

**Through the barbed wire**

**EJ Lees**

## Prologue

In 1910 Walter Lees won a prestigious prize to leave Britain and work on the Southern Argentine Railway. In 1914 he had to return home to fight for his King and country at the outbreak of the First World War.

During a short period of wartime leave, whilst visiting a friend in Edinburgh, Walter met Georgina who was at that time secretary to the Headmaster of Herriot School. There followed a whirlwind romance, and they married in February 1919. Following the end of the war, they both returned to South America and Edward (Ted) James Lees was born on 28<sup>th</sup> December of that year in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Ted spent the first 12 years of his life in Argentina where he became bilingual in English and Spanish. In 1931 he was sent home to be educated at Dollar Academy, near Stirling in Scotland. His mother came with him, to help him settle, and also to spend some time with her sisters in Cumnock in Ayrshire.

In 1933 his father became seriously ill with cancer, and was sent home for treatment in this country. By the time he arrived after the six-week journey by boat, the cancer was too widespread, and he died soon after arrival.

Ted enjoyed his time at Dollar Academy. He played rugby for his school and also did well in languages. Upon leaving, with the advice of his father's best friend, Mr. Gee, he decided to become an apprentice with English Electric in Stafford. The pay was not very good, and his mother decided to come and rent a house nearby. The year was 1937.

## Part I

### Chapter 1 1939: war is declared

One afternoon in June 1939, completely carried away by the mob hysteria and totally influenced by the slogan 'Make Britain strong, to save the peace', I volunteered for service at the Territorial Army. Little did I realise at that moment what the decision was going to mean to me. When I returned home to tell my mother what I had done she did not appear to be pleased and muttered something about 'an empty headed young fool'. Still it was just good fun going to the drill-hall twice a week to play at soldiers and then of course it was grand to have a uniform to swank about in.

The annual camp was held at Monmouth and, although it was a bit strenuous and more than I had bargained for, it was nevertheless wonderful to think that one was a soldier doing a man's job and – what was more important – building up Britain's strength so that Hitler would never attack. Anyway, the people who spoke about the impending war were only jitterbugs who had no idea of the true situation – just those born pessimists who seemed to take a delight in spreading fear, panic and misery. Anyone with but an atom of sense knew that Hitler and his silly Nazis were only playing a great game of bluff and when it was called, as it was going to be now, they would just collapse and these same people would lead them out. Just how could Hitler dare to wage war; he had no goal, the people were undernourished and were not his tanks made out of cardboard and his planes out of matchwood. Thus, with no small measure of surprise did we hear of his unprovoked attack on Poland – the man must be mad, did he realise what he was doing? Of course, though the German/Russian pact was a disquieting affair, and that no doubt had encouraged him in his wild gamble, in my life this was a big moment for it meant that I was now part of her Majesty's regular forces.

At home great excitement reigned. I was hurriedly putting up the blackout before going away – one never knew when the Luftwaffe would be dropping its first bombs. Apart from that, we knew that the same week I might be shipped over into France and in a few days be moving up to the front.

There could be little doubt that at that very moment the guns of the Maginot line and the Siegfried line would be exchanging salvos. Still, this was going to be a good war as one would just sit in an underground fortification and press buttons. At least it was going to be a good war for us. As for Jerry, that was a different matter. In the first place the Siegfried line was not a patch on the Maginot line; the concrete was wet and the poor old Huns were ankle deep in mud and water. We used to see pictures of them on the newsreels before the war broke out, wading about in water.

However, things didn't seem to turn out as we had expected. There were no air raids and we didn't go over to France straight away. Instead of that we stopped in our hometown of Stafford and filled sandbags. On the Western front, the French were advancing a bit but the expected capture of Saarbrücken did not materialise; instead of that, attacks seemed to develop into stalemate.

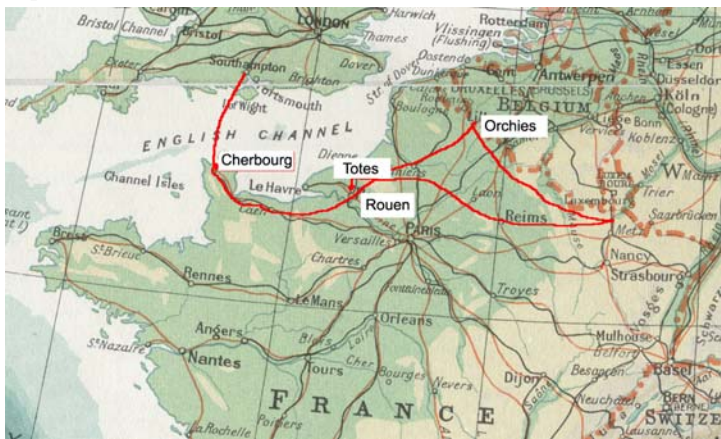
Meanwhile, on the Eastern front the German armies were roaring across the plains of Poland at a most alarming speed. Even more disturbing, perhaps, was the announcement that the Red Army was now advancing westwards over Poland. Could it mean that we were going to be involved in a war with Russia as well? These were rather disturbing developments which one

could not discuss without a feeling of grave anxiety. Then came the heroic stand of Warsaw which focussed the world's attention on that city and which abruptly brought the people to realise what a formidable tool Hitler now constituted for the forces of world democracy.

Russia was as ever an enigma and it was hard to estimate whether she had gone into partnership with Nazi Germany in an endeavour to obtain world domination or whether she was just helping Germany. Whatever may be the reason we still maintained our diplomatic relationships with the USSR and the war drifted into a stalemate. Hitler made his peace overture which was duly rejected and then we sat back and took stock of our position, our chances and our strengths.

## Chapter 2 France, a baptism of fire

On the 28<sup>th</sup> October 1939 in this genial and non-warlike atmosphere, the unit I was serving in crossed over to France to form part of the British Expeditionary Force. We took up our positions on the Belgian frontier near the town of Orchies; the weather was cold and building roads and pillboxes up there was anything but a pleasant experience. The work went on at a feverish pace and before many weeks had elapsed, a most impressive system of fortifications came into being. Pillboxes were abundant, artillery was plentiful, long lines of trenches were dug and strands of barbed wire were laid. The sight was impressive. Confidence in it shone through and the general morale of our troops was high. Everyone was confident that behind these fortifications any attempt on Germany's part to break through into Northern France would be frustrated. Winter dragged on, and mighty bitter it was too. Rumours of the German's massing on the Dutch and the Belgian frontiers were always prevalent yet the expected invasion never seemed to come.



Map showing first stages of Ted's war in Europe

Meantime, what I had learnt at school stood me in good stead and in due course I was made company interpreter. This suited me very well as it meant that during the very cold winter days I was not compelled to be outside all the time. My work was interesting and brought me into contact with most of the local

administrators of the French villages in which our unit happened to be

billeted. Some were very awkward and rather uncooperative; though speaking generally, the rest were obliging and anxious to assist the British military authorities. They nearly always tried to drive a hard bargain but that is because they believed that we were a nation of capitalists and they regarded each one of us as millionaires. On the whole, I think the French liked us even though some of our troops behaved badly and when intoxicated, which was quite often, they were apt to start brawls in the estaminets (the pubs), with the resultant smashing of chairs and windows, etc. This sort of thing did not tend to create a good impression, though I must at this point give credit to the redcaps, not that I ever had much love for them, but they put in a lot of good work in maintaining and restoring order within our zone as well as bearing themselves in an exemplary and dignified manner.

Although the unit was never stationed in a big town, we had facilities to visit such places as Douai, Arras, Amiens, Albert and St Pals. Needless to say, we availed ourselves of these opportunities and the first town I visited was Douai, a town of considerable size, typically French with cobblestones, old-fashioned trams, extensive cathedrals and, of course, numerous cafes. On Sunday afternoon, my friend and I after we had had a most enjoyable meal decided to have a walk around the town in order to discover the places of interest. In the course of our travels we happened to come across a quaint and narrow cobblestone street with houses down one side only. The street was full of British soldiers who were fighting and pushing, trying to make their way into these houses whilst the redcaps were desperately endeavouring to hold them in check and trying to organise them into some sort of order. Yes, our troops were fighting to get into the brothels.

At first, I was disgusted to see British soldiers behave like this in a foreign country while the French looked on, smiles on their faces, laughing to one another, 'Les sales Anglais' – it was a bit boring to hear our countrymen referred to in such terms. On second thoughts, however, let us not take such a poor view of it for I realised that this was a novelty to certain of the troops. They had probably heard from the last war, soldiers talking about the famous French red lamps and were curious to see them for themselves; when the novelty wore off, then these places were not highly frequented and certainly the troops were strongly discouraged from visiting them. There is a small section to be found, I believe, in any community. Despite of all that, the number of cases of VD amongst our group appeared to be high, although it was impossible to state any figure, having no means of obtaining any statistics whatsoever.

The bitterest winter the French had experienced for many years was over and in the early spring the long awaited leave arrived. It was a wonderful sensation to go home from overseas, even though it was to be a short time – ten days. In those days every consideration was given to the British expeditionary force and it was pleasant to think that one belonged to it. Alas, those ten days sped by and before long I was once again on Dover quay, this time returning to France. It was with a sad heart that I gazed overboard at the fast disappearing quayside, wondering when, if ever, I would see it again. Although I felt confident I would return sometime, there was something that told me that the immediate future held for me rather black clouds. On rejoining my unit was I soon amongst my pals again and all doubts soon dispelled.

Shortly after my leave, I returned to my company of Royal Engineers. Being a sapper, I was then transferred from the 46<sup>th</sup> Midland Division into the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division, which was moving into the Moselle to take over a section of the front from the French.

This news we met with mixed feelings, as we realised that we were now about to receive a "baptism of fire". The stark reality now began to dawn on us, for it became evident that our days of gaiety were going to be interrupted and, what is more, some of us might remain behind forever in the soil of the Saar. Our journey to the Saar was quite enjoyable, passing through such historical places as Albert, Rheims, St Quentin and Verdun and witnessing on our way many of the relics of the last war, such as tanks, trenches, barbed-wire, entanglements and huge British and French cemeteries which remained for ever a testimony of the gallantry and the bravery of those two races who stood undaunted in perilous times against the immensely superior jaws of the Kaiser. These gallant men opposed a self-styled master race, attempting to impose its will on the free people of the world. These men gave us another chance to build a better and democratic society of nations, alas, they died in vain. The egotism, their vanity and mistrust, the short sightedness of the world politicians sabotaged all those efforts to create a lasting peace. Our fathers suffered cheerfully untold miseries, hardships and deprivations in order that we, their sons, should be spared those horrors. The world's leaders, however, talked only about the situation into which we would have to undergo the same, if not greater, hardship.

Finally, our journey through Picardy, Champagne, the Meuse and the Saar came to an end and we reached our HQ which was the town of Thune, situated about 15 miles from the German frontier, 30 miles from the town of Metz. Thune was never under shellfire when we were there, nor was it ever subjected to aerial bombardment. Our stay there was short. One evening we were all aroused and slowly moved up to take our positions at the Maginot line. That night we received our 'baptism of fire' and, although we considered it intense and physical, General Gamelin, the French commanding chief, in his communiqué the following day merely reported slight artillery activity. We were stationed at Bickering Barracks, which was at the entrance to one of the largest forts in the Maginot Line.

During the day we were on road construction in some woods near the front. Whilst I was on road constructing work, I had an opportunity to come into contact with Alsations. It was not long before I took an intense dislike to these people, who I considered to be not only unfriendly but also hostile. Although one must guard oneself against being biased against them merely because they happen to show a preference to speaking German, one could not help feeling at the same time that these people were constantly spying on us. I'll never forget one French soldier whom I happened to meet at a town called Hagendangue. Our conversation soon inevitably arrived at the topic of war. "Who is going to win the war?" he asked? "Why we are, of course" I replied in astonishment. "You're mistaken" he replied, "this time Germany will be victorious". "Good Lord" I said to him, "that's impossible". "You wait and see." he replied. "England is going to lose, for the first time, a war."

Although I regarded the man as a sheer lunatic to entertain such ideas, I was nevertheless annoyed with the man for I felt that he was reflecting if not the thoughts, at least the hopes of the people of that area. One morning we were awakened at five o'clock by intense aerial bombardment. It was the morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> May. We turned the French news on a little later and learned that the expected offensive had begun for Hitler had attacked Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg. We took up new positions with the Northumberland Fusiliers who were a machine-gun battalion immediately behind the lines of contact, which happened to be outposts manned by small forces of Gordons, Camerons, Argyles, Black Watch and the Northumberlands.

Meanwhile, our portable wireless also informed us that Churchill had assumed power back at home, so we clapped our hands and thought that the war was as good as over. On our sector, the fighting too flared-up considerably, though there was none of the positional type of warfare – tanks seldom being employed. The infantry, however, were heavily engaged while the artillery duels were constant and severe. Luckily for us, however, the aerial activity was very limited. Possibly the worst and most demoralising aspect of the fighting was the night activities; our positions were in woods with a very small distance separating the two lines. Fighter patrols were sent out from both sides at night to go behind the opposite lines, find out as much as possible and try and bring back a few prisoners. The Germans in this area were very good on this sort of work as apparently most of them were local inhabitants and knew the countryside perfectly. Thus, we stood at a great disadvantage. The Germans used a cuckoo-call as their signal; so whenever we heard that naturally we were on the alert for we never knew whether it was a real cuckoo or a German patrol.

### Chapter 3 The Germans attack on the western front

The German attacks on the Moselle were successfully repelled but on the rest of the front, where the Germans had thrown the bulk of their armed divisions into combat, the news was bad and it came as no small shock to us when we heard first of all that the Dutch army had capitulated, and then that Brussels had fallen into the hands of the enemy. What alarmed us most, however, was to hear that the Germans had captured Arras and Amiens, which we had visited but a few weeks back and which were considered to be miles behind the line. The plight of our comrades in Belgium was desperate and so the 51<sup>st</sup> Division was withdrawn presumably to try and ease the pressure on the British Expeditionary Force [B.E.F.]. The Germans meantime were driving fast for the channel ports and so it became a race to see who could get there first. Owing to the bulge which the Germans had created over the Meuse, when they breached the defences of Sedan our journey to the ports was dangerous as we scarcely knew where the enemy was going to pop-up next.

We were easily beaten; Boulogne fell and we were still in Champagne. Thus, we became isolated from the rest of the British forces. After a long and adventurous journey we reached the Somme. The Belgian's had, meantime, capitulated and so our commander Lord Gort had no other choice but to try and evacuate the bulk of his forces in Belgium before they were totally annihilated. The only possible port from which he could do this was Dunkirk; but in order that Dunkirk could be kept free for evacuating the troops, Calais had to be held at all costs. The rifle brigade, the King's Royal Rifles and the QVRs [Queens Volunteer Rifles] were allocated this onerous, though most unpleasant task. When these men were sent from England to defend Calais they knew many would not return. This meant for them death or captivity. Though this engagement was short lasting, I think about three days, it was bitter street fighting with all its horrors and uncertainties. They did their task magnificently and when the survivors were eventually overpowered they were herded into prison cages; but the B.E.F. had been successfully evacuated - truly one of the most important and decisive battles of our history.

Thus, the battle of Calais and Dunkirk was over; there remained but one small body of Britons to eliminate from the continent, the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division. Major General Victor Fortune rather audaciously decided to put in an attack against Abbeville, for what reason I did not know, but the fact remains that our attack, lacking any air support, was quite easily repulsed with considerable losses to ourselves. The Germans counter-attacked and, although our infantry had equipped itself well, it was decided to withdraw to a line behind the River Bressle, our task as sappers was, naturally enough, to blow up the bridges.

The section I was in, about 50 strong, was allocated the bridges at the town of Totes. The Germans had apparently advanced more rapidly than had been anticipated and a hurried order came through to blow the bridges immediately. This we did, and so effectively did we do it that we nearly blew ourselves up in the process. This was done practically in the face of the Germans and to our horror we learnt, as dusk fell, that we were surrounded. The suspected attack on the villages of Totes did not materialise that night; instead, in the evening they decided to subject us to a mortar bombardment. My own opinion, for what its worth, is that the Germans at that point were rather weak, and at the same time they over-estimated our own strength. Little did they know that we were but 50 engineers and a battalion of Royal Scots fusiliers! Our officer, Second Lieutenant Butler, decided that the village would be defended and so at dawn he organised us in small groups of eight or ten, behind heaps of rubble, in houses, or behind hedges, at all entrances to the village. Our orders, however, were only to defend and open fire only if we were directly attacked. Fortunately, we were not directly attacked by infantry or mechanised formations but merely subjected to a mortar bombardment, which in itself was bad enough.

Meanwhile, our officers were not satisfied in the way in which one of the bridges had been blown and so a corporal and I were detailed to go and make a better job of the demolition. This proved to be a very unpleasant task as all the bridges were apparently under cover of enemy fire and every few minutes bursts of rifle fire were ricocheted into the structure of the bridge. However, neither of us was hit, though it made us work with a speed which previously we never would have credited ourselves with having.

The task done, we returned to our posts to find that all was as we had left it; to our great relief our armoured units had put in an attack, which successfully broke the ring around Eu. Our officer gave us orders to abandon our posts as quickly as possible and led us out of the ambush.

As all communications with the division had been interrupted for 24 hours he had no choice but to lead us to what had been Yves Tote, a small town. Fortunately, the HQ was still there. Here we rested one day. The enemy, however, put in a big attack which had been held by our infantry on the Bressle River but unfortunately the French who were on our right flank, allowed their front to be breached and Rommel's armoured forces, in a lightening dash, were driving for Rouen. Our position was now desperate and, in the light of these events, I have no doubt that our commander applied to Whitehall for naval forces to assist him to evacuate what forces he could. At any rate, the order to evacuate was given and we were informed that our rendezvous was to be Fécamp.

But before proceeding to our port of embarkation we were allocated the task of destroying the crossroads at the village of Tote on the main Rouen/Dieppe road. Rouen had fallen; this was confirmed by refugees who were now congesting the roads of our perimeter, which was continually being compressed by the ever-growing power of the Germans. With the fall of Rouen it was anticipated that the Germans would now strike for Dieppe and endeavour to handicap our means of evacuation. The streams of refugees on the roads were one of the most distressing and heart-rending sights, which I had so far witnessed. It brought home to me, probably more than anything else, the horrors and inequities of war. There were innocent women and children, harmless and infirm old men fleeing from their homes, leaving behind them their world's possessions; many of them doing it probably for the second time in 25 years - this was the glory of war.

With the fall of Rouen our task in blocking the Dieppe road was going to be very important, but also very dangerous and very difficult. In that tense atmosphere in the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup> June we set out to do what we could. The lorry I was riding in brought up the rear of the convoy. We had not been travelling long before we heard a shot, our lorry stopped and the driver found the bullet lodged in one of our tyres. We hurriedly changed wheels and proceeded, but not for long. Once again the lorry stopped. I saw a flash and felt as though I have been struck on the face by a sledgehammer. There was a wild scramble out of the lorry, the spirit of self-preservation told me to take cover behind the lorry. This was certainly a tight spot we found ourselves in and there was no doubt that we had had a head-on collision with a German armed column. I glanced up the road to see, to my horror, a never-ending column of German tanks, armoured cars, motorcyclists, cars, lorries, etc; it was terrifying.

The Germans, too, were determined that we should feel the full weight of their arms and in the very one-sided action, two of our comrades were killed, whilst the rest of us were wounded. The lorry, which we were taking cover behind, was full of explosives. If the gunpowder or ammo had been hit, the explosion would have been tremendous; the three of us who were using it for cover would have been blown to pieces - we would not have stood an earthly chance. We made a quick decision; to make a dash for the nearest house, which

happened to be about 10 yards away. Then, in practically one movement, we were up, walked to the gate and dashed into the back entrance of the house. Whether the Germans aimed at us or not, I don't know; if they did, I don't know how they could have missed us as we were barely 20 yards away from them. The rest of the lorry survivors were also hiding in this house and although it was distressing to see some of them arriving in pain, it was at least good to see so many of them still alive.

We quickly bandaged ourselves up with the few dressings we had at our disposal and for the rest, ripped up our shirts and singlets and made them do. Our plan of action was to remain in the village that night and then on the next day to make a bid to rejoin our own lines. Consequently, we sought out a hen house, huddled ourselves together and decided to spend the night there, hoping for the best. It was not long before we heard the heavy tramp of Nazi jackboots entering the courtyard; we held our breath, and our hearts almost stopped beating. We heard them enter the house, smash some windows, fire a couple of revolver shots and shout "Raus!" Then the steps moved towards the hen-run, they paused and we said our prayers. Our prayers were answered for the Germans moved on. All through the night the armoured vehicles moved through Tote, which made us realise more than ever how truly helpless our task had been right from the start.

We decided to move out of the hen-run, for the Germans were bound sooner or later to investigate it. We found an attic and into that we moved; not before time either, for a few hours later, just after dawn, a German field-kitchen made its headquarters in the courtyard of the house and from the attic we watched two German cooks go into our own hen-run. There was little doubt that we would have to leave this village if we were to avoid capture. Whilst we were deciding what to do next, our troops began to carry out a severe bombardment and whilst the Germans were taking cover in the trenches and cellars we ran for our very lives along country lanes, over cornfields and hedges, not having any idea where we were heading for and expecting to run into a company of Germans at any moment.

Eventually, we discovered an isolated, empty barn and there, totally exhausted, we took refuge. Through the cracks in the wood we observed the landscape and to our horror saw that German tank units were stationed in the vicinity. Another heavy artillery bombardment made us keep our heads down and on reviewing the situation we saw that the German tanks were moving out. About a mile away an attack was on the go; our hopes soared for this was evident proof that our own forces were quite near and we could never tell, but the Germans might decide to withdraw and we should be able to rejoin our own lines. Unfortunately, the British armoured divisions were inadequate for the occasion and the Germans were triumphant. Dusk was falling; we were very haggard, tired and thirsty for we had had nothing at all for over 24 hours.

Then we decided to head into the direction in which the battle had taken place. At the same time looking for some food for a start and when we came across another barn, as we were very tired, we decided to pass the rest of the night there. Early in the morning the door was thrust open; our hearts sunk. To our relief, however, we heard the chatter of French women and children, they went away again and when we considered them to be a safe distance away from us we extricated ourselves from our hiding in the straw to investigate. They had brought two large baskets in; they had to be inspected. To our joy we found hidden underneath a lot of clothing, many bottles of port wine and various boxes of block sugar; what a find! So we took three bottles of wine and four boxes of sugar and proceeded to have a good feast on port and sugar.

We lay in the straw all day, the Germans came in and went; refugees did likewise, but at nighttime the women and children began crowding in and eventually stepped on us. Then we were forced to make our presence known; poor souls, what a shock they got when they saw us appear from under the straw. We asked them where the Germans were and they replied bitterly "Partout". We could hear the Germans singing and feasting outside, obviously drinking the fruits of victory. It was now dark and our only means of escape was to crawl across a field on our bellies and then across the road on which there was a guard. This we fortunately succeeded in achieving, and we continued crawling on our stomachs for at least another mile or so until we considered ourselves to be safely out of the German sentry's sight.

We tramped through the night after wading waist high through the wet corn until we thought we could go no further and so we decided to call in at the first barn, house or shack that we encountered. In the distance we saw a house, we slowly approached it, we heard voices, listened carefully, we couldn't quite make out what they were saying. My friend, always an optimist, thought they were Scots. We moved on slowly; then there was an awful scuffle, firing of shots and wild German shouts. The moment had come. We had fallen into German hands.