

# RITA.

It is a Saturday evening, and Bob Weston is making his way to his usual Saturday night dance. He joins the High Street and walks along past the shops until he comes to a Chemist with a Florist next to it. Between the two is a passageway that leads to a flight of stairs; these lead up to the Dance Studio which stretches over the two shops. At the top of the stairs, Madam, an elderly grey haired petite lady, collects Bobs 2/- and he enters the hall. Standing by the record player is the Professor, a short dapper man the same age as Madam. They are both professional dancers and they run the studio. The first thing Bob does is to look across to the left hand side of the room, and yes, she is there. Standing with her usual friends is Rita, a girl of medium build with flaxen hair; she sees Bob and gives him a bright smile which thrills him as he has more than a soft spot for her. The music stops and the couples that were dancing leave the floor, for some unknown reason, over the course of time, the single girls all congregate on the left side of the room and the boys on the right, while those that are couples tend to go where-ever they want. The Professor changes the record, "Now we have a Fox-Trot" he announces to the room, as the sound of the dance band fills the air, some couples take to the floor, while the single boys go over to ask a girl to dance. Bob hesitates to go over to ask Rita for a dance as he is rather apprehensive about getting to know her too well as he is frightened he will fall deeper in love with her than he was at the moment.

His reason for caution was that he felt that she was superior in every way to him; for a start, Rita lived up on the Pine Hill Estate, the posh part of town, while he lived in a Council Estate in a somewhat rundown area. Another drawback was her Father, Mr Knowles, owned the biggest removal and storage company in the County. Bobs Father was a bus driver and he was an apprenticed plumber. He also knew that Rita was better educated than he was, he had left school; at 14, whereas Rita had attended High School, she also had a good job, as a personal assistant to the Chairman of a big insurance company.

The Fox-Trot ended, and was replaced by a waltz, almost before the first bars of music filled the room. Bob moved over to ask her to dance, and to his delight she started to walk towards him, this thrilled him, somehow he sensed that Rita was fond of him, but he was too concourse of their different backgrounds and was determined not to let any kind of relationship to develop between them. The two danced well together, Rita held herself close to Bob, and although they did not speak, they did exchange glances and the look in Rita's eyes when they did, almost made Bobs' knees go weak. When the dance was over, Bob escorted Rita to the left side of the room and as they made their way over, Rita held tightly on to his arm. During the course of the evening he danced with her three or four times, but he also danced with other girls as well. At 10-30, the dance came to an end and the dancers made their way down the stairs. Bob followed Rita and her friends down the stairs, and there outside was a smart car, driven by Rita's mother or father waiting to take Rita and her friend's home. Bob walked home in the company of some of the other boys that lived in his area, happy that he was able to see and dance with the girl he had such strong feelings for.

The rest of the week-end passed quickly and uneventful for Bob; on Sunday morning he watched a local football team in which some of his mates played, and then in the evening joined them for a drink in their local pub. Unknown to Bob the coming week was to be an eventful one. On Wednesday he received his papers calling him up for National Service; he was to report in three weeks time to the infantry training centre at Browdown in Devon. He was not too displeased as he had been expecting them; also it would get him away from seeing Rita. The next day the thought struck him that perhaps this would be a good opportunity to take her out as there would be no follow up as he would be away. Bob was aware that the Master Builders Association was holding their annual dance at the Swan Hotel, which had the biggest dance floor in the town, in just two weeks time. He somehow felt the Rita would be willing to join him. Although the tickets cost 7/6 each, he did have some money saved up, the only trouble was they would have to have a taxi there and back, and he was not sure how much that would cost. The only thing he could do was to ask George, the plumber he was training under, who had a brother who was a taxi driver; Bob would have to get the information soon as the tickets were always snapped up quickly.

At work the next day he told George of his plans and asked him if he would ask his brother what the cost of the taxi would be. George was all for helping him, saying he should make the most of the opportunity and promised to ask his brother that very evening. True to his word, the next morning George said he had asked

his brother and he was willing to pick-up Bob and Rita, take them to the Swan, then pick them up and take them home all for ten bob; this was less than he had expected to pay, so he was pleased that he could now afford to go.

Before he finished work he went to see his boss to ask if there were any tickets left, Mr Manning was not sure, so he made a phone call to someone and reported that there was still some left. How many do you want son, two please Bob said, you taking a young lady to the dance, yes I am, in that case, as you will be leaving us to join the army, and you can have the tickets on me. Bob was so pleased he did not know how to thank his boss. The next thing was to ask Rita, and he just knew her answer would be yes. It seemed that Saturday night would never come round, when it did arrive, Bob was one of the first in the Dance Studio, he was there before Rita and her friends arrived. As soon as Bob saw her he wasted no time in going over to ask her if she would like to accompany him to the Master Builders Ball at the Swan Hotel. Rita was surprised but immediately said yes, as he had expected she would. Turning to her friends she told them that she was going to a ball at the Swan with Bob, they were all pleased and one or two patted her on the back. To his delight, Bob spent the whole evening dancing with Rita, they danced almost every dance, but all too soon the evening came to an end with the last waltz, and in this dance, as well as all the others, Rita pressed herself close to Bob.

As they left the Studio, he followed Rita and her friends down the stairs, and as usual there was the car waiting outside for them. "I'm sorry, but we can't give you a lift home, there is hardly enough room for us. That's alright, don't worry, I will call for you at 7pm, next Saturday, if that's alright of course Rita said, giving his arm a squeeze, "I'm looking forward to it." Bob watch them struggle to get into the motor, and then he watched them drive away. All the following week the thought of taking Rita to such a nice place almost drove the fact that in just over a week's time he would be in the army with Rita far from his mind.

On the Wednesday he told his mother that he was taking a girl to the builders ball, when she asked who it was and he explained to her who she was and where she lived, his mother was surprise and pleased that he had made friends with someone from such a nice background, make sure you treat her right, only those kind of people are used to the best. Have you got enough money, you can't take her there and back on the bus, yes mum, I've a bit of money saved up, and Mr Manning has paid for the tickets, he said that was because I was leaving to join the army, that's nice of him, but to make sure, I'll give you ten shillings on the night, oh thanks mum, I will be alright now as Georges brother is taking us there and back for just ten bob, so I can manage, I'll wash and iron one of your dads best white shirts for you, and I'll press your suit, although it's a cheap one it will look alright after a good press.

The rest of the week passed even slower, but at last the great day arrived, Bob's dad had the week-end off from bus driving and when he learnt who his son was taking out he was very impressed, does this girl smoke he asked, I don't know, I'm not sure if she doe's or not, well I'll let you borrow my silver cigarette case, the one that was your granddads, thanks dad, I'll take it just in case, I will be showing off a bit, won't I. Well it won't do any harm; it's always a good idea to impress your lady friend's dad said and what impressed me about you then said his mother to his dad as she came into the room, My good looks and my charm, dad said laughing. What has happened to them, I wonder, his mum replied, ruffling his dads hair. It will be a good night out before you join-up, wont it son, yes dad, I'm really looking forward to it. Mr Weston put his hand into his trouser pocket and passed three half-crowns to his son. Here, take these, you don't want to be caught short, especially with a girl like her. Thanks dad, but mum has already given me ten bob. That's alright son, it's always best to be on the safe side.

At 6-45, right on time, a taxi hooted outside and Bob, dressed in his best and feeling like a rich man, entered the cab and drove to Rita's house. Bob rung the door bell and it was opened by Mrs Knowles, a buxom lady with a nice smiling face. You must be Bob, it's so nice of you to take Rita out, please come in, and she will only be a few minutes. Bob stepped into the hall and was impressed with its size and the deep soft carpet. No sooner was the front door closed, and then Rita came down the wide staircase. To Bob she looked fantastic, wearing a dress in two shades of green, both pale colours, and the effect was stunning. "You look gorgeous" he could not help saying. Rita gave him a dazzling smile and thanked him. Mrs Knowles held the front door

open for them and said she hoped they had a lovely evening. Bob helped Rita into the taxi, taking care that her dress did not get caught when the door was closed.

They arrived at the Swan at the same time as most of the other guests; after queuing up they eventually entered the ballroom and Bob found a table and chairs not too far away from the dance floor. Bob looked around the hall; on the side where they were sitting he saw a bar. Would you like something to drink he asked, not just know thanks Bob, a bit later perhaps. The band, which had been assembling on the stage, started up and the first dance was a quick-step. "Shall we show them how to do this dance properly" Bob said standing up; Rita's face lit up with a bright smile, yes, why not. Was it his imagination or was she holding his hand tighter than normal, and was she dancing closer to him. Either way Bob was just thrilled to have her to himself for a whole evening and not sharing her with others. They stayed on the dance floor for some time, one dance following another, quicksteps, fox-trots and waltzes until the band leader announced they were going to play a tango. I'm not very good at this dance said Rita, me nether Bob replied, shall we sit this one out. Yes lets, Bob lead her back to their table and helped her sit down. Would you like a drink now he asked, yes please that would be lovely, may I have a dry sherry, yes of course, I'll go and join the crowd waiting at the bar, I'll be as quick as I can. Thanks said Rita, giving him a beaming smile.

As Bob waited to be served he wondered what he would drink, he was not a drinker himself, only a pint at week-ends, in fact his parents hardly ever drank, only at Christmas and birthdays and then it was only sherry or shandy, so he was not brought up in a household where alcohol was drunk. By the time his turn came to be served he had decided to have just half a shandy, so he ordered Rita's drink then his Own, Mild or bitter in the shandy sir the barman enquired, oh, mild please Bob replied, taken by surprise. He was charged three shillings, which he suspected was rather higher than in the pubs. Sorry I have been so long Bob apologised when he returned with the drinks. That's alright, there are such a lot of people waiting to be served, and you were not that long. They sat talking while they sipped their drinks, and Bob was surprised and heartened by the easy way they chatted; and he was even more surprised to learn that Rita knew a lot about him, what his job was, where he lived and that his father was a bus driver.

During their talk Bob asked her if she smoked, no was the answer, her father was the only smoker in her house, and he smoked a pipe. As they talked his boss, Mr Manning came over to ask if they were enjoying the dance. Bob introduced Rita too him, and he said he had seen her at some of the Conservatives dances, and her father served on one of the committees he was on. As he left them he gave Bob a pat on the shoulder.

For Bob the evening passed so quickly, they only had the one drink as most of the time was taken up with dancing. He was enjoying himself and he had the feeling that Rita was enjoying it also that gave him a wonderful warm glow and the satisfaction that the evening had not been a disaster. When the Ball came to an end, they joined the others leaving the Hotel, and to Bob's delight Rita held his hand. Outside he soon spotted their taxi and he led Rita towards it, he helped her in then sat beside her, and again she sought his hand and held it. Bob was now quite sure that she had some feelings for him, perhaps even strong ones. All too soon they arrived at Rita's house. Bob helped her out and walked to the gate with her. Rita, thank you for such a wonderful evening, and before he could stop himself he continued, I really enjoyed being with you tonight, you made it such a lovely occasion. Rita put her arms around him and hugged him; I've had a lovely evening as well Bob thanks to you.

Then the very thing he was frightened of happened; he put his arms around her and they kissed. Will I see you again before next Saturday she asked? The question took Bob, already perplexed by what had just happened by surprise, well no, he blurted out, I leave to join the army on Wednesday. There, it was out, not the way he had hoped to break it. Rita's face turned from a happy smiling one to one of shock. Bob took advantage of the change of mood and opened the gate and escorted her to the front door. As she opened the door she looked at him with a sorrowful face. Rita said please write to me Bob, he was anxious to get away, if I can was all he said then turned and hurried to the waiting taxi. Sorry to keep you waiting" he said as he got in, don't you worry my son, I was young myself you know, and what a lovely girl you've got yourself. Lying in bed he went over all that had happened that evening, but when he thought about what happened at Rita's gate he was angry with himself for letting his emotions run away with him. He was sure that Rita liked

him a lot, but the difference in their stations in life, in his view, put a barrier between them; and to add to the difficulties her parents were conservatives and his was a staunch labour, so there was no common ground there.

As he was joining the army on Wednesday he did not have to go into work, so he busied himself going round saying good-bye to relatives and friends, but taking good care to keep away from the area of the town where Rita lived, especially in the evening. It was his great fear that he would see her and his resolve would crumble.

Wednesday morning was a dull wet one, reflecting on his mother's mood, but he himself hardly noticed as he was so anxious to get away. The journey to London was uneventful, but the train bound for Cornwall had a great number of young men of Bob's age onboard. It soon became apparent that they were all heading for Browdown, and Bob got chatting to one of them in his carriage. But even this new found friendship could not drive the thoughts of Rita from the back of his mind. On arrival at their destination, they were met on the platform by two Sergeants who lined them up and marched them out of the station. How far they marched Bob couldn't guess, but they kept going on and on, some of the chaps started to moan about aching legs and sore feet. And it started to rain. At last they turned down a lane, and there before them was the camp. It was a collection of low huts spread over a large area. They were marched through the gate, guarded by two armed soldiers and halted outside a long building by the gate. The two Sergeants went inside and came out a few minutes later, each with a paper in their hands. One of the Sgt's a man over six feet tall and built like a rock, marched to the front of the new recruits and in a loud strong voice called for their attention. Now as I call out names, those men will form up in front of me, is that clear and without waiting for a reply, started to call out the names, in alphabetical order. Bob listened intently and when the Sgt got to the W's sure enough Bobs name was called out. He joined the others already there and there was only one more name called and that was for a lad named Winters.

Right, pay attention, the man mountain said, I'm Sergeant Summers, and I am your squad Sgt who will supervise your training here, be fair to me and I will look after you, cross me and I'll make your lives hell, is that clear, there was a yes from those lined up. "Yes Sergeant, and say it loud and clear, do you understand. This time the response was loud and clear. Now you are in the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, and for all your training you are in 654 squad of B Company. Your squad officer is Lt Masterson and the company commander is Captain Barkworth. Sgt Summers then informed them what times their meals were and when lights-out and reveille were called. They were marched to their huts, which were in row C and numbered 3 and 4, the first 16 were put into No 3 and Bob was with the remainder in hut 4.

There were eight single beds down each side, and at the end was a partition which was the toilets and showers. Bob went down to a bed at the far end of the right hand side, this proved to be a lucky choice, as there was only one bed between him and the toilets. In the middle of the hut was a long wooden table with benches both sides. Next to his bed was a cabinet with three draws and at the back of the bed there were four pegs and above that a shelf. The lads started to unpack and get to know each other; they had come from all over the country and from a variety of trades and occupations. Some had been in the Army Cadets so they had been taught to drill and knew something of army life. Most of the lads were sitting on the benches or on their beds. Bob sat on his bed and started to think of Rita, and wondered about the Saturday dance, and if she would miss him, of course she would, he told himself, after her show of affection at the Ball he even wondered if she would go to the dance at all.

The lad who had the bed on his left came and sat on his bed facing Bob, his name was George and he was one of those that had been in the Army Cadets. Bob looked at his watch; it's only 6-30, there is another hour and a half before we go to supper, shall we go for a walk around the camp. Better not George replied, as we have been told to stay here we had better do that, and by the way the time is eighteen thirty hours. They chatted away and Bob learnt that George was an apprentice motor mechanic from Sheffield and that he was the youngest of three brothers, the two eldest had both served in the war, one in the Royal Engineers and the other in the Royal Navy, but he had been lost at sea. The boy who had the bed on Bobs right, came and sat on Bobs bed, his name was Les Cooper and he was a trainee butcher from Swindon, and his father was a bus

driver like Bob's. Les offered Bob a Woodbine, no thanks Les, I don't smoke, I've tried it several times but it just makes my head feel light and the taste was bloody awful.

All the room were chatting away when the door burst open and the mammoth frame of Sgt Summers filled the doorway. Right, pay attention, he marched to the long table, now before I take you over to the dinning hut for your supper, I will tell you about tomorrow morning. After breakfast you will be taken for a medical, then over to the stores to collect your uniforms and webbing gear; is that clear? There was a good response of yes Sgt. How long will we be in this camp Sgt? That was Jack Marshall who had been in the Cadets in Stepney. You will be here for two months doing all your training, and then you will be posted to wherever necessary. What about leave John Stimson asked. The Sgt's face reddened, leave! you have only just got here and you want leave. He looked round at them all, I'll give you leave my sons by Christ I will, by the time I've finished with you lot you will be glad to have it. On hearing that, Bob's heart sunk, and in his mind he asked Rita to help him.

The next eight weeks all of the 654 squad were assembled outside the huts and marched over to the dinning hut. Inside, Bob saw rows of scrubbed trestle tables with long benches down each side. At one end was a serving area, and at the back of it he could see through to the kitchens. The meal was good old sausage and mash with cabbage, followed by a tasteless sponge pudding and watery custard. Back in the hut the lads continued to get to know each other, then Tony Fielding looked at his watch, I don't know about you boys, but I'm quite tired and it's almost 10 o'clock, twenty two hundred hours corrected Jim Archer, a former army cadet. Bob was glad to get to bed, and as he snuggled down between the blankets, [no sheets] his thoughts turned to Rita, and the Ball he took her too. Even after "lights out" had sounded, his kept thinking of her, then to his surprise the bugle sounded reveille, he had slept well but had been dreaming of Rita all night. By the time all the lads had washed and made their beds it was time for breakfast, this was porridge and unsweetened tea. When they returned to the hut, they waited until Sgt Summers entered and ordered them to form three ranks outside. "Right you lot" the Sgt addressed them, "You are now going over to the medical centre for a good check up, so squad right turn quick march. The squad moved off, some of the lads having difficulty in keeping in step, after marching round several huts they came to some large ones with the Red Cross painted on them. Sgt Summers halted them and went inside one of them, after several minuets he emerged and informed them that they would be called in a few at a time. As they waited, Bob became aware of firing going on and it seemed quite near, then there were a number of very loud explosions and he had a rather uneasy feeling inside him, and he silently asked Rita to keep him well and safe.

After waiting what seemed ages a medical N C 0 came out and called out half a dozen names, they went inside, and ten minutes later came out and another lot went in. When Bob was called he went inside and they were all told to strip to the waist, their heart, lungs were tested, then they had to drop their trousers to be tested for a hernia, then an eye test and it was all over. As they came out two soldiers with Red Cross arm bands, came along pushing a four wheeled trolley and on it was a solder with one of his legs bandaged from ankle to thigh. I wonder what happened to him" someone said. When all had been through the medical centre they were marched to the equipment stores where each of them was issued with all their clothing in a large kit bag and a separate greatcoat, then all their webbing gear.

Back in the hut they went through all their clothing with the Sgt, and then told to change into their uniforms, and then they were instructed on how to put their webbing together and how to wear it. By the time that was completed it was dinner time, so Sgt Summers instructed them to be outside their hut at 14 hundred hours, that's when their training will start in earnest. As they made their way to the dinning hut, Bill complained about how rough the uniform was, We all think that, but we will soon get use to it, I expect Les said. When their meal of stew and rice pudding was over they returned to the hut and sat about until 14 hundred hours, then gathered outside. Their Sgt soon came marching up and formed them into three ranks, and for the rest of the afternoon they were put through all the drill movements, including saluting at attention and on the march. Sgt Summers cursed and bullied them until they got it right; even then he kept threatening them with extra drill in the evening if their movements were not quick and sharp enough. That evening those lads who had soft jobs were also very tired, but others, like Bob, who were use to hard work, went over to the NAAFI canteen for a drink and a cheese roll.

The next day, was taken up with more drill plus a session in the gym, this was something Bob was not use to, and he found it tough going, especially with a Cpl instructor pushing him on. As he had been doing all day when things called for an extra effort, he asked Rita to give him strength to see him through. Although it had been a hard day, in the evening Bob joined the others over in the canteen, where he had his usual half a shandy; he was also lucky to get a game of billiards, a game he had never played before, but Ken, one of his roommates, showed him how it was played.

The next morning, although it was a Saturday, they still had to parade for drill, and again, they were put through their paces on the parade ground, and in the gym, they were also taken to a sports field and told to run round it four times, and if they took longer than ten minutes, they would have to do it four more times. Of course, they did take longer, so they had to go round again, and for most of them, including Bob, who kept calling on Rita to help him, it was too much to ask, and they all finished walking round, to the fiery and verbal abuse of the Cpl. At the end of the day, their Sgt informed them that Sunday was a free day, and they could go into Browndown town if they liked, but they had to be back before lights- out at 22 hundred hours, also there was a church parade at 011 hours for those that wished to attend.

That evening Bob wrote a letter to his parents, telling them of all the things he had been through and what army life and the food was like, he would have liked to have written to Rita, but he had made up his mind before he left home that he would not do so, it was a chance of a complete break, although he thought of her all the time. The next morning Bob joined Jack Marshall, John Stimpson, Ken Jackson, Bill Wright, Eric Houseman and Tony Fielding, going into town. As they went through the main gate a Red Cap told them that there was a bus that would take them right into the centre of Browndown, but they must be sure to get the last bus back that leaves the town at 21-20 hours, as there will be a long walk back and a chance they would be late getting back. They only had to wait a few minutes before a bus arrived; the journey into Browndown took about twenty minutes. They were dropped off on the main square which was a large open area surrounded by shops, pubs and cafes. I fancy a nice cup of tea with some sugar Ken said, bloody good idea mate John replied, and something good to eat as well. There was a cafe near to where they were standing, so they made their way over to it. Inside there were already some soldiers all tucking into plates piled high with food, I think I will settle for a cup of tea before I eat Bob informed his pals, me to and I see the tea is served in mugs, which is just what I need Bill Wright told everyone.

An elderly lady came up to their table and said I bet you boy's want mugs of tea, yes? There was a chorus of conformation, and soon a tray with seven steaming mugs arrived with a bowl of sugar. As Bob drunk his tea, his thoughts turned to Rita, what was she doing, did she go to church, if he was still at home would he be able to keep away from her, and what about the Saturday dance, he would not be able to go there anymore; he was so deep in thoughts that his mate had to shake his arm to bring him out of it. I don't know where you have been, but you have let your tea get cold Jack said to him, I bet he was thinking of home Ken piped in, Well, more or less Bob replied, Although the tea was cold it still tasted good, he started to think of Rita again, only to be brought back to reality by the lady asking him what he would like to eat. Most of his new found friends had something with chips on. Bob opted for the home made meat pie with roast potatoes and veg, and it was very enjoyable.

The rest of the day was spent looking round the town, going into a quite pub they came across up one of the side streets for a drink and going to the cinema. The film they saw was a Western with Aude Murphy as the star, and on the news real they saw the Berlin wall being built, and the barriers and armed guards keeping the protesters away. As they came out of the cinema John said what about a drink before we leave, but Ken looked at his watch and told him that it was nearly 9pm, 21 hundred hours, Tony butted in. They all agreed to get the next bus back just to make sure they were not late, so as a bus was just about to leave they all jumped aboard and arrived back in camp with time to spare. That night, as all other nights Bob thought and dreamt of Rita, and as always, a small voice inside him kept saying he should declare his love for her, but another stronger voice kept reminding him of all the drawbacks and problems that would cause.

On parade next morning they were taken first to the gym for another gruelling hour of all kinds of exercises, then to the medical centre for a lecture by an army doctor about hygiene and how to avoid sexual diseases , most of which Bob had never heard of before. Then it was another hour of squarer bashing, marching up and

down and never doing anything right. When that was over they were taken to the armoury and issued *with* their rifles and bayonets, not the long ones of the first war, but shorter, dagger like ones, indeed they could be used as such. That was followed by instruction on how to handle the weapon and how to keep it clean and the only person they should point their rifles at is the enemy, not their friends. By now it was lunch time so having taken their rifles back to the huts, they trooped over to the dining hut and were served meat pie, but so different from the one Bob had yesterday.

The whole afternoon was taken up with arms drill over and over again they had to go through all the various routines, so by the end of the afternoon even Bobs arms felt like they were falling off. In the evening Bob wrote a letter to his parents, assuring them he was doing alright and getting on well with his mates; then he went over to the NAAFI for a half pint of shandy and was able to join in a game of cards. Next morning it was more rifle drill followed by another session in the gym, and then they were taken to the rifle range where after a lecture on safety shown how to load their weapon and how to set the sights for the different distances. When it came to Bobs turn to fire he asked Rita to make his aim good, and to his surprise, he did do well, in fact he was the best shot for that day. Most of the lads said their arms ached so much they had a job to keep the rifle steady. Before they were dismissed for dinner, they were instructed to parade at 1400 hours in fighting order as they were going on a five mile route march. That news brought a lot of groans, many of the lads thought it would take them all afternoon, but Jim Archer said they would be marching a five miles an hour, so it should only take them an hour or so. Again, some of the lads thought that would mean running all the way.

After a dinner of sausage chips and beans and some sort of pudding, they all got their webbing gear sorted out and put on, then went outside ready to be marched off. When Sgt Summers appeared he too was in fighting order, telling them that he would always go through the same ordeal as they had to, although Bob noticed he was not carrying a rifle. They were told that once they were clear of the houses they would be marched at ease, which meant they could talk or sing as long as they kept in step, it's the rhythm of the marching that makes it easier to cope with a long march, and Sgt Summers informed them. Marching out of the main gate, they turned right marching away from the direction of the town, and as soon as they cleared the last house, the Sgt called for them to march at ease. They were marched along country lanes, bypassing some villages, and to Bobs surprise they were soon approaching the town again and were called to march at attention. Back in the hut most of the lads just wanted to rest, but the afternoon was not over and they were taken to the rifle range again for more practice, this time concentrating on the longer ranges. Again, Bob did well, he felt quite relaxed because he knew Rita was helping him to keep his weapon steady.

In the evening, after cleaning their rifles and webbing and giving their boots a good shine. Bob joined some of the lads in the canteen. Bob asked for his usual shandy. Why don't you try the mild instead of the shandy Les Cooper asked him, so Bob switched his order to half a mild, and he found that he rather enjoyed it. There was no chance of a game of cards or getting on the snooker tables, so after their drink they returned to the hut, most of them were tired, and there was only an hour to go before lights-out.

Next morning it was raining quit steadily but they still had to do and hour square bashing. After which they were told that they would be going over the assault course for the first time, and as it was the first time they would be doing it without their rifles. The squad were marched out past the firing range and into a large area that was full of all kinds of obstacles. Right now Sgt Summers addressed them, this is the assault course, and you will be well use to it by the time you finish your training. Now as its wet you are going round without your rifles and I will walk you round the course so you know exactly what you have to do. Looking at all the obstacles Bob's heart sunk, he could see that some of the things they had to do would be quite dangerous even when they were dry, being wet made them even more dangerous, and once more he asked Rita to help him get thorough without harm. The squad followed their Sgt to the first obstacle; now here are a series of trenches, each one getting deeper, from here you will climb over this five foot wall then run over these logs laying n the ground, then it's up the rope netting and when you get to the top you will slid down these ropes, Bob saw that the rope netting was about eight or ten feet high and from the top there was some ropes to the ground at an angle of about 45% which they had to slid down. Now the next obstacle is another rope netting, this one is like a tent, you make your way up one side and down the other, using your heels to get a hold, from here you climb another wall, this one is made of logs so you can get a finger and toe hold, on the other

side there are steps made out of logs for you to run down. This next obstacle is as you can see a large drain pipe, and you have to crawl through it, from there you have ropes to climb, you must climb to the very top, lean over the bar, and then climb down again, and there will be someone watching to make sure you do lean over the bar. The last one is these planks and as you can see they are gradually getting higher, when you get to the end of the top one you climb down the rope, and if you are going over the course with your bayonet fixed you will charge at those sand bags.

The Sgt surveyed them all, now, a word of warning, when you came to those planks, if you fall, try and fall to the right or left, especially when you get to the high ones, if you fall with your leg on either side you could do yourselves some serious damage, do you understand. The response was a firm "Yes Sergeant," and Bob felt his stomach turn over at the thought of having to walk along those planks, and once more silently called on Rita to help him. It had stopped raining, but the ground was still wet and muddy, so it would be far from easy getting round the course. Sgt Summers lined the squad up into five lines so that they would go over course five at a time. Bob was in the first five, and when the order was given jumped down into the first trench, and up the other side, the first two were quite easy, but the other two were a little more difficult. The first was the first wall, and Bob took a running jump at it and just managed to grip the top, then using his toes wiggled and heaved himself over and drop onto the logs, these were laid in an uneven manor and being wet made it difficult to keep balance, and again he called on Rita to take care of him. Now it was the rope netting and Bob was lucky in being one of the first to climb it so there was not a lot of movement in it which made it easier to climb, and to roll over the top. Having slid down the rope, he run to the tent shaped netting, this was more difficult even with only two or three on it, the problem of getting ones heels caught on the rope was extremely arduous and it was even more awkward coming down as his foot kept going through the hols, it took a long time to complete, much to the disgust of their Sgt.

Next it was the log wall, this was higher than the first one and the logs were wet and slippery and again took a long time to get to the top. once over Bob started to run down the log steps, but again the wetness made it almost impossible to stand up and Bob finished up rolling down, as did all the others, then crawl though the drain pipe, this had two or three inches of water in it, making it a most unpleasant experience. Now Bob had to climb a rope, and he was feeling absolutely whacked, and he called out loud for Rita to give him strength to get to the top, even with Rita's help he could only get half way up, and that was the case with every one of the squad, what have I got this time the Sgt roared, a bunch of Girl Guides I think they would do better then you lot of little kittens. He scowled at them, now get onto the next obstacle at once, and be quick about it. Bob heaved himself up Rita, Rita please help; please he said out loud again, all those around him were too exhausted to take any notice of what he was saying. The graduated planks, were to Bobs mind, the most dangerous, starting on the lower ones, he experimented by sliding his front boot along the plank then sliding his other one up to it, then repeating over and over again. He had got up to the fourth plank when there was a cry, this unsettled his nerves and he jumped down only to find Tony Fielding had fallen and was laying on the ground holding his right shoulder. This brought the morning session to a close. They were ordered to parade at 1400 hrs in full fighting order; they would then have square bashing and time on the rifle range.

During their dinner break they had a moan about the course and speculated as to what had happened to Tony as the Medics had taken him away. The afternoon session started in light rain and it kept on all the time they were on the parade ground or on the range, and Sgt Summers never stopped reminding them that they must give their rifles a good oil and pull through at the end of the day as he would giving them a thorough examination in the morning. That evening most in Bobs hut, including Bob, did not go over to the canteen but stayed in cleaning their gear and weapons, and having a good grumble about the assault course and drilling in the rain. As Bob got into bed he wondered what Rita would think about all the hard and difficult things he was having to do, and hoped she would look after him, although as he closed his eyes he knew he was just kidding himself, but it gave him some confidence.

The next day was a wet and windy one, but it was the same routine, drill, gym work, on the range and over the assault course, this time with their rifles, and it was right mix-up and scramble. That evening Bob wrote home to his parents giving them a outline of the things he has been doing, then he went over to the canteen for a half a shandy before going back to get his gear cleaned up for the next day. The days and weeks that followed continued to focus more on the assault course and the range then the parade ground, with Sgt

Summers breathing down their necks all the time. But it did seem to be getting easier as the weeks went by; they were fitter, stronger and more used to the way things were done now, but Bob also put it down to Rita giving him a helping hand. Near the end of the course they were informed that the Para's were asking for volunteers, the only snag being that you had to sign on for seven years, anyone interested should report to the Company Office. The idea came to Bob that this might be a good of getting Rita out of his mind, and indeed his life, as if he did sign up he would be away for years at a time and that would help him to over ride his feeling for her. He wrote a letter to his parents about joining the Para's saying that he liked the idea and was feeling quite excited about it, and that he knew it would be a tough course to do but he felt confident enough in himself that he could manage it. He did not mention the real reason was to keep out of Rita's life, but he did say that if they were against the idea, he would give it up. It was no surprise to him when he got a letter from home saying that if he really wanted to join and he felt he could cope, then they had no objections, as long as he was confident in himself.

That same day he reported to the Company Office that he wanted to volunteer and was told that he was one of twenty or more that had also volunteered and that the Para's liked to get men from the Infantry Brigades as they were already well trained. The training eventually came to an end, but before going on leave those joining the Para's were told to report to their training camp after their leave. Bob was the only one from the 654 squad joining, but three lads from 652 were also joining, so they agreed to stick together through the tough times ahead.

Bob had 10 days leave and as he travelled home he did feel much stronger and fitter. He was greeted most warmly and with a good meal as well. He was determined to keep well out of Rita's way; he would go out in the daytime, but not at nights especially Saturday and Sunday nights, as that's when he would most likely see her. As there was a week end in his leave, it was fortunate that his parents had arranged visits to relations over the two days. But even so, it was hard, in fact it took a supreme reason not to go out of his way to see Rita, he met some of his old mates and some of them still went dancing at the Dance Studio and they were certain to tell Rita that he was on leave and that might show her he was not interested in her, but somehow he felt that she would think he was just a bit shy, although after the dance they went to and the encouragement she gave him, he could not blame her for thinking he was an idiot of the highest order.

All too soon his leave ended, and he reported to the Para's training centre, on the way down he met several other lads all going to join the Red Devils Bob met up with the three lads from the old 652 squad and they all joined the others travelling down to Para's camp. On arrival they were met at the station by three Sergeants from the Parachute Regiment who lined them up into one long column and marched them for some miles to their new camp. Bob was pleased to see that they would be billeted in rounded tin huts, for some reason he thought they would be better than the wooden ones. The new men were left outside what appeared to be the camp office, then one of the Sgt's, a man no more than five feet high but with a row of medal ribbons on his chest, came out and said his name was Sgt Lewis and all the men whose names he called out were to form up in front of him and they would be in his squad all through their training. Bob and his new mates were all called out one after another, which pleased them.

When all the names were called, just twenty altogether, they were marched along to a row of huts marked F, and halted outside number 3. Right, now Sgt Lewis addressed them. You are now in C N squad, known as Charley, November, and you will be known as that all through your training. The size of the squad is just twenty to make training quicker and easier. Now you have already been through some infantry training, so the extra you will be called upon to do should not be difficult for you. Most of what you will do during the four weeks you are here will be learning the art of jumping, landing and grouping up once you are down on the ground. The Sgt looked them all over. I must say you look like a good strong fit bunch, you will find that the emphasis is more on training than smartness, but don't think that you will be allowed to get away with being slovenly, because you will soon find yourselves in deep trouble, is that clear. The answer was a loud "Yes Sgt". The Sgt then gave them instructions as to where the dining hall was, the medical centre, canteen, what time meals and that they will parade at 07-30 hours the next morning in full fighting order to be taken on a route march. Inside the hut Bob found single beds, ten down each side with a long table and benches down the middle. He and his new friends, Peter Wright, Jim Turnbull and Tom Ashden were able to get beds side by side. Until they were called for their evening meal, they sorted out their gear and clothing and got to

know each other, a big lad, he must have been six foot six at least, said his brother was a Para, and he told him that the best way to get through the course was for the whole squad to work together and support each other, work as a team. And with Rita's help I will be able to get through the course alright Bob thought to himself. Their evening meal was a good one, more like a breakfast, I expect they know we had gone all day with nothing to eat Tom remarked, That's why they have given us a good tuck-in, no mate the big lad, whose name was Bert, said, My brother said that all the meals are good, and always plenty of it, no matter what time you come in for them.

The next day, after a medical, their training started with learning how to fall without hurting themselves. The technique was to roll as you fell, thereby reducing the chance of an injury; they started by falling from a standing position then gradually jumping from higher positions. They were also taught how to put their parachutes on and how to free their packs containing all their equipment and weapons so that it hung down when they jumped and hit the ground first. Then the time came for the actual parachuting, first from a tower then the real jump from a plane. All through the training Bob kept calling on Rita to help him cope, which in a way, helped to give him confidence, so that he got through the parachute course and the extra infantry training easier than he had hoped. It was a very proud day for him when he received his Red Beret.

When the training was over Bob and Jim, Tom and Peter were all sent to the same company and luckily into the same squad. While Bob was doing his training, a war had broken out between the United Nations and a far Eastern country, and as Britain was a member of the UN it was involved. After a few weeks in which they were doing some training and one drop, the Para's were given 10 days embarkation leave. Bobs family were not too happy about him going overseas, they knew that he would be involved in the fighting and being a Red Devil he would be in the thick of it. Bob was aware of it as well, but he was relying on Rita to keep him safe. While on his leave Bob dressed in civilian clothes, for one thing they were more comfortable, and for another a uniform would make him stand out. He only went out and about in the daytime, as there was no chance of meet Rita as she would be working.

Unfortunately, his luck run out, he was walking along a shopping area when he ran straight into Rita, and she was pleased to see him, her whole face lit up. Bob, how nice to see you, how are you. For his part he wished the ground would open up and swallow him. Oh. Oh, alright, thank you, and how are you. Just fine, but you didn't write, why not I've been wondering how you were getting on Bob started to sweat, how could he say he did not want to keep in touch because he did not think he was good enough for her, he washed he had never taken Rita to the Ball, Well, er, well, I decided to make the army my career and I did not think you would want to waste time writing to someone who is away for months even years at a time. Rita had moved up close to him, and it was all he could do to stop himself taking her into his arms. Why on earth do you want to stay in the army, you could have such a good life out of it, and of course I would like you to write. For what seemed ages. Bob could not reply, he couldn't even speak, I, er I er I was not that happy in the work I was doing. That was a lie, he was interested in plumbing it covered such a wide range of things, then it all came out. I'm not that clever, I did not do well at school, and I was in the bottom class so I'm not fit to do much and soldering seemed to be a good way out, and I would see the world. He could have added it also kept him from seeing her. You are putting yourself down Bob, Rita told him, and you are capable of improving yourself. Bob just could not help but feel deeply moved by that, and his love for her seemed to grow stronger. No, no, I'm not clever enough, and I must go, nice to see you Rita," and he turned and walked quickly away.

What a terrible way to behave, he felt so ashamed of himself, but he could not accept that Rita liked or loved him for what he was, nor that he was capable of improving himself he felt as though he should go away and hide. He was not sorry when his leave was over, although it meant saying goodbye to his family, and not knowing when, or if, he would see them again. Back in camp, the company did three training drops, and then they were flown out to Malta, and did some more training drops. All through these Bob asked Rita to look after him, though why she should after the way he treated her never crossed his mind. After two weeks they were flown out to the war zone. After being allowed time to acclimatise, they went through a short infantry training program. Then three of their companies were called to a briefing, and Bobs was one of them. They were informed that there was to be a landing on the enemies coast so that an army could push across the country and split in two. There was a vital road bridge only five miles inland from the landing beach, and it

was the Para's job to secure that bridge intact, and hold it until the landing troops got there. One company would land first and secure the way to the bridge, two company would secure the bridge itself, and the third company would hold it. It was pointed out that those that survived the first and second drop must help and support the others. Bobs Company would be the second one so he would be helping to capture the bridge, his stomach turned over at the thought.

Over the following week they carried out simulated attacks, but without a bridge, only an area they had to make for when they landed which was defended by a Scottish company. The practise landing brought home to Bob just what a hard job it was going to be, it was obvious that they could not think about the safety of their own lives, they just had to push on regardless of who were falling all around them. It was going to be a dawn drop, so the day before they were busy getting their final briefings, collecting equipment and ammunition. After a really good late evening meal and a church service, they were driven to the aerodrome and boarded their planes. They sat in them for some time, they were not allowed to smoke, so there were plenty of moans, Bob was lucky, he had Tom, Jim and Peter sitting by him, so they were able to keep each other's spirits up.

At last the plane took off, and flew towards their drop zone, which was over an hour away. Then Lt Owens, their platoon commander ordered them to hook-up ready to jump; Bob stood up and hooked his cord that would open his chute to the overhead rail. Well lads, this is the easy part of the job, and Bobs knees went weak, in training, jumping from the plane was the hardest part, once on the ground there was no danger, but now, it was going to be very dangerous when they landed. Oh Rita, Oh Rita, Oh Rita, Bob said in a soft voice, Please, Please look after me. Please. As he spoke the men were moving up to the aircraft door and jumping. Bob followed, and then he was there, and received a push in the back and he was out. Almost immediately there was a jerk as the shoot opened, and then Bob released his pack so that it landed just before him, at the same time he looked round the area and was surprised at how far away the bridge was. In their training he got the impression that they would be landing at the beginning of it.

The ground was rushing up so fast, then his bag hit and a second later he was rolling out of his fall. As he drew his weapon from his bag and loaded it he became conscious of heavy firing and the fact that he was running with sweat. Putting on his pack he moved towards the bridge, joining up with the rest of his company, luckily he teamed up with Jim and Tom and a corporal who lead then forward. They passed some of their mates dead or wounded, and also a number of the enemy all laying dead. Bullets were flying all over the place, and ricocheting off trees. There was a grunt and a sigh from someone near, and Bob looked to his side and saw Jim rolling on the ground with a wound in his left shoulder. Rita, Rita, please, please take care of me. This was said quite loud, but the noise of the battle drowned it. Now Bob was at the start of the bridge, there were bodies all over the place, it was almost impossible to move without treading on them. The corporal signalled Bob and the others to follow him onto the bridge, there were Para's just in front of them, laying in the road or crouched against the brick sides.

Bob noticed that there were some brick pillars every few yards, sticking out of the side walls; with pounding heart, he crawled over to one, this was only some eight or ten inches deep, but it gave some illusion of cover. From there he could see right over the bridge, and as there were none of his mates between him and the far side, he opened up with his weapon, emptying a whole magazine towards the enemy. As he reloaded he noticed the corporal was across the other side of the road, behind a pillar, he called over to Bob to give him cover so he could move on the next one. This Bob did, and then as the Cpl gave him cover he moved on to the next pillar. There was just one more of the pillars before the end of the bridge. The Cpl called over to Bob to repeat the action, unfortunately as the Cpl reached his pillar he was hit in the stomach, but Bob managed to reach his unharmed, thanking Rita for keeping him safe.

A road run across the end of the bridge and on the far side Bob could see a concrete block house, with slots in it and from which the enemy was firing at them. By now, more of his mates had come up some squeezed up behind him and some up against the wall on the far side. One of those was Sgt Lewis, he called on all those in the front position to insert a new magazine into their weapons, then ordering some of the men to lay across the road and give covering fire, he, and Bob made a dash for the block house. As he crossed the road at the end of the bridge, Bob felt a stinging sensation in his legs but he reached the block house. The Sgt

called on him to put a grenade through one of the slits, as Bob fumbled in his pouch for one, one of his mates came up and told him to lie still as he had caught a packet in his legs. Looking down he saw that his trousers were all torn and his leg were bleeding and he could see parts of his shin bones. For a few minutes he was confused, and then some more men came running by and they called to him to get a tourniquet on as soon as possible. Being in a confused state, he had a job to remember just where his first aid bags was, and he called on Rita to help him. Luckily, at that time some medics came up and as one put tourniquets on his legs, the other cut a slit in the sleeve of his uniform and gave him an injection of morphine and marked his forehead to show he had been injected. There, make sure you start to loosen them in about twenty minutes." one of the medics said, but slowly.

Bob started to feel drowsy and the next thing he knew was being lifted onto a stretcher. How long have you had these on for?" a medic asked. Bob shook his head, no idea mate he replied. As he was carried back over the bridge he saw streams of soldiers going in the opposite direction, and it slowly came to him that they were infantry men, which meant that the bridge had been captured, and that gave him a great sense of pride, for he had been part of the group that captured it. The medics left him at a casualty clearing post and as he waited, Bob drifted off into a deep sleep.

Opening his eyes Bob could not make out where he was, he was in a room with a low grey ceiling, looking to his right and left, he could see men laying on beds. Rita, Rita, what has happened he said quietly, he tried to sit up, but found it rather difficult, as it happened a female nurse came by, saw him struggling and came over. So you are back with us, that is very good. Why I am here and where am I he asked. As the nurse sat him up she told him he was on the Royal Naval Hospital Ship "Compass" and a doctor would be round soon to talk to him. The nurse took his temperature, pulse and blood pressure, wrote something on a chart at the end of his bed, then asked him if he would like a cup of tea, yes please, and realising he was starving, and something to eat as well please. The nurse said, you can have tea, but I will have to check about eating. Bob looked round the room; there were beds on both sides of the room, with men lying or sitting up on them. As he looked across the room someone waved to him, it was Jim Turnbull, with his left arm in a sling, the last Bob had seen of him was as he rolled on the ground. What's happened to you Jim, Bob call over, Got my shoulder blade smashed up, they have had to wire it together, what about you, I'm not sure, I think I got hit in the legs, it's a bit hazy, and I can't remember much. I'm the same mate, I've been hit but I can't remember were, I've got to wait until the doctor comes round to find out.

At that moment the nurse arrived with a steaming hot mug of tea, you can eat, but dinner is only five minutes away so you will not have long to wait she informed him. The tea was hot and sweet, and Bob felt it warming all his body, as he sipped he laid back and his thought turned to Rita, he had come through a dangerous and harrowing time alive, he might be wounded, but at least he was living, and he silently thanked Rita for looking after him. The dinner arrived; it was a mug of hot tomato soup, a full roast and apple tart and custard, and another cup of tea. Bob felt quite good after eating; it was certainly the best meal he had eaten since he joined up. About half an hour after they had eaten, a group of doctors came into the room, and started to talk to some of the men. When they came to Bob they told him that he had suffered some terrible leg damage. In fact the damage was so bad that they had to amputate both legs. This shocked Bob, what, I've no legs he said unbelievable, at the same time running his hands down his body. But they are there he said feeling his thighs. No, not all of them one of the doctors told him, Your right leg, we were able to leave the knee intact, but the left one was so bad we had to take that off above the knee. As soon as you get back home you will be fitted with prosthetics so you should be able to live a normal life. What re prosthetics Bob asked; the doctor smiles and says artificial legs son.

After the doctors had made their round of the ward, Jim walked over to Bob, what happened too you then he asked, lost both legs, one above the knee and the other just below Bob told him, Christ mate, I thought I was bad enough, but you are much worse than me, what is going to happen to you when we get back I'm going to have artificial legs fitted. Where did it happen then Jim wanted to know. I got over the bridge. You got over the bridge Jim interrupted, blimey, you did well then. I'm very, very lucky, we lost so many of our blokes in getting over it, and I bet there is not very many of us left. An officer came into the ward and Bob asked him if his parents had been informed of his injuries. He was assured that they had been informed and that his wound was not life threatening and when he was assigned to a hospital they would be informed so they

could visit. The voyage home was uneventful. Bob was wheeled out on deck every day where he talked to other Para's and infantrymen about their experiences. Arriving back in England Bob was taken by naval ambulance to a hospital about two hours drive away.

The next day a team came to measure him for his new legs, how tall would you like to be they joked. Bob took them seriously and said he would like to be over six feet tall, they said they were only joking, and he would be the same height as before. All the other men in his ward were having arms and legs fitted; Bob was one of five that were having both legs done. The following day his parents came to visit him, he was sitting in a wheel chair and as his Mother came up to hug him she was in tears and said how worried she had been, and his Father was also crying and said what a relief it was that he had survived. They stayed for some time with Bob telling them what he could remember, and they brought him up to date with all the family news. When they had gone, he started to think about Rita, at least, now there was no chance of any relationship with her, or any other female, and for some reason, he felt quite contented about that.

A few days later his new legs were fitted, and when the technicians were satisfied with the fit, the physiotherapist took over and Bob was given exercises to do as well as practicing walking using two walking sticks. He was so determined to walk properly as soon as possible, and to do so without sticks, that he never stopped practicing. In fact, only two days later when his parents visited again, he was able to walk towards them unaided, although a little wobbly. His progress was so good that the doctors said he could go home on ten days leave, but he must never walk far without his sticks, even if he didn't use them, at least, if he felt his balance going he could use them to support himself. Bob asked how he was to get home, and was told that an ambulance would take him home and bring him back, but it would take several days to arrange. While he waited, his commanding officer came to visit and tell all the Para's in the ward that by their efforts they had captured and secured the bridge and that made the landings a success. He was also very proud of them all, and though their losses had been very heavy it was the determination and bravery of all ranks that had made a difficult operation a success.

A week later and Bob was on his way home, he and three other men who lived in the same area, were driven in an army ambulance driven by two female nurses. Bob was the first to be dropped off, the nurses and the other men refused his parents offer of tea and biscuits. It was great to be home, all the neighbours and his friends came in to see him, and he enjoyed his Mums cooking. He was of course, quite helpless without his new legs on, and his Mother had to help him when it came to getting up and washing and dressing, but in time he knew he would work out a way to do it himself. For the first three days he was out walking every day but always with his Mother or Father, but on the fourth day he, and they, felt he could walk a little way on his own. So off he went, determined to walk a long way and just carrying his sticks. In fact, he walked up to his local shopping parade; it was a week day, so the thought of meeting Rita never crossed his mind. But suddenly, there she was, coming out of a shop with her mother.

For a moment they just looked at each other, then Rita came towards him with arms outstretched, and he dropped his stick and staggered towards her and she fell into each other's arms. They hugged each other for some time, then Rita looked into his face, there were tears running down her face, and there were tears in his eyes as well. They looked at each other for some time, then Bob tried to speak, but at first his voice wouldn't come, then in a soft, croaking voice he said, It would not have worked Rita, believe me, we are just two different people with such different backgrounds. He paused, Go and enjoy a good life, be happy, I'm going to be alright, and I want you to live your life as you like. He let his arms drop and took a step back, his balance was not that good and he put his hands out but realised he had dropped his sticks. Mrs Knowles had them and she gave them to him and gave him a big hug. Turning, Bob walked a few steps, then, lifting his head and straightening his shoulders he carefully walked away.

By Alf