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EMPIRE'S WITNESS

A Soldier's Secret War Diary 1942–45

Philip James Day

A journey to the edge of a vanishing British Empire

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WWII History. Memoir. Empire Studies.

390 pages. 23 maps. 57 plates. 350+ citations



Alwyn Robinson Day of Wakefield, Yorkshire, enlisted in the British Army Supplementary Reserve in February 1939 and was posted to the Royal Army Ordnance Corps as a Category ‘C’ clerk. When Britain declared war on 3 September, his quiet reserve commitment became full-time service.

By early 1940 he was stationed in western France, working between the supply port of Saint-Nazaire and the British 2nd Echelon headquarters in Nantes, helping support the vast flow of vehicles, stores and equipment sustaining the British Expeditionary Force.

Then, in May 1940, the German blitzkrieg shattered Allied lines. As the main British army escaped at Dunkirk, thousands of troops in Brittany were left behind, directly in the path of the German advance.

Army records show that Day was evacuated from Nantes during Operation Aerial on 19 June 1940. German forces entered the city the same day. Within days, France had fallen.

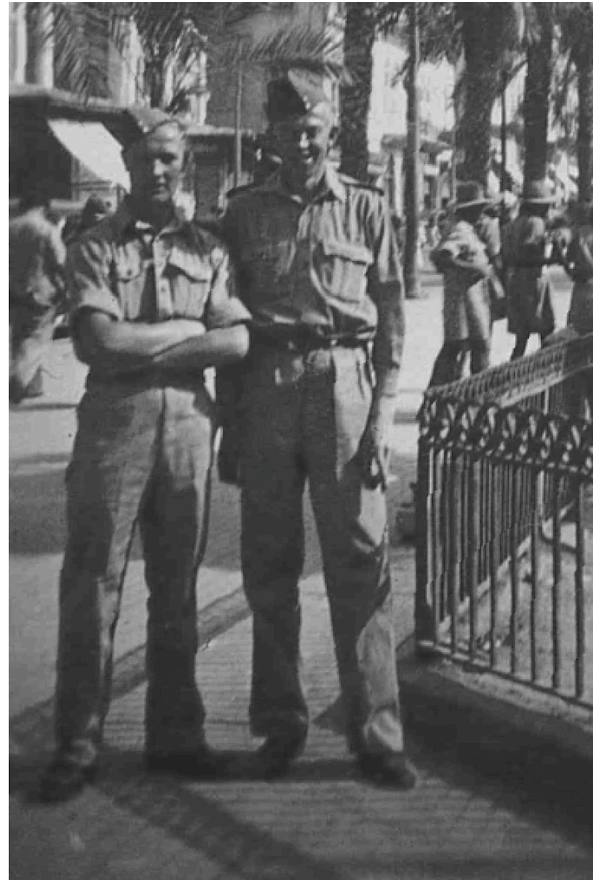


Plate 1. Alwyn, aged 13, Wakefield, Yorkshire, 1917

Plate 2. Alwyn (right) Martyrs' Square, Beirut, Lebanon. VE Day, 8 May 1945

Plate 3. The military cemetery at El Alamein, photographed by Alwyn, April 1944.

From Britain to the Eastern Theatre 1942–45



The Empire's Reach

In 1942 the British Empire still spanned an extraordinary reach, covering nearly a quarter of the world's geography but the Second World War tested the realm to its limits. Victory depended not only on battles, but on movement: ships, trucks, fuel, spare parts and men such as Corporal Alwyn Day, tasked with keeping it all moving.

(Above) Reconstructed overview of Corporal Day's wartime route around Africa, up to the Middle East and into British Occupied Iran. It was an itinerary shaped by imperial geography and the Allied logistics network.

(Right) Iran and Iraq: key nodes on the Persian Corridor, the supply route through which Allied matériel moved from the Persian Gulf toward the Soviet war effort.



France 1939–1940

No. of Part II Order or other Authority,	Unit	Record of all casualties regarding promotions (acting, temporary, local or substantive), appointments, transfers, postings, attachments, &c., forfeiture of pay, wounds, accidents, admission to and discharge from Hospital, Casualty Clearing Stations, &c. Date of disembarkation and embarkation from a theatre of war (including furlough, &c.)	Place of Casualty	Army Rank	Date	Service not allowed to reckon for pension		Signature of Officer certifying correctness of entries
						Yrs.	Days	
	<i>att'd H.R. Day</i>	Disembarked France 12.9.39		<i>Pte</i>				<i>[Signature]</i>
<i>Roll No 55 at 27/39</i>	---	<i>Granted furlough w/f 26/39 to 7/39</i>	<i>Nantes</i>	---				<i>[Signature] for C. O. N. 1. B. O. 1</i>
<i>Pt II No 25/24/40</i>	---	<i>Rejoined unit from leave</i>	<i>O. 1/6 R.A. O.C. - R.A.P. C.</i>	---	<i>17-12-39</i>			<i>[Signature] Lt Col</i>
<i>Pt II No 25/24/40</i>	---	<i>Granted Extension of leave 8/19.12.39</i>	---	---	<i>24.1.40</i>			<i>[Signature] Lt Col</i>
<i>Pt II No 624/1333</i>	---	<i>Proceeded on 10 days compassionate leave.</i>	---	---	<i>18/40</i>			<i>[Signature] Lt Col</i>
<i>ADP No 105. 6/3/40</i>	---	<i>Granted extension of leave with R.A.</i>	---	---	<i>5/2/40</i>			<i>[Signature] Lt Col</i>
<i>ADP No 105. 6/3/40</i>	---	<i>Passed grade test Clerk Group 'C' Class II temporary only</i>	---	---	<i>12/1/40</i>			<i>[Signature] Lt Col</i>
		<i>Evacuated U.K.</i>			<i>19/6/40</i>			
<i>593^a/40.</i>	<i>1.10.0.1</i>	<i>With 1 B.O.D.</i>		---	<i>28.6.40</i>			
<i>14/40</i>	---	<i>Posted D.A.D.O.S. N.19</i>		---	<i>12.7.40</i>			<i>[Signature]</i>

Before Alwyn Day began writing the diary that forms the heart of this book, and while he was still a Private, his movements can be traced through official military records.

12 September 1939 Disembarked France

Nine days after Britain declared war, Private Day arrived in France with the British Expeditionary Force. His unit formed part of the logistical system that supplied and maintained the Allied army.

18 January 1940 Compassionate Leave

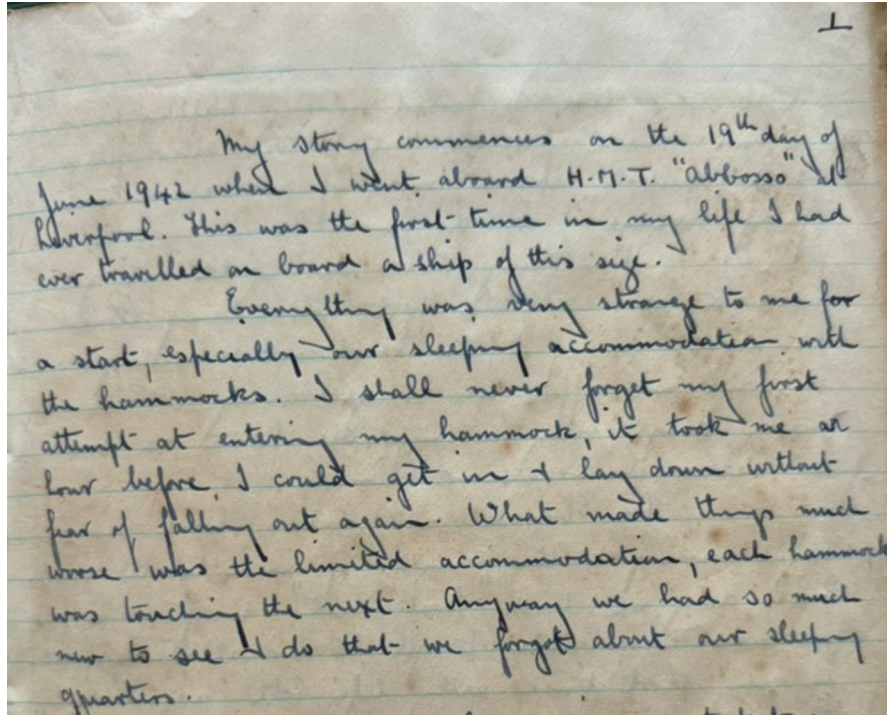
The record shows that Day was granted compassionate leave following the death of his mother. After the leave period he returned to his unit in Nantes.

19 June 1940 Evacuated U.K.

This entry records his evacuation from France during the chaotic Allied withdrawal from western ports such as Nantes and Saint-Nazaire. German forces entered Nantes the same day.

Diary Entry

19 June 1942, Liverpool, England



"My story commences on the 19th day of June 1942 when I went aboard H.M.T. "Abosso," Liverpool. This was the first time in my life I had ever travelled on board a ship of this size. Everything was very strange to me for a start, especially our sleeping accommodation with the hammocks. I shall never forget my first attempt at entering my hammock; it took me an hour before I could get in and lie down without fear of falling out again. What made this much worse was the limited accommodation; each hammock was touching the next. Anyway we had so much new to see I do that we forgot about our sleeping quarters."

Exactly two years after his escape from France, Corporal Day began writing the diary that would eventually become this book. On 19 June 1942 he boarded HMT Abosso at Liverpool, part of a vast wartime convoy system carrying tens of thousands of soldiers and supplies across the oceans of the British Empire.

Where the journey would lead he could not know. Convoys moved slowly and quietly through waters hunted by German U-boats. Ships travelled in tight formation, zigzagging through the Atlantic under constant threat.

On that first night at sea, surrounded by thousands of strangers and the uneasy creak of the ship, Day opened a notebook and began to write.

Campaign and Defence Medals, 1939–1945



The Hidden Compartment

Shortly after Alwyn's return, an official letter confirmed that he had qualified for three standard campaign awards: the 1939–45 Star, the War Medal 1939–45 and the Defence Medal. There was nothing unusual in this. They were the quiet acknowledgement of years served, miles travelled and duties carried out. For years, the family assumed that the full medal group was missing. Perhaps the Army had never sent it, or perhaps Alwyn had never claimed it.

In March 2026, however, the original box was examined properly. Behind a carefully constructed false compartment lay the official transmittal letters and the ribbons, folded flat and fitted so precisely that they seemed measured to the space. It felt like something closed and left untouched. Whether the compartment was simply Alwyn's way of keeping order, or something more private, cannot now be known. What is clear is that he kept the medals complete, yet never wore them in public. Why remains an open question.

The Physical Cost of Service

(Below) Army Form B.179.C records Corporal Day's medical reclassification for 'general debility following pneumonia', an impersonal phrase for a serious setback. After severe pneumonia in Tehran he was assessed as having weakened lungs and his category was altered.

It did not end his service. He continued his duties in the large Allied maintenance depots, and he kept writing, even as his health narrowed what he could comfortably endure.

Army Form B.179.C.

APPLICATION FOR THE MEDICAL RECLASSIFICATION OF A SOLDIER.

PART I.

No. 7593371 Rank Cpl Name DAY, A.R.
 Unit R.E.M.E. HQ. 3 Corps. Age 38 yrs. Service 3 1/2 yrs
 Army Medical Category on first posting to the Army A.1.
 Present Army Medical Category A.1.
 Disability General Debility following Pneumonia.
 Present state of disability was in 39. B. S. N. 21-11-42 - 6-2-43
with lobar Pneumonia (Rt apex) since his return to Iran
run a cutting pulse of 90-100. Cough, tired, persistent
cough, and general debility. Not fit for an A.
Category.
 Station in the Field. AIRFORCE Signature of Unit J. S. [Signature]
 Date 28 Mar 43 Medical Officer Capt R.A.M.C.

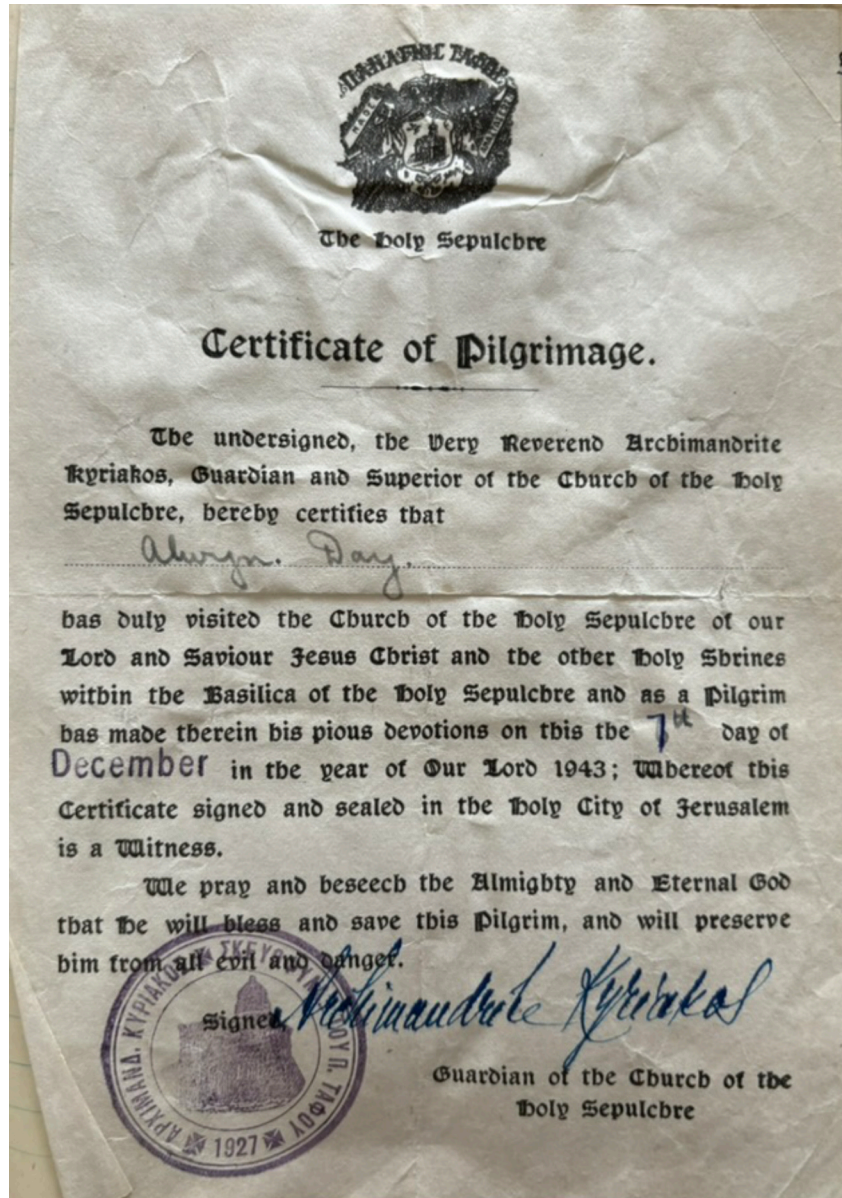
(L7851) Wt. 10206/47 100.000% 4/41 A.S.E.W.Ltd Gp. 698
 (L9662) Wt. 33732/1366 100.000 10/41



(Above) Depot barracks at Tel-el-Kebir, sixty miles outside Cairo.

Photographs on the wall, pin-ups, and a wireless set suggest the small comforts of long service away from home. Following pneumonia and medical reclassification, Corporal Day continued his duties in the depot system and kept writing the diary that records the daily reality of a war fought far from the front line.

Certificate of Pilgrimage, Jerusalem, December 1943



Dated 7 December 1943, this certificate records Corporal Day's visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, confirming his visit as a pilgrim. The document offers insight into the moral and spiritual dimensions that coexisted alongside military duty.

During his time in Jerusalem he also collected devotional cards and a leaf from the **Garden of Gethsemane**, which he pasted into his diary; personal artefacts reflecting how soldiers encountered the **Holy Land** during the war.