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BATTLEguide

From the Editor

This issue of BATTLEguide marks a new departure as it is initially being produced merely as a downloadable PDF file for viewing on a computer. The reason is quite simply money: as the Guild membership has grown so have the production and postage costs associated with publication and accordingly in an effort to reduce overheads and give better value to all members we are now going to be publishing the Journal electronically. Printed copies can be obtained upon application to the Editor but these will be severely restricted in numbers.

One advantage of electronic publishing is that we are no longer restrained by considerations of cost when it comes to deciding the number of articles, their length and their pictorial content. In other words, BATTLEguide will be larger and hopefully more informative than ever before.

But it is you the members who are really the deciding factor when it comes to what we are able to publish because it is your contributions which decide the content and quality of what we have to offer. So please, if you have an idea for an article, contact the Editor. The greater capacity to publish articles really means that the onus is on you to provide the material on which to base the journal so why not turn some of those Assignment 1 successes into articles for all to read?

Sadly this issue marks the final, posthumous contribution from Lt Col Will Townend who was a founding member of the Guild and recipient of Badge No. 4 and who died early in April. His article appears with the kind permission of his family and will serve as a reminder to us all in the Guild as to what a huge loss he is to our collective knowledge and experience

Mike St Maur Sheil
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Graeme Cooper

WILL TOWNEND - VALETE! by Mike St Maur Sheil

“Colonel Guns” is dead. The Guild has lost a great man and all of us have lost a good friend who was ever ready with advice and the sort of detailed information which we could only have ever gained from, from... from years of experience such as only Will Townend ever had.

And was he ever anything but generous when it came to sharing his knowledge?

As I prepared for my Assignment One I asked him the sort of stupid question you would expect from a scruffy civilian like me about the meaning of “indirect fire” and how did one adjust for firing at targets at different levels in mountains? A couple of weeks went by - no reply and I thought that perhaps my idiot questions had drawn a crusty, Colonel-like disdainful silence.

And then the e-mail “...sorry for making such a brief answer but am between tours so hope you will forgive me for not

being able to other than a quick explanation”. As I commented to someone shortly afterwards, I hope I never get one of Will’s normal explanations! It was fantastic - four pages of solid fact and detail, simply explained and quite clear even to an ignoramus like me.

But best of all was the day in France when seeing a sign-post to a battlefield I had never visited and for which I had no maps I found myself in the named village. But where was the battlefield? As the light was fading desperate measures were called for and so a quick call to Will asking “where should I go?”

It transpired he was driving up the M3 but he proceeded to direct me to the middle of the

correct field, turned me about to face the right way and then gave me a fantastic stand, all on my own.

The light was perfect, that day. But now with his passing it is a little dimmed.

Right to the end he was producing material of incredible erudition and range: just a short while ago he offered to “knock up a quick piece on Torres Vedras”. Sadly I will never be able to publish that “quick piece” which I am sure would have been a definitive essay on the subject but in its stead here is the final article from that magic man -

Lt. Col Will Townend aka “Colonel Guns”.

D-DAY GUNNERS by Lt Col W A H Townend

Not another article about the Run-in shoot, you might think, to which the answer is yes and no.

There can be no doubt that the run-in shoot fired by the Divisional Artilleries of 3rd British, 3rd Canadian and 50th (Northumbrian) Divisional Artilleries on the morning of D-Day made a significant contribution to the suppression of the German beach defences and one of which the Royal Regiment of Artillery can be justifiably proud. What is rarely recorded is what the targets were, how the Divisional Artilleries were controlled, when they landed and what happened to them after they landed. Nor has much been said about the actions of the host of other Gunner units that landed on D-Day.

To take the run-in shoot first, it is worth reviewing which units were involved: for 3rd Division, the three regiments of the Divisional Artillery – 7th, 33rd and 76th all equipped with twenty-four 105 mm Priest SP guns. For the 3rd Canadian Division, there were the three regiments of the Divisional Artillery – 12th, 13th and 14th Field Regiments Royal Canadian Artillery, and an Army field regiment, 19th Field Regiment which normally supported 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade; all four regiments were also equipped with the 105 mm Priest. In 50th Division were 90th Field Regiment of the Divisional Artillery and two Army field regiments, 86th (Hertfordshire Yeomanry) and 147th (Essex Yeomanry) Field Regiments, all equipped with the 25-pounder Sexton SP gun, also known as the Ram. 147 Fd Regt normally supported 8 Armd Bde, whose

regiments supported the brigades of 50 Div during the landings. The other two regiments of the 50th Divisional Artillery – 74 and 124 Fd Regts, had towed 25-pounders; 74 Fd Regt did not land until D+4 and 124 Fd Regt did not land until D+30.

On Sword Beach the target of all three regiments was *Wiederstandnest* (resistance nest) WN20, codenamed by the British COD. On Juno 12 and 13 Fd Regts supporting 7 Cdn Inf Bde on Mike Sector fired on WN31 and 29 at Courseulles and 14 and 19 Fd Regts supporting 8 Cdn Inf Bde on Nan Sector fired on WN27 and 28 at St Aubin and Bernieres respectively. On Gold Beach 86 Fd Regt supporting 69 Bde on King Sector fired on WN33 at La Riviere and 90 and 147 Fd Regts supporting 231 Bde fired on WN36 at Le Roquette and WN37 at Le Hamel respectively. 147 Fd Regt radar

in its motor launch fell behind and could not make radio contact with the adjutant to pass the initial data so this was passed by 90 Fd Regt's ML. However, their fire, contrary to the comment in the Official History, was adjusted by the OP, Maj Sidgwick, and the Regiment fired on its correct target, although the effect of the fire is uncertain, for WN37 put up a stout resistance and 1 Hampshires had a prolonged and costly fight to suppress it and to capture Le Hamel. It was a Royal Engineers AVRE at the back door and Sgt Palmer's Sexton of 511 Bty at the front that eventually put WN37 out of action, for which Sgt Palmer was awarded the MM.

The arrangements to provide the necessary observation and communications on each beach were complex. Each regiment had its three battery commanders and six troop commanders, the OP officers, but there were many more units in each assaulting brigade that required their support than they could provide and the command, observation and liaison



Author's Collection

Crusader 40mm SP



Author's Collection

Bofors SP

arrangements were complex. On Sword, the BCs and FOOs of 76 Fd Regt and 7 Fd Regts supported their affiliated battalions and were supplemented by FOOs from 33 Fd Regt, which also provided FOOs for the armoured regiments of 27 Armd Bde and BCs as LOs with brigade headquarters. Once ashore the BCs and FOOs were to return to their normal affiliations. On Juno, each assault brigade was supported by an artillery group; 12 Fd Regt Group of 12 and 13 Fd Regts for 7 Bde and 14 Fd Regt Group of 14 and 19 Fd Regts for 8 Bde. Each Regiment provided four FOOs for each assault battalion and two for the follow on battalion. After landing, 12 and 13 Fd Regt continued to support 7 Bde, but 14 Fd Regt changed affiliation to 9 Bde once it had landed and taken the lead; two Army field regiments – 6 and 191 – were to land after D-Day to bring each group up to two regiments. On Gold, 86 Fd Regt deployed the BC and OP officers of 462 and 342 Btys with the battalion HQ and reserve companies of the assault battalions of 69 Bde on King Sector, 5 East Yorks and 6 Green Howards respectively, and one OP

officer with the reserve battalion, 7 Green Howards while the BC and other OP officer of 341 Bty were the observing officers for the Run-in Shoot. The BKs of 341 and 342 were LOs with the Royal Navy to pass fire missions to the warships and BK 462 Bty commanded the B Vehicle group following on. On Jig Sector, 231 Bde, with a tougher objective at Le Hamel, had BCs and OP officers from both regiments spread through the Brigade: CO 147 Fd Regt was with Brigade HQ, and CO 90 Fd Regt with CO 1 Dorsets. Each Regiment deployed an LO with the units supported by the other to ensure calls for fire could be answered quickly by either regiment, or both, and an OP officer was deployed with the Sherwood Rangers, the brigade's armoured regiment. Both regiments were to then change affiliation to the follow on brigades – 56 and 151 – on landing.

Right across the Army front BCs and FOOs brought down fire to suppress enemy positions to allow the infantry to get to grips with them. On Sword,

Capt Featherstone, although wounded with a broken collar bone, remained with 2 E Yorks until he was ordered to the dressing station in the evening; on Juno Capt Tom Bond of 19 Fd Regt RCA won MC for coolness and confidence under fire as an FOO with the Regiment de la Chaudiere "... he was shelled out of his OP and while keeping fire going on his objective he went forward to another OP, still under heavy fire, to continue giving valuable support to the infantry" while Gnr Jack Holtzman of 13 Fd Regt RCA won the MM for directing fire after his FOO had been wounded and OP Ack killed. On Gold, the two FOOs with the Hampshires, Cpts Taylor and Munro, both kept up with the leading infantry and showing complete disregard for enemy sniper fire and their own safety brought fire down in support of the infantry attacks at Le Hamel; they were both awarded the MC.

However, they were neither the only gunners to fire on D-Day, nor the only units to land. 6 AB Div had only a single regiment, 53 AL Lt Regt, to support them, and to supplement the number of FOOs volunteers from across the Corps artillery were trained as parachutists to provide additional FOOs for the parachute brigades, many of whom were dropped wide of their objectives and killed or captured. One recalled: "Nothing of the two Horsa gliders stood higher than six feet. Two killed, three with broken arms or legs, jeep trailer, motor cycles and wireless all written off and 500 cigarettes in the debris at map reference 115745. Officer Commanding FOO and FOB had arrived and with his party to

support 5 Para Bde and to liberate Europe and did not feel confident of success.” The first guns to land on D-Day were the 6-pounder troops of 4 AL ATk Bty, by glider at 0335 hrs to deal with the German armoured counter-attacks. They were followed on the evening of D-Day by the 17-pounder troop of the Battery and the 75mm guns of 211 AL Bty which flew in by glider, the guns going straight into action at Ranville. The 6-pounders of 3 AL ATk Bty came by sea on the afternoon of D-Day and the 17-pounders on D+1.

The Run-in Shoot was a integral part of a Joint Fireplan provided by the Royal Navy and RAF. The fireplan started at midnight with the night bombers of the RAF concentrating on the principal coast batteries, followed at first light by the day bombers of the USAAF. The Royal Navy provided a bombardment group on each beach; the five battleships, two monitors, twenty cruisers and two gunboats would open fire from 0530 hrs on the same targets. Each bombardment group also had between ten and fourteen destroyers to provide ‘beach drenching fire’ and each assault group had a variety of specialist landing craft for the same purpose, mainly LCG(L) (Landing Craft Gun (Large)) with two 4.7-inch guns, LCT(R) (Landing Craft Tank (Rocket)) with 1,000 60-pound

rockets and LCS(L) (Landing Craft Support (Large)) with 6-pounder guns. Before H-Hour the fire of these ships would be observed solely by specially trained pilots flying observation aircraft to observe deep inland and report the fall of shot; there were four squadrons of Fleet Air Arm Seafires, five squadrons of RAF Mustangs and Spitfires and 15 Spitfires flown by US pilots, each aircraft having radio contact with the ship to which it was allotted. It was the first time single-seat aircraft had been used for this purpose on such a scale.

As the guns of the field regiments were not scheduled to land straight away there would be no artillery support during the first hour or so after H-Hour. Indirect fire support would be provided by the warships of the Royal Navy controlled now by Forward Observers Bombardment, Royal Artillery officers specially trained to observe naval gunfire would control the fire of the warships.

The FOBs were organised as Combined Operations Bombardment Units (COBU). No 1 COBU supported 3, 6 AB and 50 Divs, while No 3 COBU supported 3 Cdn Div, the commandos and provided the reserve, a total of 40 FOBs. Each was in direct communications with a Bombardment Liaison Officer (BLO) on board a ship as the military advisor to the captain. In addition there were 17 BLOs with the ships supporting the US landings, but the US provided their own observing parties. A destroyer was the equivalent of a field regiment and a cruiser the equivalent of a medium regiment; there was no comparison for a battleship. The FOBs worked closely with the field battery



Author's Collection

75mm Light Gun

commander in integrating the ships fire in support of the unit. Some parties were trained as parachute, commando or airlanding troops.

The FOBs conducted 101 shoots on D-Day and fired over 4000 rounds. The effect of the FOBs was mixed, partly because there was minimum safe distance of 1000 yards for the ships to engage targets. In 3 Div the country was too close for the FOBs to able to observe, but in 6 AB Div the FOBs broke up German counter attacks with great effect. Among the casualties, Capts Williams with 4 Cdo and Llewellyn with 1 Suffolks were killed on Sword Beach and Capt Lee with 2 R Warwicks was missing believed killed during their abortive attack on Lebisey Wood on 7 Jun. Several of those attached to 6 AB Div were dropped wide and some captured or killed; LBdr Luggard and RTel Peters managed to evade capture for eleven weeks until overtaken by the Allied advance.

Also covering the critical minutes between landing and the arrival of the first guns were the 95mm Centaur tanks of the Royal Marine Assault Support Regiments. One battery of 16 tanks was allocated to each beach. They were scheduled to land first, on some beaches joining the run in shoot, and fire from the waters edge either direct or in response to



Author's Collection

HMS Ramillies - D-Day

calls for fire from FOOs. The tanks travelled in LCT(A) with extra armour, however this destabilised the craft and many were swamped and arrived late or in the wrong place, and some were towed back to England.

Surveyors from the Corps survey regiments - 9 Svy Regt for I Corps and 4 Svy Regt for XXX Corps - landed with the field batteries shortly after H-Hour. Their task was to pass line and fix to the field batteries as soon as possible to permit coordinated fire, and to set up beacons for the bombarding warships. The beachmaster on Gold Beach did not take kindly to having a beacon set up next to his CP acting as an aiming mark for enemy fire.

The first Gunners to land on the beaches were the anti-tank gunners of the Divisional and Corps anti-tank regiments. These were the M10 SP troops of the Divisional regiments, 102 (Northumberland Hussar) ATk Regt on Gold Beach, 3 ATk Regt RCA on Juno and 20 ATk Regt on Sword, either with the assault waves or shortly after. These regiments had four batteries each of one M10 3-inch SP troop and two 6-pounder troops. The 6-pounder troops did not land until the second tide as wheeled vehicles were not permitted to land in the assault wave. The SP troops landed independently or, on Juno, grouped under control of one battery, 105 ATk Bty RCA. The guns were there to provide immediate anti-tank defence to the beaches, but the German panzer divisions were not released from OKW control until late in the morning. Several guns were knocked-out on the beaches

and BC 101 Bty was wounded on Sword. However, the guns on Sword came into their own in the afternoon when 21 Pz Div mounted the only armoured counter-attack against the beachhead on D-Day. The M10s of 41 ATk Bty of 20 ATk Regt shared a score of 16 Panzer IVs with the Staffordshire Yeomanry and stopped the armoured counter-attack dead in its tracks on Periers Ridge. The 21 Pz Div history recorded "The British positions were tactically well chosen and their fire both heavy and accurate. The first Mark IV was blazing before a single tank had had a chance to fire a shot. The remainder moved forward firing to where the enemy were thought to be; but the English weapons were well concealed and within a few minutes we had lost six tanks. The fire of the English from their outstandingly well-sited defensive positions was murderous." Following the Divisional regiments were the M10 batteries of the Corps regiments, 198 and 234 Btys of 73 ATk Regt on Gold and 247 and 248 Btys of 62 ATk Regt on Juno; the 17-pounder batteries did not land until D+1.

The least well-known of the Gunner tasks on D-Day was the air defence of the beaches, during both the assault and the follow up. The air threat was taken very seriously; the air defence appreciation estimated that the Luftwaffe could mount up to 1750 sorties per day, with up to 50 per hour, and so elaborate measures were taken to protect the landings from air attack.

The responsibility for protecting the beaches was the task of 76 and 80 AA Bdes of 2nd Army troops

and they would do this from the outset: the brigades were placed under command the assault corps - 76 AA Bde commanded by Brig E F Benson with XXX Corps and 80 AA Bde commanded by Brig H W Deacon, with I Corps. 80 Bde was the coordinating HQ and was responsible for Juno and Sword Beaches while 76 Bde covered Gold, Mulberry B and the PLUTO installation at Port-en-Bessin. Each brigade had light and heavy AA regiments, a searchlight battery, an RAF balloon unit, a pioneer smoke unit, and an AA Ops Room. The corps and divisional LAA regiments would land later to protect routes, headquarters and the gun areas as the divisions advanced and emerged from the cover of the AA defences on the beaches. The Fleet, of course, had comprehensive air defence, from pom-poms to 5.25-inch guns that would protect the anchorages.

To ensure that there was point defence on the beach against low-level air attack from the first landing, the first equipment to land would be the 40 mm Crusader anti-aircraft tanks of the beach defence LAA units - 120 on Gold, 114 on Juno and 73 on Sword, each regiment reinforced with a 20 mm Crusader battery of 93 LAA Regt, 320 on Gold, 321 on Juno and 322 on Sword. Each battery comprised three troops each of three Crusader tanks with a turret fitted with triple 20 mm guns or a single 40 mm, and each towing a triple 20 mm trailer mounting or 40 mm Bofors Mk I. The order of landing varied from beach to beach, but most arrived on D-Day, although not always on time or in the right place. Some were loaded in the same LCTs(A) as the Centaurs of the RM Armd Sp Gp, and suffered

the same mixed fortunes. Capt Storey's E Tp of 120 Regt were scheduled to land on King Sector, but only one tank and towed gun arrived; it disembarked and stood in a traffic jam until the rising tide swamped it. It stood, fully manned, up to its track guards in water throughout the day, the only LAA gun on King Sector. The rest of Capt Storey's troop was towed back to Portsmouth where he spent two days trying to blag his way on to a ship bound for Normandy, eventually arriving on D+3. The 40 mm tanks and their towed guns deployed on the beach, while the 20 mms deployed on the high ground inland to protect the expanding beachhead. The third troop in each battery had lorry-mounted SP Bofors and would land after D-Day to protect vital points inland. Following the LAA batteries were the mobile 3.7-inch guns of the HAA regiments, 113 on Gold, 86 (HAC) on Juno and 103 on Sword, a reinforced battery on each sector; in the event congestion was too great and the threat too low and only one gun, Sgt Hughes's 3.7-inch of 103 HAA Regt landed on D-Day, just before midnight, and shot down a Ju 88 next day. And to complete the deployment, the recce parties of the RAF balloon and pioneer smoke units also landed on 6 June.

In the event, the combination of the Allied air offensive against the Luftwaffe and the deception plans meant that the Germans mounted few sorties on D-Day – there was effectively no enemy air activity in daylight hours. However, as dusk approached, the Germans came to life and mounted a series of raids on the night of D-Day, and most nights afterwards, which did considerable damage, although was never worse than a nuisance.



M10-SPA Tk Gun-2

Author's Collection

Finally, mention must be made of the leading units of the Army artillery allocated to I and XXX Corps which were scheduled to land on the evening of D-Day. These were 53 Med Regt, a 5.5-inch gun regiment of 4 AGRA landing on Juno and 987 US Army Field Artillery Battalion, a US 155 mm SP unit attached to 5 AGRA for counter-battery tasks, landing on Gold. However, the unreliability of the Rhino ferries meant that only the CO of 53 Med Regt got ashore on Day, and the guns did not start to land until D+1.

By the end of D-Day 75,000 Commonwealth troops had landed on Gold, Juno and Sword and in the Orne Bridgehead. A large number of these were Gunners and they were probably the biggest single cap-badge and only slightly fewer than the number of infantrymen. By the end of the Battle of Normandy there were more gunner units in Normandy than infantry and armour

combined. We rightly celebrate the achievements of the Run-in shoot, but it was just the start.

Sources:

Official History - North-West Europe, Volume I: Normandy – Maj L F Ellis. Gunners of Canada, Volume II - Col G W L Nicholson Regimental Histories of 7, 33 and 86 Fd Regts, 53 AL Lt Regt and 103 HAA Regt RA. Larkhill Locators - Massimo Mangili Climpson. Various articles in the RA Journal – RAI. Papers of Maj Gen J H Parham – RAI. Unit War Diaries – National Archive Series WO 171

¹ *The Official History states that 147 Fd Regt fired on 90 Fd Regt's target, but a GPO in 147 Fd Regt states categorically that the fire was adjusted on to the Regiment's target by the OP, Maj Sidgwick, BC 413 Bty.*

² *Sources vary: the Official History gives 36, Max Hastings gives 122 and John Terraine gives 317 sorties. ■*

ALL IN A GUIDE'S DAYS WORK by Bob Darby

I have been asked on many occasions how much remuneration should I be seeking as a Battlefield Guide. My reply is always, 'What do you think you are worth?' A recent canvassing of members of the Guild has resulted in the following opinions and comments.

Firstly, you need to address the question: what is a Battlefield Guide? Guides come in all shapes and sizes, male or female, some with relevant educational qualifications and with much experience of guiding. Some regard themselves as professional guides whilst others are 'hobbyists' who, in many cases provide a very valuable guiding service but where the reward for them is the pleasure they receive in telling the story, rather than any fiscal benefit.

Other 'guides' may be those who tour the battlefields normally at the steering wheel of a coach dispensing 'knowledge' on the basis of a book they read or, a film they saw.

There are some who argue that Battlefield Guides should not be 'professional' and therefore not paid at all. You can afford to take this view if you have retired on a handsome pension are not dependent on your guiding income to sustain yourself or, by necessity have to 'top up' an inadequate pension income.

Attitudes are comparative to the early days of rugby football when those who wanted to be paid for playing broke away and set up the game of Rugby League in order to be paid. 'Gentlemen' remained within Union rules believing it was unworthy of a player to expect to be paid for playing a game and contrary to the spirit which was bound tightly to the ethic of

playing for the love of it!

Some Guides own their businesses and generate income based on the profit from their tours. However, many more do not, working mostly on a self employed basis and receiving a fee at a daily rate.

What is a Guide worth? Well, if you look at the daily rates paid by some of the larger guiding companies they can vary between £75.00 and up to £150.00 per day. The latter is the maximum daily rate I have heard of being paid by a tour operator.

Comparison should be made with the minimum wage rules. However, **they do not affect the self employed.** Currently the minimum wage is £5.73 per hour for a worker age 22 and over. Considering the average guiding day can be up to 16 hours and, given a daily rate of £75.00, this works out at £4.68 per hour! The choice is stark, be a Battlefield Guide or be a 'Burger Flipper' in MacDonald's. You would earn more!

Earlier I referred to those who 'having read a book and watched a film, immediately becoming Guides'. Those same people have taken work away from me. I was politely rejected by a group of travellers after I had them told my fee. "Thank you but the coach company say their driver knows about all those places you were going to take us to!" Maybe they were not the sort of group

I should have been looking to work with in the first place or more probably I did not get my message across.

How many operators know the amount of research you put in to providing accurate information for a tour you may guide on? Do they know you are not necessarily depending on secondary sources alone, but have actually spent time and money visiting perhaps the National Archives or a Regimental Museum to ascertain the truth about a particularly action!

Many tour operators have Guild members working for them in a management capacity, administering guides who work for them and, often determining the rate to be paid to a Guide. They often employ fellow guides. Some are 'Badged' others not, but no less committed to providing an honest and entertaining account of history.

I believe our Council should be working towards some sort of recommended pay scale level for 'Badged' guides. However, some Council members may have the dilemma of being our paymasters and it would not sit easily with them to be negotiating on our behalf, possibly against themselves!

Those who have attained the status of 'Badged' Guide within the Guild should seek to achieve a rate of daily pay which adequately reflects the prescribed level of guiding skills as defined by the Guild of Battlefield Guides in their Validation process. All those who aspire to be professional Guides should regard it as a minimum skills requirement. Who would not agree that good Guides are primarily entertainers

who should be rewarded accordingly? They are the pivotal point of any tour and are the main reason for clients returning to the same touring company time and again.

One has to respect the right of a tour operator who wishes to maximise his profit by keeping his overheads down. You, the Guide are an 'overhead'. However, it may be that in the future they will recognise the 'marque' of a Badged Guide of the Guild of Battlefield Guides and pay a higher rate for such a qualification. Some operators I understand do give preference to members of the Guild, when allocating tours.

Guides have the right to work for whom they choose including running their own tours. They are self employed professionals able to sell their services to the highest bidder, or at least should be able to. However, there are some operators who would like to think they can 'own' Guides and therefore 'ban' them from working for rival companies. The fear being the Guide will 'steal' the clients and 'ideas' of the operator.

What is a fair day's pay for a fair day's work?

I have spoken to a number of Guides within the Guild. It appears that the average daily rate is £110.00 per day. Most Guides work between 6 and 9 days per month or 108 days per annum. This would presume a salary of £11,880 per annum. Payment is generally not made for time spent on research and pre-tour preparation, although a few do. If you are happy with the rate as above so be it, but you would not

be helping your fellows whose sole income might be from guiding.

Others of you have said that your daily rate is £200.00 per day. When costing a fee, you allow for the cost of meals, travel and any other costs such as the preparation of handouts to support your stand presentations. Justification for charging this type of fee would be experience, knowledge and presentation skills. Writing and presenting a tour of say Sicily or North Africa, might command a higher fee than a tour of the Western Front. The former would be a more specialist tour for the more discerning clients of battlefield touring who would pay a premium for something different.

Some of you tell me you have been able to command a fee of over £300.00 per day, it being paid not only for time on tour, but also for research time. The type of tour envisaged here will probably be unique in its subject and for a professional body such as a military establishment or specialist touring company who have approached a Guide because of his specialist knowledge and/or reputation! £300.00 per day is the highest anybody has been prepared to reveal to me.

So what are you worth? It seems that if you work for a tour operator running mainstream tours to (say), the Western Front then you are going to be one among many other Guides plying their trade for hire. As I have said previously you are regarded as an 'asset'. Now if you become the owner of your 'guiding asset' by setting up your own tours then you will reap the reward but also take all the risks, which were

previously those of your tour operator. Setting up your own business will require investment. Do you want to do that?

The choices are yours. Get your Badge and prove to your employer you are worth more! It won't be just because of the qualification but the additional skills acquired as part of the validation process, whereby you are able to administer a tour in a profitable manner and bring in additional business by having satisfied clients who will recommend your employer's company to others.

Perhaps a compromise might be the best way forward whereby your employer does not try to restrict you to his employment alone. You have the right to sell your services for whatever fee you can command. I was told by one Guild member that his employer said that, as he had 'trained' him he therefore had first claim on his loyalty and could not work for anybody else. This is a preposterous assumption! It was you that spent hours researching and preparing tours in your style and format. It was you that spent your monies on visiting battlefields all over Europe. This employer had merely taken him on tour and told him how he would like the tour carried out. That does not, in my book constitute training.

Ultimately, it would be rewarding if the whole battlefield guiding fraternity took up the Guild Validation Programme as their mark of excellence, and paid accordingly. I wouldn't hold your breathe!

I hope we can generate some debate on this matter. ■

A BATTLEFIELD TOUR OF ST NAZAIRE By Bob Hilton

In the summer of 2008 I conducted a private tour of the Normandy battlefield area for a small group using a mini-bus. The group included several men who had served in 29 Commando Regiment, Royal Artillery in the 1990's. They were particularly interested in the Commando and Ranger actions of 'D-Day' itself. Most of these men had visited or taken part in the annual Commando speed march competition held at Spean Bridge where the memorial to all commandos stands. During the course of the tour I told them that I also conducted tours of the St Nazaire raid area and one of them was quite shocked.

"You, an ex para, you conduct tours of our greatest battle honour!"

Even today it causes excitement amongst those that know about it, a feeling of incredible achievement, that against the odds, a force of just over 600 men sailed in an old destroyer and a collection of wooden hulled motor launches, up a river that was heavily guarded and attacked the enemy right on his own doorstep.

This article will look at what there is to see now, how you can access certain points to over-see the area for the best vantage points and then set all this in the context of the incredible actions that those 'gallant six hundred' carried out over 65 years ago.

Introduction.

The early months of 1942 were one of the darkest ever periods in Britain's history. Her armies were being driven back in almost every major theatre of war, whether in North Africa, Burma, or Malaya, the news was everywhere the same. Critically short of supplies she depended for her survival on the vulnerable, lumbering convoys which brought her succour from America. Already ravaged by U-boats this vital lifeline faced a new and mortal threat when in January the German super-battleship 'Tirpitz' sailed north to Trondheim. This was the traditional first move of surface raiders preparing to break out into the wastes of the North Atlantic, and it prompted an immediate response from the Admiralty, who took urgent action to forestall her.

The dry-dock facility at St Nazaire was the only place the Tirpitz could put into for repairs if damaged by naval action in the Atlantic. The Combined Operations staff plan was to sail a task force of one 'old' destroyer, converted into a floating bomb, an assortment of 15 Motor Launches (ML), a Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) and a Motor Gun Boat (MGB), with a force of Commandos embarked, 6 miles up the Loire River to attack the dry-dock and its facilities and destroy them!

Walking the ground.

Our start point is the Old Mole. This structure has not changed since the war. The Germans constructed two pill-boxes with gun and searchlight positions on them, the main gun position being numbered 63 by the British planning team. They are long gone. The only people that you meet now are the odd fishermen with their rods and reels. It is a humbling place to stand and relate the catastrophe that was to befall the British force at this point.



Author's Collection

The 'Old Mole' where there were two German gun platforms with 20 mm flak guns, position no 63, and a searchlight. The slip way on the left (Northern) side was where Group 1 of the Commando's in their six Motor Launches were to land.

The action.

Group One of the assault force was to land at the Old Mole from their 6 Motor Launches. Their targets were: the Old Mole itself and the destruction of its defences; the East Jetty and its defences; and all the lock gates and

defences around the New (South) Entrance to the Inner (Submarine) Basin. They were raked by fire from the German guns on the Old Mole and along the East Jetty. ML 447 under the command of Lieutenant Platt was hit repeatedly, but still managed to make an approach to the landing point. Unfortunately he overshot and in trying to correct his position his ML was hit by more fire and then a heavy calibre shell. He ordered all those aboard, which included the 14 Commandos to abandon ship. Three of the crew were killed and nine of the Commandos. In command of the Commando assault party, whose very objective was the mole itself, was Captain David Birney. He turned to the only two men fit to swim and ordered,

'Over the side, you two.'

The two men, Lieutenant Bill Clibborn and Troop Sergeant Major Ted Hewett would both survive, although they were made prisoners. Captain Birney, however, was only an average swimmer and the effort of reaching the dry land exhausted him. He stumbled ashore a short distance and then died.

ML 457 under the command of Lieutenant Collier was more successful and landed all its Commando teams intact, but in attempting to come back in a second time, later on, and take off the Commandos' he was severely hit and sunk. He and six of his crew were killed and seven were taken prisoner. Captain Pritchard's and Lieutenant Walton's demolition teams and Lieutenant 'Tiger' Watson's protection teams all moved off to their assigned objectives. At one point during the run in 'Tiger' Watson caught a glimpse of HMS Campbeltown heading for its' target,

"She was a memorable sight, ploughing along, brilliantly lit up by searchlights, the British battle ensign streaming over her stern, she was now heading for the dry-dock at full speed, her sides alive with the flashes of shells that were hitting her continuously".

Having moved off, with only a cursory 'blast' at the enemy in their positions on the Old Mole, they were allowing it to 'come back to life'. 'Tiger' Watson wanted to do more damage with a grenade into one of the German positions when Captain Pritchard shouted at him,

'What the hell are you up to, Tiger? For God's sake get on!'

With the Old Mole not subdued no other Commandos were able to land in any organised strength. This

would have a disastrous knock-on effect later, as the Old Mole was to be the extraction point for the Commando Force.

ML 307 under the command of Lieutenant Wallis tried to land next, but was driven back by heavy enemy fire, with several of the Commandos being badly wounded. At one stage the asdic dome of the boat got stuck in the mud and gave the Germans a perfect opportunity to attack her with grenades, thrown from the protection of the low wall that runs along the entire length of the mole. Captain Paton, one of the embarked medical Officers saw Captain Bradley trying to deal with this,

'I turned round to see what was going on and saw him falling off someone's shoulders. He had been trying to get a Bren gun up to fire over the angle of the Mole by standing on a soldiers' shoulders. He assured me that he had killed a man, but the recoil made him fall to the deck.'

As they eventually backed away from their predicament a shout from the water was heard and Captain Paton managed to grab hold of the hand of Captain Birney, from Lieutenant Platt's ML, however, just then,

'The boats propellers gave a great surge in reverse and our hands were torn apart because of the oily water'

Lieutenant Wallis decided to add their fire-power to that of other craft trying to neutralise the German guns. This ML was one of only three that would make it back to England.

ML 443 under the command of Lieutenant Horlock, with three demolition teams of fifteen Commandos embarked, also attempted to land his force, but was also driven off by heavy German fire. This was the second of the Motor Launches to make it back to England.

ML 306 commanded by Lieutenant Henderson missed his first run in and tried again, but was also unable to land its Commando force and eventually would withdraw out to sea with other surviving MLs. During the withdrawal though, it lost touch with the other boats and was intercepted by a German destroyer force. ML 306 had nearly made it past the group of 5 German destroyers when a look-out on the last one caught them in the beam of his search light. The ensuing engagement should have been short lived, he was so out-gunned, but the German commander had reckoned without Sergeant Tommy Durrant. When the sailor manning the twin Lewis guns was killed, he took them over and kept up a steady fire on the enemy destroyer. He was hit

over a dozen times, but still refused to give in and when the Captain of the German vessel closed in to demand their surrender he was met with a burst of fire across his bridge. Eventually Tommy Durrant succumbed to his wounds and with Lieutenant Henderson dead it was left to Lieutenant Swayne to order their surrender. Of the 28 men on board 20 were killed or wounded. ML 446 commanded by Lieutenant Falconar over shot his landing at the Old Mole and attempting to come around and land his Commandos, his craft was severely hit by German heavy guns. His two Oerlikon guns were put out of action and the crews killed or wounded and Captain Hodgson, of the Commandos' killed and two of his Sergeants wounded. In view of this he was forced to withdraw. The ML was scuttled later and the crew and Commandos' transferred to escorting destroyers.

Finally ML 192 commanded by Lieutenant Stephens and leading the Starboard Column was badly hit and its steering wrecked, it drifted across the Port Column and hit the Old Mole. Whilst briefly lodged against it Captain 'Micky' Burn tried to make a jump for it, but landed in the water. He was rescued by Lance Corporal Young, who grabbed him by the hair and pulled him ashore. The ML was badly holed and the order was given to abandon ship. Lieutenant Stephens and thirteen of his crew were taken prisoner, whilst four others were killed. Of the Commandos' on board, eight were killed and six taken prisoner.

Moving up to the Old Entrance.



Author's Collection

The open area and some of the warehouses between the Old Mole and the Old Entrance. This is where the Commando Force gathered on completion of their tasks. They then fought their way from here towards the new town across Bridge 'D'. Just out of sight beyond the cars.

The warehouse complex in this area has changed considerably now, most of this area being destroyed by the Allied bombing later in the war that was aimed at the u-boat pens. There are a few warehouse buildings next to the Quai Demange and near to the Old Entrance is the Ecomusee, more information on this later. Between these buildings and the shoreline is a large open area which is roofed over. Moving down onto the shoreline at this point gives an excellent view of the dry-dock gate and the pump house area. It is the ideal place to talk about HMS Campbeltown's last moments.



Author's Collection

View from the shoreline, mid-way between the 'Old Mole' and the dry dock. 1. where HMS Campbeltown hit the Southern caisson. 2. The positions in show the German positions, no's 64 & 65, on top of the pump house. 3. On the other side of the caisson was gun position no 66.

The Charioteers.

HMS Campbeltown ran the gauntlet of enemy fire for the last 6 minutes of her approach up the Loire estuary. All the ruses of the 'Charioteers' had been used up, her disguise as a German Wolf class destroyer, the Nazi flag, captured morse signals, etc. When it was apparent that the enemy were onto them Lieutenant-Commander Beattie ordered that the Nazi flag be struck and the British battle ensign hoisted and all the Motor Launches followed suit. From then on battle was joined, with Campbeltown's 12 pounder and her Oerlikons firing furiously at the German shore batteries.

Doing their best to clear a path through the fury of incoming fire was the Motor Gun Boat of Lieutenant Curtis, with Commander Ryder and Lieutenant

Colonel Newman on board, as well as the torpedo armed Motor Launches of Lieutenant's Irwin and Boyd. The Hotchkiss gun on board ML 270 was engaging searchlights in the port area. The gun was manned by Able Seaman Jack Elliott, assisted by Able Seaman Wally Evans and Stoker Andy Porter. He remembers how after seeing the white ensign run up on HMS Campbeltown,

'Jack looked at me, and he said, "Jesus Christ! There's going to be all hell let loose in a minute!"'

HMS Campbeltown drew the worst of the German response. Her sides rippling with explosions she surged toward the lock gate while ahead of her MGB 314 and the MLs of Boyd and Irwin duelled with guns ashore. Lieutenant Boyd's ML 160 engaged and damaged the shoreline batteries to the east of the dock which would enfilade the destroyer's starboard side when she struck: Lieutenant Irwin's ML 270 meanwhile took on the searchlights which were fixed upon her bridge and armoured wheelhouse. At 20 knots and with her commandos' in position to immediately storm ashore, HMS Campbeltown hit the gate at 01.34 hours. Lieutenant-Commander Beattie's response;

'Okay, we seem to be there, then, looking at his watch added, 'four minutes late'.

Later Lieutenant Irwin would be forced to scuttle his boat, but Lieutenant Boyd, after picking up survivors from Lieutenant Platt's boat and leading a charmed life, would be the third of the three MLs to reach England.

HMS Campbeltown was now firmly wedged up against the dry-dock gate. So that it would be impossible to move her she was also scuttled and started to settle at the stern. For this was the true intention of using the 'old' ship as a battering ram, not to try and smash through the gate, but to use her as a floating bomb. Set just back from her bows was a huge charge, set on a timer, which when detonated would blow in the gate.

Moving round to the 1943 bunker.

You can get right up to the shoreline near the Old Entrance and get a much closer view of the dry-dock gate. You are also standing right where Lt Col Charles Newman and his small HQ Force landed. Moving round to the 1943 bunker, via Bridge 'G', you move right past the place where he set up his headquarters for the duration of the assault. In 1942 there was a small hotel here.



Author's Collection

The area where Lt Col. Charles Newman had his small Headquarters Force, during the assault and demolitions phase. In the distance are the u-boat pens which had quick-firing anti-aircraft guns mounted on the roofs. These were a considerable hazard to the lightly armed Commandos.

The Commando Force HQ and Group 2.

On board MGB 314 a debate broke out between Lt-Col Newman and Commander Ryder, who wanted to help his hard-pressed MLs, but Newman wanted to be put ashore to command his assault force. Newman prevailed and Lieutenant Curtis carefully manoeuvred his craft into the restricted area to land them. Having landed with only a team of 8 men and a journalist he started moving up to the area where he wanted to establish his HQ, Charles Newman was surprised that no one else was there. He had expected it to be secured by the RSM's party and the remainder of the HQ force.

'I don't know who was the most surprised, when on turning the corner of the building I literally bumped into a German. Before I realized who or what he was, his hands were up and he was jabbering fifteen to the dozen. I called up Tony Terry [Intelligence Section], who asked him in German where he'd come from. He had just come out of this building which was a German HQ. "Are there any more of you inside?" "Yes, " "Well go in and tell them to come out with their hands up." In he went, but almost at once the entrance to the building became very unhealthy. A quick firing gun from a vessel in the inner Bassin had seen us and was firing at point-blank range, something like seventy yards away. We had to beat a hasty retreat'.

Both ML 262, under command of Lieutenant Burt and ML 267, under the command of Lieutenant Bear were dazzled by searchlights and the evasive actions of ML 192 and missed their approach, having to circle round and come in again.

The next to attempt a landing was ML 268, commanded by Lieutenant Tillie he was almost at his landing point when the boat was hit by accurate, sustained fire and caught alight, very shortly after blowing up. Although half the crew survived, only two of the eighteen commandos of Lieutenant Pennington and Second Lieutenant Morgan's teams survived.

ML 156, commanded by Lieutenant Fenton, was hit repeatedly before she got near her objective, both Fenton and Captain Hooper, in charge of a 13 man assault team of the Commandos, were wounded. Fenton managed to stay in command of the vessel but had to take evasive action as it approached the Old Entrance. The ML overshot and came round again in a wide circle but by now Fenton's wounds were too severe and he handed over command to Sub Lieutenant Machin, he too was wounded and the craft sustained more damage. With all three officers in a bad way, having one effective engine and its steering gear damaged the boat withdrew downstream, to be scuttled later on.

ML 177, the last boat in the Starboard column bringing in commandos' of Group Two, was commanded by Lieutenant Rodier and carried Troop Sergeant Major George Haines fourteen man assault team. They were landed successfully and moved up to give some support to Lieutenant Colonel Newman's hard pressed team. The 2 inch mortar that TSM Haines set up, in the open with bullets zipping all around him, helped to silence some of the guns firing in their direction. Lt Rodier, upon Commander Ryder's orders, now moved over to pick up survivors from HMS Campbeltown. When it was making the withdrawal it was carrying over 50 men of the destroyer and commandos, It was hit by heavy calibre shell fire and Lieutenant's Rodier and Tibbits, from HMS Campbeltown were killed. Lieutenant Commander Beattie was thrown into the water, but was picked up later by the Germans.

Coming in again ML 262 landed its party on the northern quay. Lieutenant Woodcock and his demolitions team, along with Lieutenant Morgan and his protection team made it ashore. About this time, the southern winding shed erupted in a huge explosion as Lieutenant Smalley and his men completed their demolition task. Lieutenant Burt was just casting off when Morgan

and his team came racing back and so Burt came up alongside the quay once again and took them onboard. Lieutenant Morgan claimed that the return to the ML's flare had been seen. Just as Burt was leaving, Lieutenant Smalley's party came back calling to be taken off. Burt once again moved back into the quayside, took them off and headed for the open water. The craft was hit several times in short succession causing casualties, which included Lt Smalley who was killed, and badly damaged the ML but it remained operable and so Burt withdrew.

Also coming in again, ML 267 carried the Commando reserve protection party under the command of Regimental Sergeant Major Alan Moss. They got near to their landing point when they were severely hit by German 20mm and 37mm anti-aircraft gun fire. Even so, a couple of the commandos actually jumped off the boat when they were recalled and only just made it back on board. One of these was Lance Bombardier Jack Aspden, who was a strong swimmer and witnessed the RSM giving his place on a Carley-float to another Commando. Whilst helping to push the float ashore the RSM was hit by machine-gun fire and killed.

On top of the 1943 bunker.

Although the Germans quickly blocked off the dry-dock gate they were never able to get it functioning again. The threat to the Old Entrance area and the Inner Basin by the Commando attack had illustrated the vulnerability of the base to the Germans and they built a new 'sheltered' entrance and exit for the u-boats, which



View from the top of the German 'bunker' built in 1942-43. This shows the Old Mole and the landing place of MGB 314 .

Author's Collection



Another view from the top of the German 'bunker'. This shows at A, the Southern caisson and the entrance to the dry dock. B, the pumping house. C, the German gun positions on top, 65 at the southern end and 64 at the northern end. D, gun position no 66 and at E, the fuel oil storage tank site.

was completed in 1943. The views this now provides of the surrounding area and the raid actions are superb. Access to the roof is via steps or a lift, which is open at the same time as the Sous-Marin Espadon Museum, at 10.00 hours.

Group 3 lands.

The Commando force disembarked from HMS Campbeltown in an orderly manner, being directed by Major Bill Copland. One of the Assault team commanders, Lieutenant John Roderick describes his impression of Major Copland,

'He might well have been seeing us off on the local bus for all the concern that he was showing!'

This, however, was in stark contrast to the way Bill Copland really felt as he went about his task,

'I found Gough and his party and, having seen that they were busy getting the big iron-runged ladder into position, dashed back amidships: through the narrow door, gangways and well-deck covered with many wounded sailors, a job to get through, and I had to be rather rough in dragging them out of the way where they lay across the path for my chaps coming off. "Sorry to hurt you, mate, but my chaps MUST get through here" and "for Christ's sake leave this passage clear".'

The departure of the commando demolition teams from the old destroyer was made more difficult because of a large hole up near the bow, probably caused by one of the supporting R.A.F. bomber aircraft dropping short, which several men fell part way into. As they moved up to this point to disembark there was Major Copland, Sergeant Ron Butler, from Lieutenant Chant's team, remembers,

'He put his hand on my shoulder as I staggered past and said, "Just another scheme, lad?" And I said, "That's right."'

Also moving forward with this team was Lance Sergeant Bill King, who thought this was one of the hardest parts of the whole operation, but remembers,

'We'd been trained so well it was almost automatic. We did the job. You knew where you were intended to go; you got there and you did it. It's only afterwards you thought, "How the hell did I get out of that lot?"'

After the Commandos had all left the crew were taken off by the MGB and one of the ML's.

Ashore Group three quickly set about their tasks. One of the most important was the destruction of the pump house, this being given to Lieutenant Stuart Chant of No 5 Commando and his four man team of Sergeants from No 1 Commando. They had practiced extensively, back in England, on such docks as Southampton and Cardiff to perfect their technique and could now do it blind-folded. It was a good job, because this was a tough assignment made tougher by Sergeant Chamberlain and Chant being wounded on the run-in, with the team having to descend several flights of steps in the dark to place their charges on the vital pumping equipment. Although it was a struggle they made it and successfully laid their charges. Chant then ordered them up top, except Sergeant Dockerill, and he then fired the fuses. Supported by Sergeant Dockerill he made it outside and took cover just as the whole structure exploded with a satisfying roar which indicated that their task was completed.

Captain Roy and Lieutenant Roderick were both successful in their tasks supporting the demolition teams. With all the allocated missions now complete they began their withdrawal back to the evacuation point.

The Northern end of the dry-dock.

From here you get a very good view of the enormity of the 'Normandie' dry-dock, or as it is known to the French the Forme Ecluse Louis Joubert. This is a busy area for cars moving back and forth across the Northern caisson to access the docks facilities, so care should be exercised when moving around. You also get a very good view into and across the Penhoet basin where there is usually some work going on with the cruise liners being built here.



This aerial view shows very clearly the 'Normandie' dry-dock and the various targets for Group 3. The photo is displayed on a large billboard at the Northern end of the dry-dock.

Northern targets of Group 3.

There were four demolition teams assigned to knock out targets in the Northern area of the dock facility. With the failure of Capatain Burn's team to land, except himself, and the destruction of Lieutenant Pennington's team the tasks assigned to those of the most Northerly commando force were made that much more difficult.

The tasks assigned to Lieutenants Brett and Purdon were the destruction of the Northern caisson and the northern winding shed, respectively. They were re-enforced by the team of Lieutenant Burtinshaw, whose team of demolition men were now available, their task had been the blowing of the Southern caisson if HMS Campbeltown had failed. He disembarked from HMS Campbeltown still wearing his monocle and wearing Lieutenant Commander Beattie's cap and humming,

"There'll always be an England".

They were lead and protected by the team of Lieutenant Denison. Two of his men had been wounded on the run-in and one of them again when they assaulted German troops on the way to their objectives.

'Pain and blood everywhere, says Lance Sergeant Dai Davis, Bill Mattison and I were in a pretty dazed state. I managed to get him going in front of me, and I was last to leave. Somehow we scrambled down the bamboo ladder. Thank God Mr Hopwood was holding the bottom. It was slipping and we would have gone in the drink!'

Upon reaching the area of the Northern caisson Captain 'Micky' Burn found that his objectives, the two Flak Towers were unmanned. It was a good job as he was totally alone. He waited in vain for the other assault parties and some of his own men.

Both Brett's and Burtinshaw's teams would struggle to access the inner part of the Northern caisson, without success, the manhole covers being locked and nothing would dislodge them. Several men were now badly wounded and the amount of in-coming fire from the surrounding enemy ships and structures was murderous. Lieutenant Corran Purdon was suffering no such problems, as they were out of the main line of fire and set about their task undisturbed. Once all the charges were laid, primed and ready to fire he sent Corporal Ron Chung to warn the other teams they were ready to blow and once the others had withdrawn past him, he would fire them. When Corporal Chung returned, having successfully delivered the message, he was also wounded.

Taking charge of the efforts to create some damage to the Northern caisson was Sergeant Frank Carr and he decided to lay the charges down the side of the dock gate,

'With the amount of fire that had come in I had to check all the circuits to make sure that none of them had been cut; so I had to walk round the thing and check it.'

When their charges were fired there was the satisfying sound of rushing water into the hollow part of the caisson. When they withdrew past Corran Purdon they left behind four men of their teams, including Lieutenant Burtinshaw, who had been killed attempting to complete their missions. Then he pulled the pins on his igniters.

It was a memorable sight. The entire building seemed to rise several feet vertically before it exploded and disintegrated like a collapsed house of cards.

The whole party, several of whom were very badly wounded, now moved back towards the evacuation point.

Bridge 'D' area.

This structure has not changed at all since the war. This is still the main access route to and from the 'new' town of St Nazaire to the 'old' part that was pre-war. It is a lifting bridge and it is not unusual to find yourself halted here for a considerable amount of time whilst ships come and go.



Author's Collection

Bridge 'D', or as the Commandos called it 'the bridge of memories'. The old town is on the other side of the bridge and the Commandos had to assault across this and into the 'new' town to get away.

The Withdrawal.

Once it was apparent that there was to be no withdrawal for the Commando Force via the MLs a decision was made to break-out into the 'new' part of St Nazaire and attempt to escape back to England. Approximately 60 - 70 of the commandos assaulted across the bridge to try and escape, a feat that was successfully accomplished by Corporals Douglas, Howarth, Wheeler and Sims and also Private Harding.

The final moments of HMS Campbeltown.

At 10.35 hours the 28th March 1942, approximately four hours late, the main charge on HMS Campbeltown

detonated with a shattering roar. At the time Lieutenant Commander Beattie was being questioned by the Germans who commented on how foolish he had been to attempt a ramming of the dry-dock with such an inadequate ship!

HMS Campbeltown Memorial.

Today all that survives of HMS Campbeltown is her forward 12 pounder gun. It was found when the work started in earnest to repair the dry-dock.



Author's Collection

The gun from HMS. Campbeltown was recovered from the bottom of the dry-dock after the war.

The 'Charioteers' Memorial.



Author's Collection

The Royal Navy and Commando memorial to the 'Charioteers'. At its base is a stone plaque with the names of the 165 men who lost their lives on the raid and the names of the French civilians who were also killed.

Located on the main sea front, adjoining the beach at St Nazaire, the memorial is next to the gun of HMS Campbeltown. They look out towards the river Loire and the approach route of the small Royal Naval Flotilla and the Commando Assault Force.

Gallantry Awards.

Amongst the awards made were two V.C.s. One was given to Lt Cmr Sam Beattie who was awarded his V.C. as a prisoner with the German Camp Commandant reading out an extract from the citation;

“in recognition not only of his own valour, but also that of the unnamed officers and men of a very gallant ship’s company”.

The most unusual one was that given to Sgt Tommy Durrant, a Royal Engineer in No 1 Commando. The citation reads as follows;

On 28th March 1942 H.M. Motor Launch 306 was heavily attacked while proceeding up the river Loire in the raid on St Nazaire. Sergeant Durrant in charge of a Lewis gun in a completely exposed position engaged enemy guns and searchlights on shore. He was severely wounded in the arm but refused to leave his gun. Later when the launch was attacked at close range by a German destroyer, Sergeant Durrant fired coolly and continuously at the destroyer’s bridge drawing on himself the enemy fire and suffering many further wounds. When so weak that he had to support himself on the gun mounting, he went on firing until his gun was silenced and the enemy boarded the motor launch and took prisoner those still alive. This very gallant and skilful N.C.O. died later of his wounds.

He was in fact the only man to be given the V.C. as the result of the recommendation of the enemy! The sergeant’s fight against a superior German naval force in the estuary so impressed the German Captain that after the battle he sought out Lt Col. Newman to tell him and it was only after Newman’s release in June 1945 that the story became known.

Three and a half years later, when the rest of the prisoners were released, the full story became known and Lieutenant Colonel Charles Newman was awarded his V.C. in June 1945. But it was the information that Newman was able to give about Sergeant Tommy Durrant that would prove to be the greatest revelation. Thus Durrant would be the only

soldier to win a V.C. in a naval action in the war and at the initial recommendation of the enemy!

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Some very good web-sites, relating to St Nazaire, are;

www.stnazairesociety.org
www.jamesdorrian.co.uk
www.saint-nazaire-tourisme.com
www.grand-blockhaus.com

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Bob Hilton is a member of the Guid and was member of The Parachute Regiment for twenty two years and saw service in the Falkland Islands, Northern Ireland, Belize, Sierra Leone, Macedonia and Afghanistan. He has performed parachute drops in France, Holland, Germany, Canada, Italy, Botswana, Kenya, Egypt and the USA. Now a full time battlefield guide, specializing in Britain’s Airborne Forces and its actions in World War Two. ■



Special Service
(Commando) Brigade
capbadge

Free French paratroopers of the Special Air Service OPERATION AMHERST, THE FIGHTING AROUND GASSELTE

By Wybo Boersma

In February 1942 more than 100 French parachutists are incorporated in the SAS as the French Squadron, commanded by Captain David Stirling. The SAS is a unit operating far inside enemy lines in order to perform demolitions. Their device is "Who Dares Wins". From February 1942 till April 1943 the French Squadron participates in all missions of the SAS such as in Tunisia, in the province of Tripoli and Crete. The survivors of the French Squadron return to England in April 1943. Next the 3rd and 4th Régiment de Chasseurs are raised. These consist of veterans from Libya, followers of De Gaulle from North Africa, refugees from France and of volunteers from all over the world. As 2nd and 3rd (French) Regiments they form together with 1st (British) Regiment and later also with 4th (Belgian) Regiment the SAS Brigade commanded by General MacLeod.



See credits at end of article*

Amherst, French SAS paratroopers on the way to Holland, 7 April 1945

In the night of 5 June 1944 430 French SAS parachutists of 2nd French Regiment drop in Brittany. The 3rd French Regiment are later deployed in Finistère and Burgundy to obstruct the Germans. One of their well known actions is the attack in September 1944 with jeeps on German troops in the town of Sennecey-le-Grand where they destroy a large column of German vehicles. After the war the general SAS monument was erected in that town in honour of all soldiers of the SAS killed in the Second

World War. In December 1944 the French take part in the Battle of the Bulge. After the Rhine crossing on 22 March 1945, Operation Veritable, 2nd Canadian Corps, reinforced by 1st Polish Armoured Division and 49th British Infantry Division (Polar Bear) is ordered to liberate Mid and North Netherlands. General Mike Galvert, who has succeeded General MacLeod as commander of the SAS Brigade before the end of the war. The only possibility left is Mid and North Netherlands. 1st (British) Regiment will land in Mid Netherlands in April 1945, Operation Keystone. Only a small group takes part.

4th (Belgian) Regiment, under command of 2nd Canadian Corps, will infiltrate the north Netherlands in jeeps to perform reconnaissance duties and attacks, Operation Larkwood. 2nd and 3rd (French) Regiment will be dropped in the provinces of Drenthe and South-eastern Friesland, Operation Amherst. The French are ordered to support the advance by capturing 15

bridges and 3 railway bridges and to prevent the destruction of as many other bridges as possible, to gather information for the Headquarters of the Canadian Corps, to prevent the destruction of the airfields at Steenwijk, Eelde and Leeuwarden and stimulate and organise the local resistance movement.

Both regiments number 702 parachutists. At the same time eighteen jeeps will be dropped. Bad weather causes a cancellation. They will later arrive overland. Furthermore four "Jedburgh" teams are dropped. Dutch officers are part of these, to keep contact



See credits at end of article*

Radiopost "Archiviste 36" with Jedburgh sender and MRC1 receiver in the woods near Gasselte

with the resistance groups. Containers with weapons, ammunition, food and radio's are also dropped. To mislead the Germans 143 dummy parachutists, Ruperts, are dropped. The drop of the paratroops is made 'blind' which means there are no reception committees on the ground. The pilots are directed to the dropping zones by signals. The French jump in 47 groups 'sticks' of 15 – 18 men from 47 Lancaster aircraft. From 20.30 on 7 April the Lancasters take off from Dunmow, Shepgrave



See credits at end of article*

Before the attack on the headquarters of the NSKK, French paratroopers wait near the barn of Mr Pronk

and Rivenhall airfields with on board 702 paratroops and 219 supply containers. The drops take place between 11.45 and 0.45. Caused by bad weather the great height from which they jump and faulty navigation the sticks land spread over 2 to 7 kilometres from the planned location. One stick lands even 60 kilometres away. Two sticks land in the built-up area of Assen, some others in between convoys of retreating Germans. Contact is made with locals for orientation, bringing great risks. The French start



The church of Gasselte, 2009

Author's Collection

attacking German units that same night. By the separation of both regiments into small groups there were many small actions all over Drenthe and South-eastern Friesland each with its own tragedy. The French are often supported by local resistance fighters, secret agents previously dropped and Dutch Commando's from no 2 (Dutch) Troop No 10 (Inter Allied) Commando. Various German units are in the Netherlands among which Fallschirmjäger, Luftwaffe, Waffen SS and Gestapo fled from Belgian, Kriegsmarine and Dutch National Socialist "Landwacht" units.

The Fighting near Gasselte

One of the fights took place near the village of Gasselte in the province of Drenthe. This is an example of a skirmish that had could have had grave consequences for the population of this rural village. In this case posterity is quite

fortunate for one of the French Paratroopers carried a camera and he used it extensively. It enables us to visualize the situation in April 1945 more vividly.

A section of the National Sozialistisches Kraftfahr Korps (NSKK) is based in Gasselte at the beginning of October 1944. The NSKK is a transport organisation and translates roughly as "National Socialist Freight Corps". This specific section comprised of Dutch volunteers led by a German officer, Obersturmführer Klaus. They had set up their HQ in the vicarage adjacent to the church which was situated on the Dorpsstraat. To accommodate the Staff members several rooms were requisitioned among the villagers. One could call the relationship between the villagers and the NSKK-members rather tense. The authoritarian attitude of the latter even nurtured feelings of

animosity with the villagers.

During the night of Saturday 7 April 1945 about 60 Paratroopers of the 3rd (French) Regiment Special Air Service (2e Régiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes) land near Gasselte. They are led by Captain Grammong, Lieutenant Jean Appriou, Lieutenant Legrande and 2nd Lieutenant Henry Stephan. Nearly all land on the assigned Drop Zone, not far from the woods situated to the west of Gasselte.

Early the following morning some paratroopers knock on the door of a house opposite a house called "Hemelrijk", not far from Gasselte (both these houses were knocked down after the war). The house owner is a man called Pronk, who transpired to be an active member of the resistance. As daylight increased Pronk manages to round up some more paratroopers in the

woods near the house. In the meanwhile the local resistance movement have become aware of the landings and they contact the French combatants. It becomes clear that several paratroopers have failed to rendezvous. The resistance movement organises a search for the absent men, while other sections gather containers loaded with ammunition, weapons and rations. During these activities the Frenchmen carry out several attacks against German convoys who are retreating northwards in a bid to escape captivity by the advancing Canadian Army, whose frontline is halfway up the country.

Meanwhile the landings have not gone unnoticed by the enemy either. Enemy troops, including the NSKK-members are alarmed. Because the latter feared thousands of paratroopers had landed they did not dare to patrol the woods. Some people from

Gasselte have been in contact with the French already. On their way home, these villagers are stopped by enemy sentries and are taken to the vicarage for questioning and then sent home.

Prior to the landings contact had been made with the local Resistance and it was agreed that they would be assigned the task of gathering information for the paratroopers. They would spring into action after a code sentence is broadcast on the BBC's "Radio Orange" radio service. Sunday evening, 8 April 1945, the radio



See credits at end of article*

Corporal Fernand Begue, killed 9 April 1945

The vicarage of Gasselt near the church, 2009

Author's Collection



Gasselte have been in contact with the French already. On their way home, these villagers are stopped by enemy sentries and are taken to the vicarage for questioning and then sent home.

Prior to the landings contact had been made with the local Resistance and it was agreed that they would be assigned the task of gathering information for the paratroopers. They would spring into action after a code sentence is broadcast on the BBC's "Radio Orange" radio service. Sunday evening,

announcer told the anxious listeners that “The boat had tipped over”. The Resistance know what to do.

In the woods of Gasselte the paratroopers have divided themselves into two Command Posts (CP’s). The first CP is about a mile from Pronk’s house. The second CP is located in the woods. Communication is established by means of two Jedburgh transmitters and several MRC 1 receivers. From intelligence gathered by the Resistance it becomes evident that the



See credits at end of article*

French paratroopers in front of a house near the church after the battle.

NSKK have a headquarters in the vicarage of Gasselte. The paratroopers decide to neutralise this headquarters and devise a plan of attack.

The Plan of Attack is as follows:

1. *Officer Cadet Bacuez will consolidate the entrance road to Gasselte, covering it with a Brengun.*
2. *Lieutenant Appriou will lead his men along the northern side of this road to the vicarage and attack it. After the attack they will veer off to the east.*

3. *Lieutenant Legrand will lead his men along the southern side of the road and engage the enemy and clear other enemy strongholds.*

4. *Captain Grammond will lead his men to the north of the village and prevent the enemy retreating and thereby preventing the enemy bringing up reinforcements.*

5. *Sergeant Le Groff will lead his men to the south of the village and will prevent enemy movement via Dorpsstraat by securing it.*

It is assumed that noon is the best moment for the attack, because the enemy guards are less effective around that time. It is ordered that the paratroopers will put on a yellow neck cloth after the attack to make them easier recognisable. The attackers rendezvous at Pronk’s house, from where they will advance on Gasselte. Local Resistance workers provide guides.

The distance to Gasselte is approximately 4 kilometres and is negotiated without any problems. After arrival the plan is put into effect immediately and the tactical surrounding movements carried out on the double. Lieutenant Appriou leads his men to the vicarage and opens fire. Although the NSKK-members are taken completely by surprise, they quickly recover and start to return fire from the windows. Especially fire from a MG operated by NSKK-member Van der Hoek from the rear of the building proves very effective against the attackers. Here the French are too close to the windows and unable to re-position themselves. It also proves difficult for the French to

deliver effective return fire from their positions in the orchard. Corporal Begue is killed here and Sergeant Briand is wounded.

In the meanwhile Legrand has also arrived and begins to attack the front of the building. The French want to end the attack and plan to storm the building using hand grenades. But then the enemy MG operator Van der Hoek is hit, causing the remaining NSKK-members to flee. Most of them are captured by Legrand. As the fighting has now quietened down NSKK-members who were not positioned in the vicarage try to leave the village. Most of NSKK-members, however, are tracked down by the French resulting in the death of two of them.

Because it is quite feasible to assume that the Germans will now bring up re-enforcements, the French paratroopers decide to withdraw back to the woods, taking their prisoners with them. A Staff car parked at the vicarage is also brought along. A lorry containing rations is left behind for the villagers.

After the French and their prisoners have left, an eerie quietness settles over Gasselte.



See credits at end of article*

German POW’s are tied up in the woods near Gasselte
Left the German Staff car.

Some villagers start to loot the vicarage. NSKK-members who have managed to evade captivity arrive in the neighbouring villages of Borger and Gieten and arrange re-enforcements. A Luftwaffe detachment commanded by Captain Willke arrives in Gasselte. Two NSKK-members who had hid in a cellar informed the Captain about the looting villagers. As a response all villagers who were in the streets were rounded up brought to the school play ground. As the play ground soon proves to be small the men are separated from the women and put up in the church. About 4.30 PM the women are released but now all male villagers have to report to the church. In total over 300 men were held in the church.

Then the Germans threaten to blow up the church, but intervention by the pro-German Mayor, Mr. Tuin results in most men being released. Sixteen men, suspected of having taken part in the looting, were kept as prisoners. Some of these men were pointed out as looters by the two remaining NSKK-members and a National Socialist nurse. Then the men were marched to Gieten and kept in a refrigerator lorry until 11 April 1945. On that day they were transferred by train to the prison in Assen. An attempt by the French paratroopers to relieve them failed because the train had left early. On 13 April the men from Gasselte were liberated by the Canadian Army.

Back in the woods, the French realise that their rations are not sufficient to provide for them and their prisoners. By means of radio communication the French request to be re-supplied. Much to the amazement of

their prisoners two Typhoons drop four containers filled with ammunition, weapons, medicines and rations on 10 April. On Thursday 12 April the Canadian Army reaches Borger, five Kilometres south of Gasselte and is involved in fights there all day. That evening the remaining NSKK-members in Gasselte decide to retreat and the next day Gasselte is liberated by the 8th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment followed by Poles of the 2nd Squadron of the 10th Cavalry Rifle Regiment. The French paratroopers leave Gasselte and meet up in Coevorden from whence they move to Nijmegen and finally to England. For them the war has ended.

In spite of the fact that Gasselte has expanded considerably in the 65 years following the liberation, the vicinity of the vicarage and the church has hardly changed. During the Battlefield Tour this fact will enable us to visualize the situation regarding the actions in April 1945 with some ease. The same applies to more villages in the north of Holland where French paratroopers had landed. Operation Amherst was the last operation in World War Two in which Allied Paratroopers were

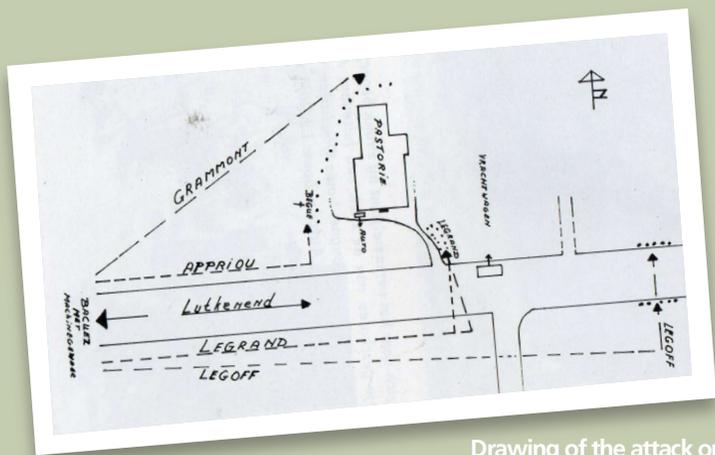
deployed. It is still discussed if Operation Amherst actually contributed in speeding up the liberation of Holland. No question, however, exists about the determination and the fighting spirit of the French.

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Translation: J. Dijkstra, A. Groeneweg.

*Photographs taken by the French doctor Victor Stephan or Jean Troller, both members of the French SAS, who had a camera with them. By kind permission of the Historical Archive of Assen and the Archive Airborne Museum, Oosterbeek

Wybo Boersma, is married to Nanna, has two children and lives in Ede in The Netherlands. He served with the Dutch Army for 36 years until his retirement in 1991. From 1974 till 2009 he was member of the Board of the Airborne Museum in Oosterbeek, becoming the Acting Director in 1995. The author of a number of battlefield articles and guidebook he is a frequent guide to battlefields in the Netherlands, Normandy and the Ardennes. He holds Guild Badge no 30. ■



Drawing of the attack on the vicarage by Sergeant Tricard

Sergeant Tricard

THE MIRACLE OF ST PAULS 1939-45

A QUICK BATTLEFIELD TOUR

By Clive Harris



Frank Toogood

Whether seen towering majestically over the chaos of a Victorian Ludgate Hill crowded with buses, newspaper boys and businessmen in top hats or standing lone for a free Europe or shrouded in smoke and besieged by the Luftwaffe, St Pauls is without doubt one of the worlds iconic buildings.

Its fondness in the heart of the nation is in part due to the latter image. Captured from a Fleet Street rooftop at the height of a raid, the image was wired to a waiting America alongside the shocking yet thankfully premature story that “St Pauls had been destroyed”. The following morning the same journalist a submitted an “eat my words” follow up story as the dust had settled and London woke to just another day in the blitz with St Pauls intact. This period was to last from Black Saturday 7 September 1940 through to 11 May 1941, the heaviest raid of the war on the capital. The only respite during this time was due to the weather. More troubling times were ahead however with the baby blitz of 1943 and the V1 & V2 campaigns in the latter months of the war.

By the time the choir’s voices echoed around the famous dome once more (they had been evacuated to Truro for the duration), the cathedral had come to stand for defiance, justice and victory in adversity... though in truth its popularity had not always been so high.

A number of issues arose from the outset of its construction, firstly the design, a non conventional building with strong catholic overtones such as the dome, did not appeal to everyone in a position of authority. Often forgotten today is the fact that the current building is a third smaller than the original destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666, this led to a majority of Londoners feeling short changed. A number of coronations, memorable funerals (notably Nelsons) had redressed the balance somewhat, but there is no doubt that the war years were to prove the buildings “finest hour”, (yet).

Preparation for the oncoming war played an often forgotten part in the story of the building’s survival, a volunteer fire watch comprising of staff, worshippers and locals was raised in April 1939, as it had been in 1914. Godfrey Allan a surveyor with an intimate knowledge and love of the building was a prime mover in the recruiting, equipping and training of fire teams to tackle potential incidents.

Fire fighting equipment was purchased; foresight ten years earlier had seen the fitting of a sprinkler

system within the dome itself, one of the earliest in London. Inside, the building was literally stripped for action, a shelter was constructed in the west end and the crypt converted into a strong room housing the archives. Valuable books and artworks were transferred to Aberystwyth Library for the duration of the war. The tombs of Nelson and Wellington were sandbagged and blast walls constructed inside to protect smaller, fragile memorials. Red Cross and St John's Ambulance staff manned a first aid unit that was established inside and a control room connected to various posts around the cathedral was also built. The west end was made gas proof and large food stores together with cooking facilities were established in the crypt. St Paul's was gearing up for a siege.

Here then, in three short stands is the incredible story of St Pauls Cathedral, allow 45 minutes from start to finish, the nearest tube station is St Pauls on the Central Line but the most rewarding approach is across the River from the Tate Modern, nearest tube London Bridge.

STAND ONE

St Peters Hill – The Fire Fighters Memorial with your back to the river.

Potential Hazards include lunatic skate boarders and bemused tourists.

It may surprise the reader to learn that no memorial to the war dead of London has ever been raised, often campaigned for, it regularly falls foul to political correctness (the last attempt was thwarted when the then Mayor insisted it should remember the war dead of all nations so would have included the Gestapo, Japanese Prison Guards and Mussolini's body guard). For many this statue of "Heroes with Grimy Faces" represents the cities struggle during the air war over London as typified by the civil defence workers and notably the LFB, AFS & NFS. An interesting sculpture it is well placed as the leading hand calls back to the river for more pressure, the narrow street behind you would have played out exactly this image. The River Thames, flirting with both sides was impossible to "black out" so shone like a silver ribbon to guide the Luftwaffe onto their target area, at the same time it offered the locals the best water supply to fight the fires caused by the bombing. It was no coincidence that the bombers would plan their heaviest raids with a low tide in a bid to negate this advantage. As you look back towards the wibbly wobbly bridge you can

image the urgency in the fire fighters orders, at the riverside would have been a young AFS volunteer, perhaps only 17 like a certain Jim Morgan I met, a veteran of such tasks. Armed with a trailer pump he would have been pumping out the water to the sharp end, plagued with a clogged up, silt filled, wicker filter (caused in part by fire service wartime cutbacks as the efficient pre-war brass ones were too expensive). With ordinance falling overhead his motivation was the danger to the men at the end of the hose, if the water stopped often it would lead in their lives being lost. It would have taken 2/3 relay pumps to get the water up at the right pressure to the point where you now stand. Note also, personal lines (coiled rope) worn on their belts of the figures. An essential tool for any fire fighter this offered the dual purpose of enabling you to climb out of a tight spot or if escape was easy, you could "lash your branch" (tie your hose) to a radiator or door frame ensuring the water continued to pour onto the fire whilst you got out. At the base of the memorial are a list of names, the top panel refers to the London fire service men and women who lost their lives, in 2003 this was added to by the bottom panel that rightfully lists the lost fire fighters from the whole country who died in the war making this today a truly national memorial.

Now taking care when crossing the busy Canon Street, walk to the front of the Cathedral and stop at the third large pinkish marble bollard and stop.



Author's Collection

STAND TWO

The West Door of St Pauls

Potential hazards include passing tourist buses playing a loud looped commentary and the bells starting a quarter peel as your group arrives.

“Some of us watched the bombardment from the colonnade of St Pauls. It was a golden, peaceful evening and, as the light faded from the sky, the angry red glow in the east, diversified by leaping flames, dominated the prospect, while from time to time the peculiar thud of bursting bombs punctured the silence...at last someone spoke, it’s like the end of the world, and someone else replied it is the end of the world...” WR Matthews St Pauls Warden 1940

It is a myth to suggest that St Pauls was never hit, in fact the spot where you stand is one of four direct incidents within the Cathedral’s boundaries with a further eight within a 100 meter circle that almost brought down the building. Between the granite bollards no 3 & 4 a large 1000kg bomb penetrated the surface and came to rest in the London clay that surrounds the crypt and foundations fifteen feet beneath the surface. It was soon discovered to contain a long delay fuse protected by an anti-tamper device. On arrival, the bomb disposal unit, skilfully led by Lt Robert Davies, were hampered by a nearby severed gas main; this delayed the defusing operation by a day as London anxiously awaited good news of its disposal.

When able to start, the team dug around the device in an attempt to remove it intact, this caused it to lurch a further twelve feet below the surface. As they started again, in the knowledge that any sudden movement would set off the mechanism, it became almost impossible to get any purchase around the device to remove it and work was slow. At last on the 15 September 1940, the mud caked device was lifted by steel hawsers and pulleys onto the back of a waiting pair of trailers. Led by a car waving a red flag (health and safety being an obvious concern when escorting a 1000kg HE Bomb), the conveyer sped off at high speed through the streets of the city to Hackney Marshes where it was detonated and the crater survives to the current day. After four days hard graft, Lt Davies, who drove one of the trucks himself from the scene, had earned the George Cross along with Sapper George Wylie, two further members of the team were awarded the BEM.

Walk around the front of the Cathedral to the heavy iron railings marking the entrance to the gardens on its north side.

STAND THREE

Entrance to St Pauls Gardens

Potential hazards include blue badge guides enquiring as to the relevance of the guild badge (sorry Charmian, I know this does not refer to you!).

Barely a month later on the 10 October the first direct hit on the cathedral occurred when at 05:55 a smaller HE Bomb ripped through the choir roof and detonated west of the apse and ripping a hole in the vault. An eye witness Verger R Leese described the scene;

“I had just gone out onto the east of the choir when I heard the loud swishing noise that meant that bombs were coming down very close. I judged that there were three or four. Automatically I threw myself down full length in the gutter of the roof. There was a loud bang and I felt as if my whole body was being compressed. When I looked up there was a black cloud of dust and smoke over the roof and through it I could see a large hole as if a giant had taken a bite out of it”



Further strikes occurred on the building, notably a further HE Bomb that struck the north transept early on the morning of 16/17 April, described by those inside as “feeling like an earthquake” the west and east doors were destroyed, windows were blown out, iron framework twisted and buckled and



Corinthian columns were destroyed. Despite the east and west transept walls bulging outwards the Dome remained intact.

This incident was somewhat overshadowed by the dramatic events surrounding the discovery of a parachute mine on the same evening, Mr Gerald Henderson, a fire watcher on duty that night takes up the story;

“Shortly after 4pm I discovered a sea mine enveloped in a green silk parachute at the north east corner of the cathedral. It was about eight foot high and lay close to the site of St Paul’s Cross. I was somewhat dazed by the events of the night and did not realise at once what the shrouded object may be. It crossed my mind that the silk may have been blown out of some warehouse. I went up to the place and drew aside the silk covering. It then appeared that the object beneath it was a shining steel sea mine. It was like an elongated pear in shape and rows of horns at the top and the bottom.. I was afraid that I might cause the mine to topple over if I dragged the covering silk and remained still and perplexed for some little lime, holding the silk in my hands.”

Gerald then ran to Snow Hill Police station to make a report; after some delay he returned to the scene with a police officer who having viewed the device, warned of its potential danger then promptly disappeared to make his own report. When the bomb disposal team did arrive they set about disarming it in situ. They removed and kept the parachute silk (to the disappointment of its discover Mr Henderson who had his own plans for it), but further drama developed. At the critical time in defusing the individual mine horns a fire appliance flew down Cannon Street with its bells sounding, this set the mechanism ticking and to the amusement of the watching civil defences one of the

disposal team, lying alongside the mine cupped his ears to protect them should it go off! In the nick of time the last horn was removed and the device stopped ticking...once again St Pauls had survived.

Further raids chipped away at the building causing further damage but due to the careful planning of the authorities, skill and bravery of the civil defence workers and perhaps a little divine intervention the old cathedral, pockmarked and scarred (still visible today) came through. The last word should perhaps go a roof spotter atop of a nearby textile factory;

“It was an awe inspiring and wonderful sight for those of us who witnessed it. St Pauls Cathedral, ringed by raging fires and falling masonry, its great dome superimposed and reddened all night by reflected flames, seemed to take upon itself and even greater dignity, as it stood in the midst of the example of man’s inhumanity to man”

Note – there are very good toilet facilities, (though a recent 50p charge has been enforced), located in Paternoster Square and numerous refreshment facilities are found close by, the Cafe in the crypt is of a good standard, if weather permits Paul’s bakers or the M&S food hall are recommended for a reasonable alfresco lunch sat on the memorial in the centre of Paternoster Square, this offers one of the best free views in London of the cathedral itself.

SOURCES

*I was there by John Hammerton
Amalgamated Press 1941*

A Blueprint for London – Sidney Toy 1946

*Operation Textiles by H A Walden
Thos Reed & Co 1945*

*St Pauls Cathedral in wartime by WR Matthews
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*Walking the London Blitz by Clive Harris
Pen & Sword 2003*

A visitor to the battlefields for over 20 years and guiding since 1998, Clive is a published author and badged member of the guild. His specialist fields include Gallipoli, the Italian Campaign and the London Blitz, he lives in Knebworth with his wife Ali and son George. ■



Frank Toogood

THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN - BATTLEFIELD TOUR? by Steve Smith

In the first part of my article on the Battle of Britain I tried to set the scene on some areas in Kent and Surrey that saw heavy fighting on the 18th August 1940. In this second article I hope to show you some areas that still exist today and these can be readily be used as 'Stands' on the battlefield.



Author's Collection

Kenley Satellite

This overhead view tries to encapsulate roughly what the German reconnaissance photo showed you in the first article. It also shows you the path the 9th Staffel took. The main areas I wish to cover are the areas to the northwest and in particular the areas labelled 'Cable Parachute Sites' and 'Blast Pen with Spitfire'.

Most of the first article centred on the low level attack by the 9th Staffel of KG76 on RAF Kenley. Kenley came

into being in the summer of 1917, as No 7 Aircraft Acceptance Park and it became a Fighter base from 1918 onwards. The airfield and parts of the technical site were demolished and then re-built in the 1920s and 30s and it became Sector Station HQ for B Sector, 11 Group, Fighter Command in 1940. Kenley's operational flying days finished in 1944 when the station was placed, for the most part, into care and maintenance. The airfield closed operationally in 1959 but the station did not finally close until 1974. Although parts of it are still owned by the MOD, and it is still used by the Air Training Corps for gliding, much of it has now been made into Kenley Common and this allows you access to much of the areas attacked on the 18th August. With that in mind, the first image I wish to show you is a satellite view of Kenley today highlighting some of these areas. I will then cover a few of them in more detail.



Author's Collection

Air attack

The one image that always strikes me as amazing from all the images taken by Rolf Von Pebal is the one of the Spitfire under attack in its E-Pen.

The term 'E-Pen' is derived from the layout of the dispersal. It was designed to hold two fighters and they were set apart by a central blast wall. This central wall gave the dispersal its distinctive E format. The image is contentious in itself as the Germans heavily doctored it to show more smoke and damage than was seen in the original. I used the original in my article and what follows is a series of images of that area today.



Kenley 2008

This is the actual E-Pen seen from ground level and you are looking northeast. Although the area appears overgrown you should be able to make out two distinct areas that are devoid of greenery, although I have marked these out for you. These are the entrances to the air raid shelters. This pen housed a Spitfire from 64 Squadron and it did not escape the attack. Leading Aircraftman Herbert Brotherton was within the shelter when the Germans attacked Kenley. Brotherton and the others within the shelter had a miraculous escape as a bomb had narrowly missed the pen and had exploded opposite them. The shock wave from this had upended the Spitfire onto its back.

This view now looks to the west with the E-Pen to the right of the picture. From here you are looking towards the area where Aircraftman Roberts stood and released the parachute cables that brought the downfall of Feldwebel Peterson. His Dornier went down beyond the tree line, crashing into a house killing all five crewmembers on board, the owner had a lucky escape and escaped with minor injuries. The cables were situated from where this image was taken all the way to where the old peri-track curves around to the left.



Remnants of the E-Pen

This final image of the area shows you the site from the air. You will note this is a lot higher than the original Von Pebal image, but you can still make out the area of the original photograph. Note the house to the rear; the distinctive chimneystacks can be made out in the original.

To the south of the E-Pen is another pen that has been preserved and has been converted into a memorial. Below the RAF crest the inscription reads, 'RAF Kenley Tribute In Honour Of All Personnel Who Served Here 1917-1959'. Below the figures is the stirring tribute made by Churchill, 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few'. On either side the memorial remembers the squadrons that flew from the base.

We now come onto another famous image from the 18th August 1940. This time it is a British image of a German aircraft after it had been shot down. In the first part I re-counted the tale of the demise of the Dornier 17 piloted by Rudolph Lamberty and carrying the C.O. of the 9th Staffel, Helmut Roth. Both narrowly escaped burning to death in their own plane and suffered the indignity of being bombed by their own side.

The crash site became known as the 'Leaves Green Dornier' and it is perhaps the most famous of all the German aircraft to be shot down on English soil. What is more amazing is that part of the tail-plane, namely the Swastika is proudly displayed at the RAF Museum at Hendon. It is one of the few souvenirs to be on display there. The aircraft itself had much media attention and many photos were taken of it and there is one included in part one. Leaves Green itself is situated in-between Biggin Hill and Keston on the A233.



Author's Collection

Leaves Green 2008

The Leaves Green crash site today. Note the two pylons and the row of houses on Downe Road in the background. If you take the left hand pylon you can use this as your reference point. The Dornier came to rest in front of this and if you use the image from part one you will be able to make out the site as it is today. In this case, I have marked out the site for you.



Author's Collection

Leaves Green Crash Site

X marks the spot! This is roughly where the plane came down. In order to access this area you need to utilise the footpath at the bottom left of the picture. This is signposted off the Leaves Green Road for a footpath to Biggin Hill and the site is roughly south west of Biggin Hill Airport's main runway.

For my final stand for this particular article I wanted to highlight one poignant memory of the battle itself. We have learnt about an amazing raid on an RAF base and have come to know a few of the characters from that day. I want to introduce you to one more. He was not an ace, he never achieved any major distinction in the battle, nor had he done so beforehand, and yet he is rightly one of the 'Few'.

He is Sergeant Peter Kenneth Walley and he now lies in Whyteleafe Cemetery within the small CWGC plot there. Sgt Walley flew with 615 Squadron and he, along with the

rest of 615 Sqn, had been scrambled on the 18th August to meet the high level raids bound for Biggin Hill and Kenley. As the squadron orbited RAF Kenley at a height of 25,000 feet, fighters bounced them from Geshwader 3. Within minutes, three Hurricanes had fell to the guns of Oberleutnant Keller and Leutnants Meckel and Landry, one of these being Peter Walley whose Hurricane was seen to fall to the earth in flames. He was still on board when it crashed on Morden Park Golf Course at 13.30hrs. Sergeant Walley's comrades from 615 Squadron laid him to rest at Whyteleafe a few days later, he was only 22 years of age. Whyteleafe Cemetery holds the remains of thirty-eight WWII burials, including Polish and Czech graves.



Author's Collection

Sergeant Walley's grave at Whyteleafe

He is one of six Battle of Britain pilots who are now laid to rest there.

I hope that what this article has achieved is to show you that there are many stories and sites out there that highlight this important part of our heritage. These are, ultimately, just a few stands but there are literally hundreds out there. Each one has a story to tell and I hope that in future issues I can bring you some more stories from this era. Tours can be conducted involving this campaign and people like Geoff Simpson of the Battle of Britain Memorial Trust and myself can prove this to you. So if anyone is interested in learning more about this battle then please drop me a line.

Steve started guiding in his spare time in 2002 and qualified as a badged guide in April 2004. He conducts private and organised tours and has worked as a guide for Holts and Galina in the past. He also assists other people in tracing their relative's military history in both wars. He lives with his family in Norfolk where his day job is a police officer and he currently oversees the initial training and development of student officers. ■

A Battlefield Tour

Sicily has been invaded by Greeks, Romans, Normans, Napoleon and even the British in the guise of Admiral Lord Nelson but the Allied invasion in 1943, code-named Husky, when the number of 'boots across the beach' on the first day - 174,000 as opposed to 154,000 on D-Day- make it probably the largest ever amphibious assault.

It was to provide invaluable experience in the subsequent planning for the Normandy landings and I would suggest that any tour concentrates on the campaign in the eastern part of Sicily which really exposed some of the shortcomings of the allied armies and particularly the British in their adaptation of the manoeuvre battle whilst revealing the resilience of the German and Italian soldier in defence.

For American parties, a visit to Gela to look at the seaborne and airborne landing areas and the Italian defensive work around the Biazzo Ridge is highly recommended but for practical purposes this article is based around a five day tour covering the British 8th Army landings in the south east of Sicily.

Strategic Thinking

It is debatable whether the UK/US agreed very much on the strategic thinking behind a promulgation of the war against Germany. The Americans had wanted to launch a Second Front across the Channel as early as 1942 and to take the war to the heart of Germany whilst Churchill wanted to invade Europe through the 'soft underbelly' and this was the strategy agreed when he and Roosevelt meet at

Casablanca in January 1943.

Under pressure from the Russians to create a second front to relieve the German pressure, the strategic intent was to destabilize the southern front in Europe and bring about the downfall of the Mussolini regime and at the same time to hopefully to bring Turkey into the war on the side of the Allies.

Planning Husky

The planning process was deeply flawed and stands as an example of total lack of tri service cooperation with each nation and service having its own agenda. Whilst General Eisenhower was given overall command of the allied forces in the Mediterranean theatre and his staff set about planning from his Headquarters, other commanders were working from other headquarters, sometimes hundreds of miles apart, and there seemed to be total lack of cooperation between services.

The overall ground force known as 15th Army was to be commanded by General Alexander, as Eisenhower's Deputy. It was to consist of 2 Army Groups: the British 8th Army under General Montgomery and the US 7th Army commanded by General George Patton whilst naval forces were commanded by

Admiral Cunningham and the air forces by Air Marshal Tedder.

As so often with high rank there were big egos and apart from the legendary antipathy between Montgomery and Patton, it was commonly known that Tedder disliked Montgomery and that Cunningham disliked both of them. It was commonly held that only the appointment of Alexander as the overall operational commander made it all work, because he never made a decision and therefore never upset anybody!

Deception

Deception played an important strategic role in deceiving the Axis as to where the invasion forces would land. Operation Mincemeat involved the planting of the corpse of a supposed Royal Marine officer from a crashed aircraft in the sea off Spain along with a valise containing papers implying a landing in Greece whilst in Egypt bogus signal traffic was used to create a fictitious British 12th Army pointing again to Greece as the likely target. The German response of moving additional divisions to Greece was well received and this operation was the precursor to Operation Fortitude, the deception plan for Normandy which proved to be so successful the following year.

Initially the allies were divided on their likely landing beaches as the Americans wanted to land on the western part of the island and to seize the port of Palermo immediately whilst the British wanted to land on the south eastern side of the island which was the closest to their objective of the port of Messina, the gateway to Italy across the straits and hence the furtherance of their 'soft underbelly' strategy.

The stalemate was broken by Montgomery and Bedell-Smith Eisenhower's Chief of Staff, apparently in a toilet in Algiers or so Hollywood would have us believe, as Monty persuaded Beddell-Smith that the landing forces should not be separated but should land together in the south east corner of the island thereby making mutual use of shipping assets and air defence. This was an argument he was going to use when his staff took over the planning of Overlord the following year

The date for the landings was set for the night 9/10 July 1944, a date and time when the effect of moonlight and tide would be to the advantage of the invasion force.

Landings

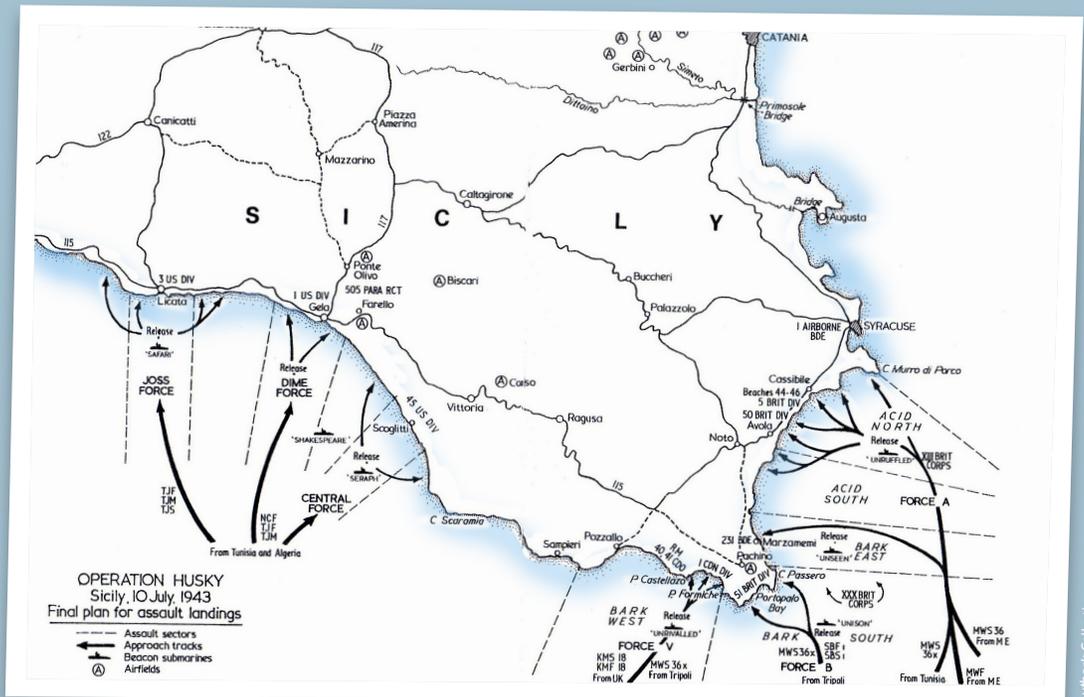
The operational plan in essence was:

- 1) To capture Messina in the NE corner of the island with a view to launching an assault on to the Italian mainland as soon as possible after the cessation of hostilities in Sicily.
- 2) To destroy as much of the axis forces as possible on the island and to prevent any withdrawal across the straits of Messina.
- 3) US Army was to protect 8th Army's flank protection as 8th Army pushed north towards Messina - Patton's shield to Montgomery's sword - and then to drive towards the north coast thereby cutting off Axis forces in the western part of Sicily.

The landings were to be on the south east coast of Sicily with British and Canadian forces from Capo Murro De Porco on the east side, both sides of Cap Pessaro. US Forces landing further in three separate places near Gela codenamed JOSS, CENT and DIME.

Aerial supremacy was vital to the success of Husky so it was essential to seize airfields and build additional ones as Sicily was only just inside air cover range for aircraft based in Malta and North Africa. Accordingly the American landings were to be preceded by a night parachute assault by 82nd Airborne's 505th Regt Combat Team who were tasked to seize airfields to the north of Gela on the Piano Lupo and to protect the Gela landings from counter attack.

Together with the British glider landings on the right flank of the bridgehead which was to take place at the same time, the allied airborne



assault was to be the biggest airborne operation since Operation Mercury, the German attack on Crete in April 1941. The tour I am about to describe looks at these British glider landings and an attack which was described by Churchill as one of the most remarkable of the war.

The Ponte Grande Bridge, south of Syracuse was the target for the British glider assault of the 1st Airlanding Brigade on the night of 9/10th July 1943. The normally cautious Montgomery had never been totally convinced that a glider landing at night was the best option for taking the bridge and had wanted to use a Commando force but was persuaded by the enthusiastic Hopkinson allow a glider borne assault.

It was a disaster - an unexpected offshore breeze and in some cases friendly fire, caused 69 gliders of the total force of 147 to land in the sea killing 252 men to the horror of many in the amphibious force on its way to the landing beaches who were unable to save their drowning comrades. A further 59 gliders crash landed somewhere in southern Sicily and 10 were forced to return to North Africa; one party which landed on Malta, ready to do battle thinking they were in Sicily, were subdued by an irate RAF officer who told them in no uncertain terms to 'get off my bloody runway'!

Eventually just 73 men from the South Staffords seized the bridge but by 1600 hrs on the 10th, short of ammunition and with only 15 men left unwounded, they were forced to surrender at which point Bren Gun Carriers of 2nd Bn Royal Scots Fusiliers arrived from the landing beaches, re-took the bridge and released those who had been taken prisoner by the Italians.

The Primosole Bridge was attacked by the 1st Parachute Brigade on

the night 13/14 July 1943 under command of Brigadier Gerald Lathbury but again many pilots lost their way and aircraft were engaged heavily by German AA fire. In addition German reinforcement of airborne troops had just taken place less than 12 hours before the assault and a German Fallschirmjager [airborne troops redeployed as motorized infantry] Machine Gun Battalion was actually in occupation of one of the hill features targeted as part of the southern perimeter defence once the Parachute Brigade had seized the Bridge at Primosole.

were within 50 metres of their forward position before opening fire. 34 Durhams were killed and 100 wounded in the initial volley whilst the survivors fled. John Frost once commented 'if I ever did that to my battalion, I would deserve to be shot!' What he had seen was reminiscent of a Somme attack many years before.

Pearson would become the most experienced of all British Airborne commanders, commanding the 1st and 8th Parachute Battalions in Africa, Sicily, Normandy and across the Rhine winning no less than



See credits at end of article*

Primosole Bridge then

Of an attacking force of nearly 2000 men, less than 200 men actually arrived to secure the bridge but strong German counter attacks eventually forced the surviving Paras. to withdraw to the high ground south of the Bridge.

A relieving force of the Durham battalion with armoured support arrived and launched an immediate attack observed by John Frost who commanded the 2nd Parachute Battalion and Alistair Pearson commanding the 1st Parachute Battalion. The attack was a disaster with the Fallschirmjager waiting until the extended line of Durhams

four Distinguished Service Orders (DSO). He prided himself on being a pre-war Territorial, often declaring 'I am Alastair Pearson the Baker' [his pre-war occupation]. He became so exasperated at the orders being issued as the Durhams prepared for another attack, that he intervened in his gruff Glaswegian accent 'if you want to destroy another battalion then you are going about the right way to do it!!' At 0200hrs on 16th July 1943 Pearson, who never carried a weapon, led two companies and forded the Simeto River taking the Germans by surprise. They managed to secure a bridgehead and after many hours of very heavy fighting which included a ceasefire

to evacuate the dead and wounded of both sides, the Fallschirmjager withdrew to a new defensive line on a drainage ditch called the Fossa Bottaca just south of Catania airfield. By the early morning of the 17th July the bridge was firmly back in British hands.

The Fossa Bottaca formed the hinge of the whole German defensive position in north east Sicily which became known as the Hauptkampflinie (main battle line) or Hube Line after the German General commanding all German troops in Sicily. The line ran from just south of Catania to the north coast at San Stefano barring the route which Patton's American 7th Army would be trying to take to Messina on the straits with the Italian mainland. Within a very short period of time of the Allies landing, the Axis forces in Sicily had drawn up Operation Lehrung to withdraw, taking as many personnel as possible together with their wounded, stores and vehicles across the Straits of Messina and this was implemented on the 23rd July.

When Montgomery found that he could not break through towards Messina through the narrow coastal strip north of Catania between Mount Etna and the sea, he decided to pass his major formations around the west and north of Etna. He moved his Divisions westward across the Catania plain in order to break through the Hauptkampflinie by outflanking it or smashing directly through, thereby splitting German forces who were using roads around Etna to re-supply their forces along the main battle line.

Here Montgomery was confronted with the high massif of Centuripe overlooking the valleys of the Dittaino to the south and the Salso and Simeto valleys to the north so he called forward his strategic reserve, the 78th Battle Axe



North East Sicily

Division, commanded by Major General Everleigh, which had earned a reputation as a very solid fighting formation. On arrival in Sicily they were immediately moved forward to take their place in the line attacking the Hauptkampflinie at Centuripe.



Centuripe

On their left they had the 51st Highland Division and on their right they had the Canadians and 231st Independent Brigade advancing from the west. During the 1st August they advanced north from Catenanuova up to the foothills below Centuripe with every inch of the ground contested by the Fallschirmjager who were perhaps the best German troops on the island.

The picture of Centuripe best shows the nature of the terrain: it is a 1000m high massif which dominates the plain of Catania. The defenders had cratered and mined all roads leading up to the town and each bend was covered by machine gun positions and snipers. Everleigh decided to use his 38th Irish Brigade to attack the town from two sides on the night of 2/3rd August. The London Irish occupied the cemetery on the west wide of town whilst the Irish Fusiliers swarmed up the almost vertical escarpment on the southern side and the Iniskillings came up the eastern side. One possibly romanticized account describes the Irish attacking with their war cry *Faugh an Beallach!* - Clear the Way! and by the morning



Another view of Centuripe

of the 3rd in what Churchill described as 'one of the greatest achievements in storming almost impregnable heights' they had taken the town and were looking northwards towards Etna and the gratifying sight of the Germans withdrawing across the Salso river.

For many, the capture of Centuripe was the decisive moment of the Sicilian campaign - the tipping point when either side could have won - and by 11th August, Operation Lehighang, the German and Italian evacuation was in full swing despite attempts by Allied air forces and the Royal Navy to prevent this. It was certainly no Dunkirk: by direct order of Hube 'no German soldier was allowed on to any evacuation craft unless he was carrying his rifle.' By the 18th August when the German High Command recorded that the evacuation had been completed, over 60,000 German soldiers and 75,000 Italian soldiers

Author's Collection



Messina

had escaped with 4,000 wounded, 14 tanks, 44 artillery pieces and 6,000 tons of stores. In fact more Germans escaped from Sicily across the Straits of Messina than were on the island at the start of the campaign!

By 17th August the last German soldier had left Sicily and Patton, followed by Montgomery's forces occupied Messina. Portrayed by Patton and Hollywood as an unofficial race between Patton and the 'limey' Montgomery in fact this had been the official plan since Montgomery made

the suggestion to Patton on July 25th when it had become clear that the Americans had an easier assault route along the northern coast of Sicily.

On the 3rd September Montgomery crossed the Straits of Messina, invading the Italian mainland against very little opposition although further north the Germans were waiting to engage him in the long and bloody Italian campaign which was to end at the Austrian border in May 1945.

It had been a bloody affair for both sides: casualties on the Axis side totaled 29,000 of whom an estimated 5,000 were killed and a further 140,000 (mostly Italians) captured. The U.S. lost 2,237 killed and 6,544 wounded and captured; the British suffered 2,721 dead, and 10,122 wounded and captured; the Canadians suffered 2,410 casualties including 562 killed and 1,848 wounded and captured.

Conclusion

Sicily was a rude awakening for both sides. Whatever his grandiose declarations after the war, Patton emerged as a considerable commander, well aware of what have been achieved. On Aug 1st he had written, "The mountains are the worst I have ever seen, it is a miracle that our men can get through them". But the American Army had proved its worth after its poor performance in North Africa and much had been learnt about planning major sea-borne landings which would prove of inestimable value a year later in Normandy, a fact which makes this such a fascinating tour to undertake.

For the Axis the results were immediate: Mussolini was deposed on July 25th and the Italians began peace negotiations with the Allies.

Military historians are still in hot dispute about the Sicily campaign.

As Guides I believe we should leave that to others and not get involved in the blame business. We just tell the stories and present the facts. Sicily is a tour which does not figure prominently in the itineraries of our battlefield touring companies. I think that is unfortunate. As the precursor to Normandy it has everything for everybody who appreciates the history of WWII.

Practicalities:

The summer heat between between April and the end of September means the winter months are probably the best time to carry out a tour and prices also tend to be cheaper. Roughly the size of Switzerland, Sicily has mountain chains running laterally across the island with rugged terrain and dried up river courses. Roads are poor and there is no real public transport system. For navigation Michelin road maps are essential but there are few topographical maps and really Google earth is probably the best source.

The Primasole Bridge has recently been removed and there is now no direct connection across the river, other than using the new autostrada which does not allow easy access to the river-banks.

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Bob Darby holds Badge 29 of the Guild of Battlefield Guides. Formerly served with the Parachute Regiment on Op Corporate - the repossession of the Falkland Islands. Has returned to the Islands many times with touring parties. Has also carried out many battlefield tours dealing with the Mediterranean and NW European theatre of operations. Currently works with Poppy Travel delivering their 'Realities of War' tour for the British Army. ■

ST VALERY-EN-CAUX, NORTHERN FRANCE

by Chris John



This article is based on research undertaken as one of the Guild's guiding team for the 2008 Help For Heroes Big Battlefield Bike Ride. The Ride was to visit and lay a wreath at the 51st Highland Division memorial at St Valery-en-Caux. The research revealed a fascinating and still controversial story as to how the 51st Highland Division came to be forced to surrender to German forces here on the 12th June 1940, almost two weeks after the end of the Dunkirk evacuations, (Operation Dynamo).

The 51st Highland Division were famous for their service in the Great War especially for the final capture of Beaumont Hamel in November 1916. During the inter war period they remained a territorial division recruiting from all over the Highland area of Scotland. They were a modern, motorised division, motorised transport, infantry in bren gun carriers etc with three infantry brigades 152nd, 153rd, 154th with full supporting units. In 1939 they were mobilised under the command of Major-General Victor Fortune and went to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force.

The 51st, however, had not been involved in the retreat to Dunkirk and Operation Dynamo. Earlier in the year they had been reinforced and sent south east to the Maginot Line on the River Saar. The aim was to give the Division some experience of "action" on the line, and to foster understanding

and co-operation between the French and British allies. Thus with the invasion of the Low Countries the 51st were far away from the area of operations. Under an agreement for such an event they were to return to the BEF and orders were issued for them to move to the coast around Abbeville, the seaward end of the River Somme, in preparation for this.

This is where the on-going controversy starts. When guiding, ask your party to imagine they are British High Command, or Winston Churchill the newly appointed Prime Minister. However much your propaganda machine is trying to put a "spin" on Dunkirk as "Victory Out of Defeat" you know that the truth is you have suffered a catastrophic military reversal. So much so that if France were to surrender, the next military phase of German operations will almost certainly be an attempted invasion of England itself in the late summer.

But there is good news, a complete reinforced British Division, nearly 20,000 men is still in existence and close to Dieppe and le Havre from where they, and all their precious equipment, could be speedily evacuated and returned to Britain.

Surely there are only two decisions possible, one so obvious it must be the only course of action that could possibly be taken in the circumstances? Which would your party choose?

~ Order the immediate return home of the Division and its equipment.

~ Order it to remain in France. To operate under French High Command control, fighting alongside a collapsing ally, against a far superior force that has already driven your main Expeditionary Force and their French colleagues literally into the sea.

One would, of course, unhesitatingly choose the latter option!!

Why? Because as the government and command you deem it to be more in the National Interest, that France should be encouraged to continue fighting. With a French Army still in the field Germany cannot spare enough troops to mount an invasion of Britain. If France is defeated Britain

will be in range of numerous enemy airfields in Northern France, and the German navy will have access to the coast opposite. If they can seize air superiority and control of the Channel, for even 48 hours, an invasion is a distinct possibility.

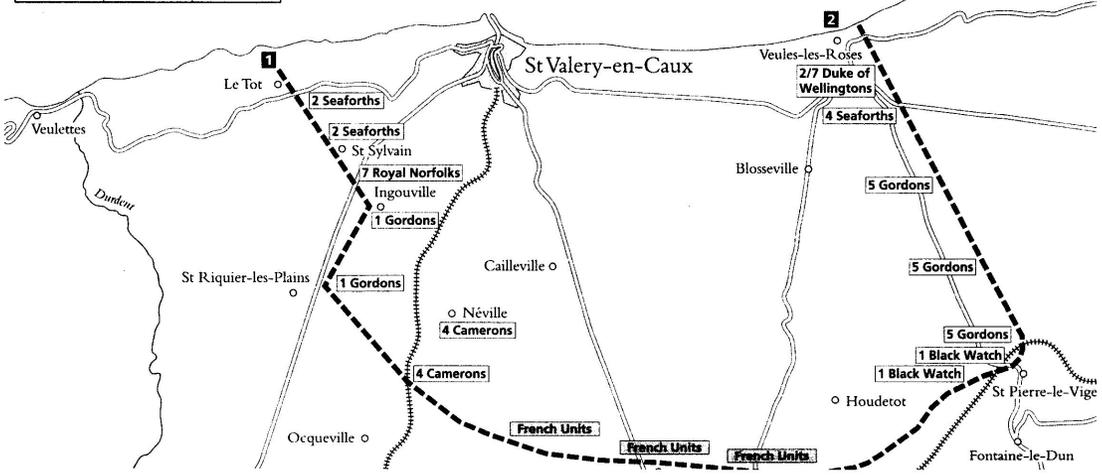
As per plan the Division moved west to Abbeville where they were ordered to remain under French command and assist the French Army. The 51st were initially ordered to undertake a joint offensive with French forces against enemy bridgeheads on the Somme. Fierce fighting took place but was unsuccessful. The next day the German Army launched Fal Rot, Operation Red to seize the Channel areas down to the Seine estuary at Le Havre.. This fell very heavily upon the 51st and particularly the 154th brigade. So fierce was the fighting that the 7th Argylls were virtually obliterated. Their war diary recalls the loss that day of 500 officers and men, a loss of staggering Great War proportions. Other battalions also suffered heavily. With their partners of the slower, horse-drawn 9th Division, French Army the 51st fell back to try and stand on the River Bresle. But wherever they stopped they were soon outflanked. Forced away from the River Bresle they formed a second line on the River Bethune near Dieppe but were again outflanked and forced backwards south-east towards St Valery-en-Caux.

- 1** The German occupation of the cliff tops near Le Tot during 11–12 June made it impossible for General Fortune to evacuate his men from St Valery.
- 2** 2230 men were evacuated from the Veules-les-Roses beaches during 12 June.



The Perimeter at St Valery, 11–12 June 1940

- Approximate St Valery perimeter
- British units
- French Units



General Marshall-Cornwall, the British liaison officer between British and French commands was increasingly concerned about their situation.. He was the first to suggest the 51st should fall back to Le Havre and be evacuated from there. But the same reply came back from London, the 51st would remain under French command and obey and comply with their orders. Evacuation could only be considered if authorised by the French High Command. In Plymouth Admiral James was also aware and was assembling shipping should it be needed for an evacuation.

But by the 10th June matters were coming to a head. General Fortune had detached the severely mauled 154th brigade and several other non infantry units, (ARKFORCE), to move towards le Havre. But at this juncture Rommel struck seizing Rouen and the Seine crossings, there was no hope of further retreat south. The 7th Panzer Division then swung to the coast, between ARKFORCE and the 51st cutting them off from Le Havre. Trapped, the two divisions established a 10 mile perimeter around the small port of St Valery-En-Caux from where they might possibly be evacuated.. But the port was now within range of German artillery. As shipping tried to approach it came under shellfire and was driven back into the sea-mist swirling around that day.

With an evacuation from the port proving impossible, with little food and ammunition left, under attack on all sides and with his French allies already negotiating an armistice, General Victor Fortune had little choice but to surrender the trapped division to General Erwin Rommel on the 12th June.

So today the controversy still continues. In some quarters it is still very much held that the 51st were deliberately and needlessly sacrificed in an effort to keep a collapsing French ally in the field.

The arguments are well rehearsed but may be summarised as,

Could they have been saved?

Early in June undoubtedly. Both Dieppe and Le Havre were open to them. But to do so would have meant abandoning their French allies, who were horse drawn and did not have the same opportunity for a speedy retreat. Once denied access to a major port the chances of evacuation decreased to almost zero. Surrounded by steep cliffs the small port was

never truly suitable for evacuating a large number of personnel let alone equipment.

Should they have been saved?

Here is the true controversy. It depends on what you accept as the National Interest at that time. Perhaps one should rephrase the question as “were they deliberately abandoned?”. The answer I think is no, the British government neither foresaw nor wished for that outcome. The Royal Navy was willing to make an attempt but that proved impossible.

Without wishing to invert blame, we should also remember that throughout this period the 51st were attached to the French Army and under direct French, not British command. General Weygand had ultimate authority.. At all times he refused to consider any evacuation for the 51st and so blame, if any there is, for not allowing the 51st to escape must be equally shared by both governments.

Visiting St Valery today

The events of the three days in June 1940 may be best understood by visiting the harbour area of St Valery and the 51st Division memorial on the eastern heights above the port. Access to here is limited, there is no direct road, though the cliff-top can be reached by a narrow back road. Access is easiest via a winding footpath from the eastern side of the port. Access is not possible for severely disabled or infirm and probably not for wheelchair users. However the story can also be understood from the harbour area.

From the memorial one can appreciate the coastline in both directions is mainly 40 foot high cliffs with no beach. The harbour is a cleft in this cliff-line and so any evacuation could only be attempted from the small port. The memorial gives views to the west cliff the side from which Rommels 7th Panzer division advanced into the town itself. It also gives an appreciation as to why, once enemy artillery were established within range on the western side, any shipping approaching would have been an easy target and so an evacuation by sea became totally impossible.

The harbour area confirms this appreciation. The cliffs on each side come right down to the harbour entrance. Access to the sea is only via the narrow harbour breakwaters. One can see there was never going to be a smaller “Beaches of Dunkirk” here.



Guild member and fellow guide Peter Caddick-Adams showing a picture taken at the same spot in St Valery.



Author's Collection

Furthermore only small sized ships could get into the harbour. The buildings on the west side are virtually unchanged and a study of the roof lines in the photo of the meeting of Generals Rommel and Fortune to discuss the surrender allow one to place this accurately on the eastern port side just inland of the sea-lock into the inner yacht harbour. Now a small car parking area one would not know this is an historic spot where Rommel once stood at the moment of his greatest victory in northern France 1940 receiving the surrender of two British and French generals.

Imagine at that moment the town packed with British and French soldiers, all of whom had been ordered to make for the port for an attempted evacuation. Many buildings are burning having been bombed and shelled. Into this pour the vehicles of the 7th Panzer division to receive the surrender of perhaps 20,000 British and French troops. Their perimeter has collapsed into this small pocket and here they are caught to lay down their arms and to march away into five years captivity.

The story of the 51st Highland division in France 1940 is a fascinating study combining not only military

history but the effects of political decision-making over-riding what may have been straightforward operational strategy. This led to military catastrophe. But we must not judge with hindsight but rather try to understand the circumstances that lead to those decisions.

Above all it is a story of the brave men of the Division who fought a two week retreat against a better equipped enemy with a clearer tactical objective and a far freer hand in achieving that. Many of them died in that retreat, often overlooked even today in accounts of those dark days. What better way as guides to preserve their memory than to tell their story where the main events unfolded?

Christopher John joined the Guild in 2004. His main interest is the Great War, validating assignment 1 with the Battle of St Eloi 1916. He gained Guild badge 32 in September 2007. Chris is proud to have been a Guild guide on the 2008 Big Battlefield Bike Ride that raised a million pounds for Help for Heroes.

Comments or discussion on St Valery contact Chris on CEJB75@aol.com ■

MONTE CECO – OCTOBER 1944: A “DODGER” WINS THE V.C.

by Michael St Maur Sheil

Nancy, Lady Astor is perhaps best remembered for two things. She was the first woman to take her seat in parliament [not as often erroneously stated, the first woman to be elected, that honour being earned by Countess Markeiwicz] and secondly she was the object of perhaps one of the most famous alleged examples of Churchillian wit when she said to Churchill “If you were my husband, I’d poison your tea,” to which he retorted, “Madam, if you were my wife, I’d drink it!”

But in addition a disparaging remark she made about the 8th Army led to the witty riposte of the ‘D-Day Dodgers’ whose bitter-sweet words still hold true for many visitors to Italy.

*The Volturno and Cassino were taken in our stride
We didn't have to fight there.
We just went for the ride.
Anzio and Sangro were a farce,
We did f..k all, sat on our arse.
For we are the D-Day Dodgers, over here in Italy.*

*On our way to Florence we had a lovely time.
We ran a bus to Rimini right through the Gothic Line.
On to Bologna we did go.
Then we went bathing in the Po.
For we are the D-Day Dodgers, over here in Italy.*

*Now Lady Astor, get a load of this.
Don't stand up on a platform and talk a load of piss.
You're the nation's sweetheart, the nation's pride
We think your mouth's too bloody wide.
We are the D-Day Dodgers, in Sunny Italy.*

*When you look 'round the mountains,
through the mud and rain.
You'll find the scattered crosses,
some which bear no name.
Heartbreak, and toil and suffering gone
The boys beneath them slumber on.
They were the D-Day Dodgers, who'll stay in Italy.*

People may visit Sicily, Anzio and Cassino with a night in Rome to taste the wine but they then totally ignore the “bus to Rimini” - the Allied attack to breach the Gothic Line [renamed the Green Line] which ran for 320 kms across the Apennines - probably the most ferocious terrain of any WWII battlefield in Europe.

The fall of Rome on 5th June [the day after Gen. Mark Clark nearly got shot by a stray bullet whilst posing for a photographer in front of a city limits sign] was rendered of little interest to any but tacticians by the news of the Normandy landings and the subsequent war in Italy became a mere side-show to the main Allied thrust towards Germany from the English Channel.

But the battle for Italy, seemingly won in 1944, did not formally end until 2nd May 1945. The failure of the Allies to exploit the Anzio landings and prevent the withdrawal of the German 10th Army meant that the Germans, ably commanded by Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, were able to fight a series of delaying actions whilst they fell back towards the prepared positions of the Gothic Line.

Running for almost 300 kms. from south of La Spezia on the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Adriatic Sea near Rimini through the natural barrier of the Apennines it was a defensive belt about 20kms deep with minefields, over 2,300 machine guns posts, almost 500 anti-tank guns, numerous de-mounted tank turrets set on concrete emplacements with deep shelters and was a truly formidable obstacle.

Meanwhile in preparation for Operation Dragoon, the Allied landings in southern France which took place on 15th August, seven divisions had been transferred, reducing the US 5th Army and British 8th Army from 250,000 men to 150,000

The assault on Rimini was effectively a huge pincer movement with the British 8th Army attacking up the Adriatic coast whilst the American 5th Army in the Apennines sought to drive through to Bologna thus entrapping the German army on the southern plains of the river Po. ‘Operation Olive’, the attack towards Rimini, commenced on 25th August. and was truly massive with over 11,000 air sorties and some 1.4m. artillery rounds being fired in the

month to 30th September when the first phase of the campaign finished with the Allies in possession of the Rimini gateway to northern Italy but having suffered 14,000 casualties and losing almost 500 tanks.

However the assault through the Apennines had been delayed both by fierce German resistance and the weather which deteriorated sharply on September 15th when heavy rains turned the rivers into torrents and turned the mountain roads into almost impassable mud.

On 12th September General Clark's 5th Army II Corps began their attack on the Futa and Il Giogo Passes which guarded the roads to Bologna and Imola and by the 18th had captured key positions on the Gothic Line including the Il Giogo Pass: Clark pushed forwards and by early October II Corps was just 30 kms south of Bologna when the weather broke making resupply virtually impossible and the attack was halted.

To the east the US 88th Division on the road to Imola had fought itself to a standstill with over 2,000 casualties and on their right flank, but separated from direct contact by mountain masses, the British XIII Corps comprising the British 1st Infantry Div, 6th Armoured Div., 8th Indian Army Inf. Div and 1st Canadian Tank Bde. was encountering fierce resistance in its advance along "Arrow Route" through the Senio valley towards Fienza.

"Arrow Route" ran north-eastwards from Palazzuolo sul Senio along the Senio as it descends from the Apennines to Faenza where it debouches onto the Romagna plain. The valley is narrow with just one road which criss-crosses the river which is frequently deeply incised: on either side mountains rise steeply on either side to over 800m and afford excellent views over the entire valley so any advance requires control of the heights. The retreating Germans destroyed every bridge as they went and the narrow road meant that resupply was difficult and any movements were vulnerable to German artillery whilst any supplies to units away from the road had to be made by either work parties or mule teams.

On 3rd October the advance had reached the village of Castagno where a large bridge had been blown and which was under very close

observation from Monte Ceco*; it was clear that no further progress could be made until Ceco was captured. Artillery support was very limited as there was no suitable ground on which to deploy guns and the waterlogged conditions meant that the preparation of positions for the 7.2" howitzers took several days: there was virtually no ammunition for the 4.2" mortars and to achieve the necessary elevation, 25 pounders had their trails dug into the ground with their wheels elevated on ammunition boxes: in addition they were limited to just 35 rounds per gun per day.

To the north west the American 350th Inf. Reg. had captured Monte Battaglia and despite 50% losses suffered over six days of brutal fighting had secured the position on 2nd October: they were now anxious for the British to advance to cover their right flank which meant that the capture of Monte Ceco was critical if the momentum of the advance on the plains to the north was to be sustained.

Monte Ceco itself is a steep pinnacle rising to 759m, some 500m above the road. To the south it is approached along a steep, narrow ridge rising about 200m in the final 600m. This was flanked to the south east by another steep ridge held by the Germans. The approach from the south west was up a bare, stony hillside [today the mountain is largely wooded] and the western aspect and Senio valley was totally overlooked from the summit which in itself was connected to the east with a second hill known as Point 734 and which would have to be assaulted to enable the whole feature to be secured.

The troops defending the hill were elements of the 715 Div. which had regrouped since the initial assault on the Gothic Line and the steep slopes meant that their reserves had good cover on the reverse slopes.

On the night of the 3rd an initial assault by the 2nd Sherwood Foresters was repulsed and the following night a further attack along the ridge from the south was repulsed although a company of 1st Bn King's Shropshire Light Infantry managed to gain a position on the western slopes below the summit which they held through the night until fierce German counter-attacks drove them away.



Looking north-west from Monte Ceco over the Senio valley



Looking up at the south west ridge of Mt. Ceco which was the route of the final attack and unloading of the stores amidst the mud of Arrow Route

Given the closeness of the combatants, artillery support was impossible and considering the strength of the enemy defences it was decided to allot the attack to fresh troops. The 1st Bn Duke of Wellington's Reg. were inserted and they made their first attempt on the night of the 6th with attacks from the south and south west.

Despite heavy rain and mist the assault started on time but the appalling conditions meant that there was a gap between the lifting of the covering barrage and the final assault of the leading troops so the enemy were able to emerge from cover and launch an immediate counter-attack with the result that the attack was held about 50m below the ridge line where the troops proceeded to dig in. They held these positions throughout the 7th although any movement instantly drew heavy machine gun fire from the crest above and it was only when darkness fell that they were able to extricate themselves.

However artillery support meant that a company were able to consolidate their positions high on the western slopes and it was now decided that retreat from this advanced position was not an option. The Duke's CO decided that the enemy were most alert at night and so he decided upon an assault in the early afternoon, launched without any preliminary bombardment. The plan was to launch the attack from the west with one company attacking the northern side of the summit ridge and another company on the southern side whilst the ridge would be bombarded with mortar, Bren and PIATs.



Foxholes and weapons pits are still clearly visible atop Mt. Ceco

The regimental diary states that the attack:

“started sharp at 1530 and by 1600 elements of C Coy had reached the crest. The remainder of the coy worked round to the left or north of the crest...The going was very hard indeed as it was pouring with rain and the mud was knee deep in places. Enemy reaction to this second assault on the feature within 48hrs was very heavy and immediate once C coy were on top - both from many spandaus and from mortars...At 1625 the first counter attack was repulsed...by 1730 A & C Coys were est on the crest and on the fwd slopes on either flank...At 1740 hrs the Comd Offr and Capt P L H Hathorn were wounded - the C. O. seriously - on the top of the feature and shortly after the news came through that the Comd Offr had died... before S.Bs. could reach him”.

The conditions were clearly appalling; the diary states that “The evacuation of casualties was tremendously difficult in the pouring rain, pitch darkness and deep mud” and it was daylight on the 9th before the wounded finally reached the valley. Despite this the position was consolidated and late on the 9th the DWR were relieved having



Flooded gun pit and heavy mud show the difficulties of preparing artillery support

suffered “12 killed, 50 wounded with 10 missing, believed killed or wounded”.

The battle itself did not end with the taking of the summit: the relieving force were the 11th Bn. Lancashire Fusiliers and it took them a further week of very heavy fighting to secure Pts. 653 & 734 on 16th October by which time they had suffered 116 casualties and won 2 DSOs, two MCs and five MMs.

For the “Duke’s” this was a significant action, not least because Pte Dick Burton won the Victoria Cross. The citation states that:

“two companies of the Duke of Wellington’s Regiment moved forward to take a strongly held feature 760 metres high. The capture of this feature was vital at this stage of the operation, as it dominated all the ground on the main axis of advance. The assaulting troops made good progress to within twenty yards of the crest,

when they came under withering fire from Spandaus on the crest. Private Burton rushed forward and engaging the first Spandau’s position with his Tommy-gun, killed the crew of three.

When the assault was again held up by murderous fire from more machine guns, Private Burton, again showing complete disregard for his own safety, dashed forward toward the first machine-gun, using his Tommy-gun until his ammunition was exhausted. He then picked up a Bren gun and, firing from the hip, succeeded in killing or wounding the crews of the two machine-guns. Thanks to his outstanding courage the Company was then able to consolidate on the forward slope of the feature.

The enemy immediately counter-attacked, but Private Burton, in spite of most of his comrades being either dead or wounded, once again dashed forward and directed such accurate fire with his Bren gun that the enemy retired, leaving the feature firmly in our hands, Private Burton’s magnificent gallantry and total disregard of his own safety during many hours of fierce fighting in mud and continuous rain were an inspiration to all his comrades.”



Captain Andrew “Robbie” Burns, CO of ‘A’ Coy. DWR who led the attack on the southern side of the ridge won the DSO for his courage and leadership that day. After the war he returned to his civilian job - walking the beat as an ordinary P.C. in Derby where his DSO ribbon was spotted by the Chief Constable who immediately made him a Sergeant and he finally retired as Chief Constable of Suffolk.

Monte Ceco today:

The battle area lies about 60kms NNE of Florence on the SS306 leading towards Faenza - midway between Palazzuola sul Senio and Casola Valsenio one turns eastwards in the village of Baffadi and follows the road up into the hills and southwards towards the ridge of Monte Ceco. Sadly topographical maps of the region are virtually impossible to obtain the best solution is to use Google Earth.

The site itself is easily accessed from Palazzuolo sul Senio which has good accommodation and a local museum with plenty of information about the campaign in the valley as there is great local pride in the role played by the partisans during the campaign when they disrupted German communications. The local commune also organises an annual commemoration service held in the 3rd week of September.

The summit of Monte Ceco [44 10’26.29” / 11 36’59.98”] is well signed from a road which has been built since the war and a path has been made up the final steep slope to the summit. Contemporary photographs show the hill as being rocky and sparsely wooded whereas now it is heavily wooded but one can still appreciate the rugged nature of the terrain and the steep slopes. The summit itself runs from east to west and is about 80 metres long and 15 m. wide and the ground falls away steeply especially to the north and south. There is now a memorial on the top and all around evidence of the fighting abounds: the northern reverse slope is pockmarked with fox-holes and weapon pits and one should make time to descend the western ridge for 250m. where there are numerous trenches and in re-ascending one can really appreciate the terrain and walk the ground where Burton won his V.C.

Drum Major
Anthony Oxley
sounding the
Last Post at
Monte Ceco



For the Duke of Wellingtons the capture of Monte Ceco is one of their proudest honours but sadly last year's act of commemoration at Palazuolo was the last one prior to their amalgamation in the Yorkshire Regiment and to mark the occasion, despite their other commitments , three serving officers from the DWR were present together with the regimental Drum Major.

So it was an emotional day in more ways than one: for Drum Major "Ox" Oxley it was the last time he would parade wearing the regimental Battle Honours which include Monte Ceco. Standing 6' 7" in his spectacular boots, he was a fitting representative of the "thin red line" and he was clearly determined that the final sounding of the Last Post by a DWR "drummie" would be an especial event.



Lt Col
Patrick St Maur Sheil,
DSO

It certainly was for me and my cousin, Major William St Maur Sheil. The the C.O. of the Duke Wellington's Regiment on Monte Ceco was William's father, Lt Col Patrick St Maur Sheil, DSO. Commissioned into the South Wales Borderers he won his DSO on Monte

Damiano in January 1944 whilst commanding a battalion of the Queen's Regiment when he personally led an attack with the bayonet against six machine gun positions, securing their objective which was then held for a further 24 hrs despite the flanking units being unable to support them so he was clearly a spirited officer. Monte Ceco was the place where that spirit died and we are very grateful to the officers of the DWR and "Drummie Ox" for honouring that tradition to this day.

Michael St Maur Sheil.
Badge No. 38
www.westernfrontphotography.com

*Monte Ceco is the spelling in British records and maps: the correct Italian spelling is Monte Cece but I have retained the British version.

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And with my grateful thanks to; Major William St Maur Sheil [ret.] and Sng. Daniele Fort, Comune di Casolo Valsenio. ■



JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS

By the Editor

The deadline for the next issue is Monday 30th August 2010 so your suggestions and contributions are invited. To avoid possible duplication and resultant disappointment, please discuss your idea first with the Editor before you put finger to keyboard.

Any battlefield description should enable readers to understand the topography so maps are of real importance: considerations should also be given to details useful to the visitor such as especial access and accommodation.

Personal memoirs are always welcome but please try and relate them to specific battlefields or significant events and illustrate wherever possible with visual material.

Photographs: hackneyed saying it may be, but “a good photograph is worth a thousand words”, so please, wherever possible, provide photographs and maps: the latter are essential in our work as guides and enable the reader to relate the article to specific ground.

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Please note that articles which have already been published in similar journals such as the WFA Bulletin are unlikely to be considered for publication unless of exceptional significance.

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