

TRUE LOYALS

**A history of 7th Battalion, The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) /
92nd (Loyals) Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment,**

Royal Artillery, 1940-1946

By Tom McCarthy

1. FROM CIVILIANS TO SOLDIERS

July 1940 to February 1941

'The sum total of the training equipment consisted of 40 rifles, half a dozen impressed vehicles and a few boxes of grenades. Everything was either made of wood, borrowed for the afternoon – or simply imagined.'

THE summer of 1940 was the most desperate hour in Britain's long history. On May 10, barely a month after overrunning Denmark and Norway, Hitler unleashed his offensive in the West. Over the next three weeks, the German panzer armies scythed through the Low Countries and Northern France – as they had done in Poland the previous September – carrying all before them with their blitzkrieg.

Trapped against the sea at Dunkirk, the British Expeditionary Force escaped by a miracle – 338,000 men snatched from the jaws of the Germans thanks to an evacuation fleet of ships large and small.

By late June, most of the British soldiers who had managed to avoid captivity were back home. But the Army lay stunned and virtually impotent, having left behind most of its guns and equipment in France. Bestriding the Channel coast, Hitler stood triumphant, ready to invade unless an ignominious peace was agreed.

But even at this darkest moment, the mood in Britain was one of defiance, resolution and a calm conviction that there would be no surrender. Inspired by Churchill, the nation was determined to go down fighting rather than be engulfed by the tide of Nazi barbarism.

As Britain looked to its defences and waited for the blow to fall, the call-up of men for military service gained fresh urgency. If the Germans came, the new recruits would be thrown into the battle. If invasion was averted, these men would build the armies which one day would go back across the Channel and liberate Europe.

Up and down the country, old and famous regiments found their ranks swelled by recruits who would very quickly have to be turned from civilians into soldiers. So it was that on July 4, 1940, the 7th Battalion of The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) was officially raised at the Loyals' headquarters in Fulwood Barracks, Preston, based around a cadre

of regulars –15 officers and 150 other ranks.

Strictly speaking, the battalion was being re-formed, since the 7th (Service) Battalion of the Loyals had been established during the First World War, seeing action on the Western Front. As the regiment prepared to accept its new intake, goodbyes were being said in homes throughout Merseyside, Lancashire and Cheshire, from where the bulk of the unit's men were recruited.

Fathers, sons, uncles and brothers who until now had been workers in factories, offices, shops or shipyards, found themselves called to the colours – and the destination on their travel warrants was Caernarvon, North Wales. There, at Coed Helen Camp, a large house surrounded by a stretch of wooded land within sight of the medieval castle that dominates the town, the cadre from the Loyals arrived on July 5 ready to receive a total of 850 recruits.

Soldiers in the cadre included warrant officers, NCOs, tradesmen, cooks and batmen, several of whom had seen service with the British Expeditionary Force in France. During the retreat to Dunkirk, the Loyals had fought with exceptional valour and determination, and were among the last soldiers off the beaches. This core of professionals brought with it 'a steadying influence of peacetime service and discipline,' wrote Major Peter Crane, MC, one of the officers tasked with helping set up the new battalion.

On July 17, the first intake of 200 men was received at Coed Helen and posted to A Company. Six days later, David Lloyd George, who had been Prime Minister during the First World War and was MP for Caernarvon, came to the camp to address the recruits.

Next day, the second contingent of 200 men arrived – to be posted to B Company – and a further 400 men two days later, who were split into C and D companies. Out of the whole intake, more than 600 came from Liverpool and district, 120 from London and the rest from various locations, mainly Lancashire and Cheshire.

The 7th battalion started training at Coed Helen with the 8th and 9th Loyals, which were raised at the same time. The three new battalions made up No15 Infantry Group, under Colonel O E Scarfe. Later, with the 12th Royal Welch Fusiliers, they formed 215 Infantry Brigade.

The 7th's commanding officer was Lieutenant Colonel M Wilson, the second-in-command was Major (later Lieut Col) W S Plant, the adjutant was Captain (later Major) Crane and the Regimental Sergeant Major (later Captain) was P W Godden. Two days after the battalion was fully formed, a German plane flew over the camp and dropped two bombs to the south, but there were no casualties. However, it was realised that the open ground where the camp had been established was vulnerable to air attack and towards the end of July all units moved to a site nearer

Caernarvon, where trees and hedges gave better protection.

At first, shortage of equipment was acute for the fledgling infantry unit. 'Training difficulties were very intense in the early stages,' Major Crane later wrote. 'The sum total of the training equipment consisted of 40 rifles, half a dozen impressed vehicles and a few boxes of grenades. Everything was either made of wood, borrowed for the afternoon – or simply imagined.'

As the men tried to settle into bell tents, it was very much make do and mend. 'We were still wearing civvies for weeks after we got there and drilling with broom handles,' recalled Corporal Ronald Prince, one of the Liverpool recruits.

In his memoirs, another Liverpool recruit, Michael Cullen, left a vivid and often colourful account of his service with 7th Loyals after he was called up in July 1940 and allocated to D Company. 'I was issued with a travel warrant and ten shillings and told to report to Coed Helen Camp,' he recalled. 'We were certainly a motley crew as we travelled down from the 'Pool with our little gas masks in cardboard boxes and were excited to know what lay in store. We were soon to find out!

'On arrival at Caernarvon station, we were greeted with a roar like an elephant breaking wind! On the platform was a man with a gold laurel wreath on his sleeve, a chest like Frank Bruno and a neck like a bull terrier! Get fell in! was the order.

'We assumed he had been assigned to knock us into some sort of shape. We learned later that his name was Len Nott. I think the "Nott" meant that he was "Nott" to be trifled with. And you can take it from me that nobody tried.'

Len Nott was the Regimental Sergeant Major. 'On arrival at the camp, which consisted of a large number of bell tents and several other large tents, we were marched into the dining tent and partook of one kipper and a plate of prunes and custard plus three slices of bread and marge. After the meal, we were issued with three rough Army blankets and one groundsheet and were billeted eight men to a tent. We slept on the ground with just the groundsheet underneath.

'Next morning, feeling rather stiff, we were marched to the quartermaster's stores to be fitted out with kit. The QM was an old Army lag who wasn't very fussy whether the uniform fitted or not. Two pairs of each article were issued – the two pairs of cellular underpants he gave me would have looked well on a cab horse! If I had stitched up the ends, I'm sure I could have got a hundredweight of tatties in each leg! We were then told to dress and come out on parade. Len Nott took one look at us and nearly burst a blood vessel. "If only Hitler could see you now, he'd die laughing," he said. In retrospect, I think that I agreed with him.

'In the days that followed, we had inoculations which put us all out of

action for three days. I think at this point I had developed quite an aversion to Army life, and longed to be home again and sampling Mom's cooking and sleeping once again in a nice soft bed. Alas, this was just wishful thinking. We consoled ourselves with the thought that the war would be over in a few months' time, and we could all get back home again. Little did we know that we had another six years of it to face and God knows what lay ahead.

'The few months that followed consisted of small arms (rifle and Bren gun) training – the Bren being the Army's latest toy. PT was at 6am, then breakfast – which consisted of lumpy porridge, tinned American bacon and perhaps some baked beans. Once a week, there was a fried egg. After breakfast, it was on parade for inspection and God help you if you hadn't shaved properly!

'We had, of course, to shave in cold water and this usually meant hacking lumps of flesh from the face and sticking bits of paper on the cuts to stem the bleeding. As Len Nott would say, "I've got a right bleeding shower here!"'

Because a German invasion was thought to be imminent following the Fall of France, training was combined with beach defence, patrols and practice alerts throughout the summer and early autumn, taking the 7th as far south along the coast as Aberdovey, where a second camp was established.

By now, the whole country was on watch for Hitler's advance forces – and in the early hours of September 8, the alarm was raised at Coed Helen of possible German seaborne landings along the nearby coast. Soldiers of the 7th hurriedly took up positions facing the beach near Llanfaglan churchyard and awaited the enemy. But it was a false alarm. By 3.30pm that afternoon, the battalion was stood down.

The stay in Wales ended on September 28, when the battalion entrained for Liverpool and its first major operational role – helping protect the port against German invasion. The 7th's base was to the north of the city in the affluent suburb of Great Crosby, with headquarters in the Northern Cricket Ground at Elm Avenue. A and C companies were stationed in Seaforth Barracks in nearby Waterloo and the rest of the regiment in billets in Seaforth and Blundellsands.

Coming under the command of Mersey Garrison, the 7th – working with four Home Guard battalions – covered one of four defence zones for the Liverpool area. Liverpool was now the most vital port in the kingdom, a gateway for the convoys that later became Britain's lifeline and the nerve centre of the Battle of the Atlantic. 'Here the work became very hard,' Major Crane wrote. 'As, in addition to intense training, the battalion had a considerable operational role and was constantly called up to provide working parties for ships and docks.'

By now, the Luftwaffe had been defeated in the Battle of Britain after fierce combat and high casualties on both sides, and as winter approached, the threat of invasion in 1940 receded. Instead, Hitler targeted British cities with his bombers and in November and December, Merseyside suffered its first major air raids as the Luftwaffe attacked the miles of docks and wharves either side of the river and the famous shipyards of Cammell Laird on the Birkenhead shore. As the Blitz took its terrible toll, the 7th Loyals were drafted in to help tackle gigantic fires which blazed for days in Liverpool's Gladstone and Alexandra docks.

Throughout Christmas, contingents of 100 soldiers battled night and day. During one dramatic operation, the men found themselves wading up to their ankles through molten rubber, which was flowing off a blazing ship. 'There was a consignment of Wellington boots nearby on the dockside and we grabbed them and put them on to protect ourselves,' Corporal Prince recalled. To the men's indignation, a punctilious officer warned them they might face a looting charge. However, reason apparently prevailed and no such charges materialised.

For many men of the 7th, this period was doubly agonising, because Liverpool and Birkenhead were their home towns. As they stood guard and saw the night skies ablaze, or fought fires in the midst of the air raids, they had no way of knowing if their loved ones had become victims.

Michael Cullen recalled: 'The Germans had started in earnest to bomb the docks and town. We had been sent over to help unload the large shells and distribute same to the many heavy ack-ack batteries that ringed the city. The raids were very heavy at times. The whole city seemed to be on fire. The noise of the guns and explosions was deafening. As we went through the streets, we could hear the "ping-ping" of the shrapnel as it bounced off the pavements. The fire engines and ambulances were working non-stop through the night. It was mayhem.'

It was the Blitz that inflicted the battalion's first fatal casualty. As the air raids disrupted civilian services, the 7th took on postal duties and Private Albert Stones, who volunteered for this work, was killed by a bomb blast in billets in Bootle on November 21.

As 1941 opened, another period of change dawned for the battalion. At the start of February, the CO, Colonel Wilson, stepped down because of illness and his second-in-command, Major Plant, took over. On February 3, the 200th anniversary of The Loyal Regiment was celebrated with a parade at the Marine football ground in Blundellsands, followed by a march through Blundellsands, Crosby and Waterloo. There was a welcome bonus for the men – a half day's holiday.

2. THE YORKSHIRE COAST

February to November 1941

'There was deep snow and frost and the men were thrown entirely on their own initiative. It would be difficult to imagine a harder or more exacting life.'

TWO weeks later, the battalion was on the move again – across the Pennines by train to the North Riding of Yorkshire, to take up positions along the cliff-lined coast either side of Whitby with 215 Infantry Brigade as part of the Durham and North Riding Division. The 9th Loyals were based at Scarborough, the 8th Loyals at Saltburn-by-the-Sea and the 7th Loyals at Ravenscar.

Again, the 7th's role was coastal defence, guarding against possible German airborne or seaborne landings at Whitby or nearby Scarborough. Headquarters was at the Raven Hall Hotel, Ravenscar, with A and C companies at Cloughton, B Company at Robin Hood's Bay and D at Hayburn Wyke.

'The battalion's role was entirely operational and training was fitted in wherever possible,' wrote Major Crane. 'However, opportunities for normal training were very few, as for many months the unit stood to along a 30-mile front with a scale of 50 per cent all night and 100 per cent at dusk and dawn.'

It was a hard winter. 'There was deep snow and frost and in it the men had to dig trenches, dugouts and shelters, in which they lived entirely. The men were thrown entirely on their own initiative and for weeks on end knew no pleasures or entertainment of any sort. There were a few casualties from mines and several from exposure. It would be difficult to imagine a harder or more exacting life. The whole front was patrolled continuously every night and sections had to dig into the cliffs, which rise to 600ft in places.'

During this time, the battalion had to acquaint itself with a variety of weapons, including Vickers and Browning medium machine guns, Lewis guns, six-pounder Hotchkiss guns and beach and anti-personnel mines. 'Wiring was a wholetime job, with constant revetting of billets and weapons pits. A French 75mm gun was promised, but – perhaps fortunately – never materialised.'

As well as patrolling, one of the assignments for a detachment of men in Whitby was raising the anti-submarine boom in the harbour each morning to let the fishing fleet into the North Sea. Since it was wound up by hand, it was an arduous task. However, there was compensation – in the form of fish from the grateful skippers when they returned in their boats. Tragedy struck along the coast on April 5, when Privates William Hewitt and

Edward McGreavy were killed by a German sea mine which exploded after being washed ashore.

On the 25th, there was a heavy air raid, with hundreds of incendiaries and a land mine falling, but no casualties despite a bomb exploding 500 yards from battalion billets at Fyling Hall.

Michael Cullen was billeted in a disused railway station at Hayburn Wyke. 'It was about three months now since we had slept in a bed and here we were again, kipping on the floor of a station waiting room,' he recalled. 'Next morning, we were marched about two miles along a disused railway track and taken to a slit trench that had been dug out of the cliff top about ten feet from the edge and facing a very wild and angry sea. The weather was very cold with about two feet of snow on the ground.

'At one end of the slit trench, a couple of corrugated iron sheets afforded the only shelter. We were equipped with old P14 rifles left over from the First World War. So this was Britain's first line of defence against the Kraut invasion! I shudder to think of the outcome if Hitler had decided to invade. I'm pretty sure that the whole regiment would have broken the four-minute mile and that Hitler's army would have slipped up on the excrement that was left behind. Seriously though, the position was pretty hopeless, bearing in mind that we were largely untrained, untried and under-equipped.'

Despite the bitter cold, the sergeant ordered no fires should be lit. "You must be on the alert at all times," he told us. "Dinner is at 1pm and will be brought to you." I had the feeling that come one o'clock we would all be frozen stiff. After the sergeant had gone, we proceeded to collect some dry bracken and packed it in the trench to try and generate a little heat.

'The cold had really eaten into our bones. So on this particular night we decided to light a fire in an old oil drum. The bracken burned fiercely and gave out a good heat. We had lifted some spuds from a nearby field and proceeded to bake them in the fire. It was about 5am and not yet daylight – the flames and sparks were leaping into the early morning sky. Suddenly, we heard the drone of an aeroplane – quite low. We thought it was one of ours – Coastal Command – until he let one go. He had apparently spotted the flames, had one bomb left and thought it a good place to deposit same.

'Luckily for us, it went wide and landed in an adjacent field. However, the blast had blown us the full length of the trench and extinguished the fire in the process. When dawn arrived, we saw the crater some 50 yards away with two or three dead sheep lying nearby. It certainly warmed us up for the day and put a stop to the fires.'

On May 9, A Company moved from Larpool Hall, Whitby, to billets in Runswick Bay, Staithes and Skinningrove. B Company was transferred

from Robin Hood's Bay to Larpool Hall, and C Company moved to Whitby. D Company left Hayburn Wyke to base itself at Uppang and Sandsend. Near Whitby on June 4, a German plane crashed, killing three crew.

As the month ended, so did the battalion's long, hard stint along the rugged coast. After being relieved by the 7th South Staffs, they were transferred some 20 miles north east to Darlington, County Durham, with headquarters at The Highland Laddie Inn, Haughton le Skerne. Here in July, intensive training started in movement by motor transport and making swift contact with the enemy.

But at the beginning of August, the battalion again found itself stationed on the coast, moving back north of its previous positions to the Redcar district, with headquarters at Kirkleatham Hall. On the 1st, a training plane made a forced landing on B Company's area and on the 19th, a German bomb broke 59 windows in their billets. From August 23 to 25, the battalion took part in an exercise to test co-operation between infantry and artillery in defence of Royal Artillery barracks and batteries. Coastal defences were strengthened.

September started with a mock attack by Commandos on the battalion headquarters. They penetrated the grounds, but could not get into the buildings. 'Several weak spots were discovered,' the war diary noted. On the fourth, two sea mines exploded on rocks near Redcar Pier, breaking many windows in the locality.

Five days later, the battalion took part in endurance tests and field firing exercises, with B Company the winner. 'All ranks had a chance to learn the firepower of a company and the sound that various weapons and projectiles make. The exercises were most realistic – at times, almost too realistic,' said the war diary.

This note of apprehension had a grim echo on September 15, when Private Sydney Taylor of A Company was killed as he stepped on an anti-tank mine while out on a working party. October opened with the battalion undergoing anti-invasion exercises and concentrating on beach defence – D Company was despatched to guard Grangetown Aerodrome, near Middlesbrough. Back in Redcar, a German bomber struck on the 21st, causing civilian casualties.

But even as the 7th Loyals was slowly being moulded into an infantry unit – one that, even at this early stage, showed much promise in its fighting skills – a different destiny was being decided for it.

On October 29, 1941, orders came through that the battalion was to be converted to a mobile light anti-aircraft regiment of the Royal Artillery.

As the change in role was being finalised, infantry training continued. At the beginning of November, sea mines again brought drama. Two exploded on the beaches near the battalion's base and several others had

to be immobilised by the Royal Navy. On November 5, a 1,000lb German bomb hit Dorman and Long's steelworks at Coatham, Redcar, but failed to explode. Three days later, D Company took part in exercises with the Home Guard between Halifax and Huddersfield, playing the role of invading German parachutists.

3. FROM INFANTRY TO GUNNERS

November to December 1941

'I know you will live up to your old motto, Loyaute M'Oblige. You will soon be holding more than your own as a highly-efficient regiment of the Royal Artillery'

BUT the new challenge that faced the 7th Loyals was about to begin. On November 13, 1941, the men of the battalion were called together in the New Pavilion, Redcar, to be addressed by the divisional commander, Major-General P J Shears. He wished them good luck in their new role as gunners, saying it was 'a great honour' to have been selected for it.

Two days later, on November 15, 1941, the battalion was officially converted to an artillery unit. But its proud link with The Loyal Regiment was enshrined in its new title. It became the 92nd (Loyals) Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, RA.

The 7th Loyals was one of 32 battalions from British infantry regiments which were switched to mobile LAA duties in the winter of 1941 to meet a shortage of such units in the ever-expanding Army. As the German blitzkrieg in Poland and France had shown so dramatically, air power was now one of the decisive factors in war. It was vital that any army going into battle had the means to protect itself against enemy planes – and that meant creating highly mobile anti-aircraft units which could deploy at a moment's notice to combat any threat from the skies.

Each LAA regiment consisted of a headquarters (RHQ) and three batteries. Each battery was divided into three troops, each of six guns. The total of officers and men was about 800, around the same strength as an infantry battalion.

LAA regiments were equipped with 40mm Bofors Guns, the classic light anti-aircraft weapon of the Second World War and after, and with 20mm Oerlikon Guns and Polsten Guns. The Bofors was designed for use against relatively low-level raiders, such as fighters and dive-bombers. Recoil-operated with a sliding breech block, it fired its two-pounder shells at the rate of 120 per minute. These were fed into the auto-loading unit from clips or 'chargers' holding four shells each, which were

continuously supplied by the gunners.

Shells had a muzzle velocity of 2,700 feet per second and were deadly against aircraft up to about 5,000ft, although they in fact went many times higher. Filled with TNT, they were fused to explode on impact and to self-destruct through a tracer-igniter once they had passed their effective range. This was to prevent live shells which missed enemy aircraft falling to earth and exploding on friendly soil.

Because the Bofors – originally developed by the Swedish armaments firm of the same name – was such a successful gun, many variants were built for different situations and it was continuously developed and improved during the war.

Initially, LAA regiments used towed versions, but self-propelled models – with the gun set on the back of a Morris CB9 Commercial lorry chassis – were later built for even greater mobility and battle-readiness.

Another mobile version, not used by LAA regiments, had a Bofors mounted on a Crusader light tank chassis. While the designated task of mobile LAA units was providing defence against enemy planes, guns were used extensively against ground targets later in the war, when the Bofors proved a devastating weapon for bombarding infantry positions.

Loaded with solid shot, they were also given an anti-tank role. But the 40mm shells were ineffective against heavy German armour – and, as some veterans ruefully recall, attacking tanks with Bofors fire could be a positive hazard because it more often than not earned a hot reprisal from the undamaged panzers.

These then, were the weapons with which the newly-formed 92nd had to familiarise itself and become expert in their use. The regiment's three batteries were designated 317 (A, B, C Troops), 318 (D, E, F Troops) and 319 (G, H, I Troops). Three of the 7th's rifle companies were simply converted into batteries, with the men of the remaining rifle company being distributed among the three.

Battery commanders were Majors N H Joynson, M S Gornall and P Crane. Captain Godden took over as adjutant. Later, Major Crane noted – not without a hint of pride – that in each of the batteries, two-thirds of the men who served the guns were from 7th Loyals, and most were from the Lancashire area. Regiment members brought in after conversion were largely drivers and tradesmen.

The batteries were initially billeted at Kirkleatham Hall, Redcar (with RHQ), at the town's racecourse and at a local convalescent home. On the day conversion took place, a German Junkers 88 (JU 88) flying below 500ft dropped two bombs which ricocheted 300yards and 50ft high, bursting on Dorman and Long's. Several civilians were killed and injured and the steelworks was extensively damaged. A Bofors detachment tried to down the raider, but no hits were reported.

Meanwhile, coastal patrols continued. On November 14, a mine was washed up in the regiment's sector and rendered harmless. The following day in the same area came a grimmer find – the body of an RAF pilot who had been based at Leuchars in Scotland was recovered from the sea. As work started on acquainting the men of the 92nd with their new equipment, intelligence tests were carried out and revealed an 'exceptionally high' aptitude for gunnery among the men.

This was especially the case for Leo McCarthy (the author's father), who had been called up with the original intake of Merseyside men when the 7th Battalion was formed in 1940. Up to the outbreak of war, Leo had been a fitter's labourer at the Cammell Laird shipyard in Birkenhead and had worked on building the aircraft carrier Ark Royal, which was launched in 1937.

One of his tasks at Laird's, alongside his father-in-law Daniel Weaver, was to help install the ship's anti-aircraft guns – which were 40mm Bofors. So when as a new artilleryman he was once more faced with this weapon, it was reassuringly familiar and he had more idea than most how it worked.

Soon, it was time for the regiment fully to take up its fresh challenge. In a letter, Brigadier John Wells CMG DSO, Colonel of The Loyal Regiment, told the CO: 'I am pleased and proud at all I saw and heard of the 7th Battalion when I saw them recently. What the regiment loses by your conversion, your new corps will gain. The spirit in which you are accepting this change is the real proof that you are true Loyals.

'Although you are no longer part of the The Loyal Regiment, you can – and I know you will – live up to your old motto, Loyaute M'Oblige. I have every confidence that you will soon be holding more than your own as a highly-efficient regiment of the Royal Artillery. Thank you for all you have done for the regiment. Good luck to you all, officers and men. I shall always be glad to hear of you.'

Another letter to the CO, from Brigadier J H Jenson MC TD, was equally warm. 'I feel I cannot let you leave the brigade without expressing to you and to all the ranks under your command my grateful thanks for your loyal co-operation during our short connection and my sincere regret that it should be necessary to sever that connection. I have been impressed by the fact that all ranks in your unit are imbued with that keenness and determination to become efficient in the job which will stand them in good stead in their new role. I hope they will enjoy their work and I feel sure that, with the spirit they have in the unit, they will be a credit to themselves, to you, and to their country.'

So on November 26, 1941, after 16 months as infantry, the former 7th Loyals bade farewell to the windswept Yorkshire coast and travelled back across the country to start their new role as artillerymen. Preliminary

training for 317 and 319 started at Aberystwyth in mid-Wales and for 318 at Saighton Camp, outside Chester.

4. AIR DEFENCE OF GREAT BRITAIN

December 1941 to March 1943

'Training has been constant, with many lessons learned. We are now equipped with all our guns and have had some grand engagements.'

BARELY a month later, the newly-formed regiment was thrust into an operational role. Just after Christmas, RHQ moved to Stanmore, north-west London, and 317 and 319 deployed to provide ADGB (Air Defence of Great Britain) anti-aircraft cover from sites at Stanmore and Luton. Meanwhile, 318 was detached to start training for the task that would be the hallmark of the whole regiment – mobility. The new gunners had to become expert in moving quickly and efficiently in preparation for their possibly vital role on the battlefield.

New Year's Day 1942 saw the 92nd on the move to Calverton, Nottingham, with some units going further east for gunnery training at the famous anti-aircraft school at Stiffkey on the Norfolk coast – 'a desolate, lonely place with one little pub that was full if it had four people in it,' Corporal Prince recalled. On January 10, there was drama at Calverton when a German plane dropped four bombs on the regiment's area. Two failed to explode and no one was hurt.

Just over a fortnight later, the 92nd was on the road again, transferring to Frogmore Hall, a large redbrick mansion set in extensive wooded grounds near Watton-at-Stone, Hertfordshire. While 317 and 319 moved into the new base, 318 went to Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, to take over protection of installations including waterworks at Kempton, Hampton and Uxbridge. The regiment now came under the command of 3rd British Infantry Division 'the 'Iron Division' – to which it would be attached until the end of the war, and to whose fame it was destined to contribute.

Throughout February, while 318 stayed at Walton, 317 and 319 undertook mobile training. By the end of a cold, snowy month, the regiment's new vehicles were starting to arrive. On March 16, there was an air raid alert at Walton, but the raiders passed over without unleashing any bombs.

Four days later, the whole regiment concentrated in Hertfordshire, moving into tents at Hitchwood South Camp, near Hitchin, to start a month's mobile training in conjunction with 3rd Division. RHQ and 319 personnel lined the route during an inspection of the division by the King.

On April 20, the regiment marched back to Frogmore Hall. Heavy showers during the early part of the month affected training, with vehicles becoming bogged down, but the latter part of April saw exceptionally warm and fine weather. Frogmore Hall was the 92nd's base for most of the summer as the men continually trained and practised, becoming ever more skilful in the techniques of gunnery.

Tragically, two men died there in motor accidents. On May 20, 1942, Gunner George Dansey was killed by a vehicle being driven by an officer under instruction. On June 19, Gunner Frederick Wilson died after being hit by a lorry as it drove around the winding inner road of the estate.

On July 24, the regiment was on the move once more. Its destination was Ryde, Isle of Wight, where it linked up with other units of 3rd Division, including 8 Infantry Brigade and Royal Marines. An 'exhilarating' exercise with the Commandos followed, plus a two-day assault course at Ashey Down. The non-swimmers among the 92nd's men were taught to swim. By August 17, the regiment was concentrated back across the Solent at Chandler's Ford, Southampton, for the start of a four-day exercise in Kent and Sussex. It then went to Clacton-on-Sea, Essex, for a week's firing practice.

'We were billeted in a deserted holiday camp and slept four men to a chalet,' Michael Cullen recalled. 'This place was a dump, the food only fit for the swill bin. Still, I suppose we should have been thankful, considering the amount of ships we had lost to the U-boat packs.' From Clacton, the regiment moved on September 8 to Sandbanks, Bournemouth – where the guns were deployed to guard the narrow entrance to Poole Harbour.

Training continued into October. On the 12th, two Focke–Wulf 190 (FW 190) fighters soared over a ferry near the guns of 317, one of the raiders firing its cannon. The battery was later in action against enemy aircraft in the Brighton area.

Encounters with German raiders along the South Coast were usually fleeting, with barely time to aim and fire the Bofors before the plane had passed out of range. 'They used to come in very low,' recalled George Baker, a young Liverpudlian who joined the regiment – where his brother Billy was already serving – in the autumn of 1942. 'When they got near the coast, they would sweep up and in, either aiming at targets or just giving harassing fire.'

At the beginning of November, the 92nd started a week of hardening exercises, manhandling guns across rivers and quarries, followed by anti-tank practice and anti-aircraft practice against targets towed by naval launch. 'Training has been constant, with many lessons learned, especially in regard to the anti-tank role of 40mm equipment,' wrote the CO, Colonel Hollwey.

Early in December, the regiment moved across to Kent, stationed at Ashford and Folkestone – where 317 engaged two Messerschmitt 109s (ME 109) and 318 fired against two FW 190s. On the 11th, an FW 190 was engaged by an RAF Typhoon fighter in front of 318's guns, which were unable to fire for fear of hitting the British plane.

Eleven days later, a Dornier 127 (DO 127) was engaged by 317, but managed to drop its bomb load on Ashford. On December 30, four FW 190s were engaged at Camber. This incident is almost certainly the one recorded by Michael Cullen in his memoirs. He recalled how he and his fellow gunners of E Troop, 318, were billeted in the clubhouse on the local golf course – 'no more than a hut, really' – and their Bofors was dug into a gunsite overlooking Camber Sands.

'The gunsites were visited every day by a Women's Voluntary Service mobile canteen, managed by two well-educated, elderly ladies,' he wrote. 'We would follow their progress each morning, eagerly awaiting their arrival, for our ever-welcome morning cuppa! We had become a little lethargic since arriving there, but we were soon to be aroused from our doziness.

'The canteen, this particular morning, had stopped in its usual place at the foot of the hill. We had left the gun in the hands of the cook and one of the ammo numbers, while we partook of our morning cuppa. We were suddenly deafened by the roar of strange aero engines, and the rat-tat-tat of cannon fire. On looking up, we could see the black cross of the Luftwaffe, spitting tracer cannon at the trucks in the village.

'The planes were FW 190s. After recovering from the shock and urged on by the tea ladies, we raced back up the hill. The two men on the gun appeared to be paralysed. Under the auspices of Sergeant Jack Smith, we turned the gun in the direction of the planes, which had disappeared over the village.

'We had secretly hoped that they had gone home – but no such luck. They returned, having spotted us, and dived down with the sun behind them and in our eyes, spitting tracer shells each side of the gunpit. At the sight of these three planes intent on ending our days, I was prompted to say three Hail Marys and one Our Father, but unfortunately there wasn't time – they had by now crossed over Camber Sands and were heading out to sea.

'We opened fire at last, and let go about 12 rounds, and managed to hit one plane in the rudder. We saw some bits fly off. After we had stopped shaking, we began to feel sorry for the pilot, knowing that in all probability, he would not make it back home. The whole incident had only taken about three minutes – we knew then why we had been dubbed the "Hit and Run Raiders." Needless to say, there were several pairs of cellular underpants hanging on the clothes line that night.'

The following day, New Year's Eve, the CO wrote: 'It is the end of a very satisfactory month for the regiment. We are now equipped with all our guns and have had some grand engagements.'

Although the regiment gained much practical anti-aircraft experience by being attached to static and semi-static ADGB batteries along the South Coast, it also served to highlight the different emphasis between the two types of unit. For example, divisional AA troops such as the 92nd could not possibly be equipped with predictors for tracing enemy aircraft, because they were so heavy they needed four men to lift them into position.

On the other hand, mobility was the key function in the life of the regiment and everything was geared towards it. Pride of place in the 92nd always went to the efficiency and effectiveness of the guns and the supply of ammunition, petrol, water, food, small arms, wireless and field telephones always had top priority in using up essential space. The balance between these functions was delicate – but was to prove its effectiveness in battle.

The year of 1943 opened with more enemy raids. On January 4, a German plane dropped a stick of bombs near a 318 detachment at Winchelsea, causing no casualties. By the 13th, the regiment was on the move again, going back to Clacton for ten days' firing practice.

It returned at the beginning of February to Seaford, Newhaven and Brighton, where one gun was stationed in front of the famous Grand Hotel. 'Brighton itself was like a military garrison – mostly Canadians,' Michael Cullen recalled. 'The seafront was just a mass of barbed wire and tank traps. Our guns were sited along the front in case of any sudden attacks from the air.'

On the 9th, a DO 127 was engaged, but got away. Next day, however, came a significant milestone in the 92nd's history – the regiment achieved its first Category One, a confirmed kill of an enemy plane. The honour fell to G Troop of 319 Battery, which shot down a DO 127 over the sea at Newhaven with a five-second burst of fire. On the 22nd, the batteries returned to Folkestone and Aldington.

5. COUNTDOWN TO OVERLORD

March 1943 to June 1944

'We knew we were to be part of the invasion – we just didn't know where or when. But the feeling of the men was for getting on with the job.'

THE demonstration of the 92nd's growing skill was timely. For now a

momentous undertaking was at hand. Early in 1943, 3rd Division was ordered to start training for the invasion of Sicily, only to see the assignment switched – mainly for political reasons – to a Canadian division.

But soon after, 3rd Division was given the task that would test its skill and courage to the limit and assure its place in history. It was to be one of only two British divisions which would spearhead the D-Day assault in Operation Overlord, the invasion of Normandy.

Being chosen to lead the liberation of Europe was a tribute to the military prowess of the ‘Iron Division’, whose proud history stretched back to the Napoleonic Wars, and which Montgomery had commanded during the fighting retreat to Dunkirk in 1940.

But it was also an awesome responsibility. Everything depended on troops getting ashore and establishing a beachhead in strength before the Germans could recover from the initial shock and hurl them back into the sea. If the Allies failed to gain a foothold in Europe, it would be catastrophic for the whole course of the war.

So in the early spring of 1943, all units of 3rd Division were ordered to concentrate in the west of Scotland to start the intensive programme of training that would make them ready for their crucial mission.

Between March 12 and 14, amid exceptionally fine weather, 92nd LAA moved north in convoy from Kent, staging at Stevenage and Doncaster. Its destination was the small towns of Castle Douglas and Dalbeattie, north of the Solway Firth in Kircudbrightshire. Here, amid the hills, woods, rivers and lochs of the beautiful Southern Uplands of Scotland, the men started honing themselves and their equipment to a peak of fighting fitness.

‘Castle Douglas seemed a peaceful haven after the mayhem of the Liverpool Blitz,’ wrote Michael Cullen. ‘It was also a pleasant surprise to find that we had a bed at last. The camp consisted of a number of Nissen huts, one troop to each hut. Our gun crew were sergeant – Jack Smith. Layer for line – myself. Layer for elevation – Harry Woodall. Two ammo numbers – Bob Hadris and Ginger Smith, “Smithy.” Also Cecil Willis, a wee lance bombardier who strutted about like a hen with bunions. He also, at times, let off a rather peculiar odour. I could only put this down to the fact that we had, of late, had quite a large amount of Spam and American Navy beans in our diet. I think the answer was blowing in the wind.

‘The following two months were taken up mostly with gun drill and lectures on aircraft recognition, a subject I took a great deal of interest in. It was, of course, a sitting-down job that gave the foot blisters a chance to heal! The food had gone off a bit and they had developed the bad habit of putting curry powder in the stew, and even in the rice pudding – I think it

had been left over from the time of the British Raj in India! This had given us a constant attack of the “trots!” This was rather inconvenient as our toilets consisted of a slit trench dug into the ground, with a rope stretched across. To vacate the bowels, one had to stoop over the trench and hang on to the rope for dear life!

‘Another item of food that seemed to be rather plentiful was a Japanese tinned salmon called Acky Bono – God knows where they had got this from, but when the tins had been opened, the smell was enough to send all the moggies in the town crazy to embark for foreign parts. In hindsight, I wondered if it was some preconceived plan the Nips had to exterminate as many Britons as possible before entering the war.’

Initial invasion exercises started even further north into Scotland, with combined operations at Rothesay on the Isle of Bute. Then at the end of March, 318 moved to Inverary, Argyllshire – 40 miles north west of Glasgow – for a fortnight of training with 8 Infantry Brigade and naval units. By day and night on the waters of Loch Fyne, the 92nd practised beach landing, disembarking guns and supply vehicles from landing craft and deploying them to their allotted area.

Meanwhile, a series of week-long trips, made by each battery in turn, started to 9 LAA Practice Camp at Cark in Cartmel, near Grange over Sands on the edge of the Lake District, overlooking Morecambe Bay. First to go was 319, followed by 317 and 318.

At Cark, Michael Cullen recalled, the guns would be pointed out to sea. ‘A plane would fly across pulling a sock or a drogue, as they called it. We would then take a sighting under the directions of the commanding officer. As it was a moving target, it was quite difficult to hit. We did, of course have to aim at the drogue, and not the plane – a fact that one or two of the crews had failed to digest. As you can guess, there were one or two near-misses – at one point, the pilot had refused to take off. Who could blame him – I think he deserved the VC!’

As well as technical training, the regiment concentrated on getting the men physically fit for the task ahead. As May opened, the emphasis was on endurance work, including day-long hill walking and river crossing. Throughout May and into June, there were full divisional exercises, during which tracer fire from a Bofors was used to indicate the width of an infantry advance, a technique that later came into its own on the battlefield. There was also practice on the anti-tank range at Cummertrees near Annan, wireless exercises, night deployment and digging-in practice.

For the gun crews, digging-in was vital. When a Bofors was deployed, a pit was excavated for it to give as much protection as possible from counter-battery fire and marauding aircraft. However, some of the 92nd’s more muscular members found their small infantry spades were not up to

the job of digging a gun pit in anything like a reasonable time – and nicknamed the spades ‘Fifth Column Shovels.’ After digging trials, Captain Robert Tennant Reid, CO of F Troop, agreed – and told his men they could have heavy-duty navy shovels instead.

On June 11, it was the turn of 317 to journey north to Inverary, where it joined 185 Infantry Brigade for combined operations training. Meanwhile, to keep it on its toes and test its mobility, the rest of the regiment was suddenly ordered south to Kent for a month of ADGB duties.

Travelling in convoy via Catterick, Doncaster and Stevenage, it reached its new locations on June 17. Guns were deployed at Birchington, Finglesham, Lympne RAF aerodrome, Richborough, Cheriton and Hawkinge aerodrome. Nine days later, 317 rejoined the regiment, deploying at Minster, Snowdown Colliery and Sandwich. On July 9, the battery’s guns opened fire on a DO 127 raider. Five days later, the regiment was ordered back to Scotland, arriving there on July 19.

By now, new Mark V self-propelled Bofors Guns had been delivered, and one troop in each battery started training with them. In August, further exercises were held with 185 Brigade and there were two complete divisional exercises, lasting into September. Trips to Cark for firing practice resumed and there was anti-tank training at Craginair, south of Castle Douglas. On 21st September, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Loder-Symonds assumed command of the 92nd when Lieutenant-Colonel Hollway was posted to take over 124 LAA.

Throughout October training went on, with regimental deployment exercises, wire-cutting and night attack by patrols. In November, there was an interlude of entertainment and recreation in the form of inter-regiment boxing and rugby matches, plus a visit by the band of The Loyal Regiment. At the end of the month, the final phase of 3rd Division’s assault training started when units moved north to the area around Nairn and Inverness to link up with Naval Task Force S, which was to carry the division to the Normandy beaches.

On November 28, 318 journeyed to Brackla airfield near Nairn, a few miles from Inverness, spending the next two months camped there while taking part in a series of full-scale invasion exercises along the Moray Firth between Chanonry Point and Fort George. Here, often amid appalling weather, the men refined their loading and assault techniques in tank landing craft.

‘The Highlands of Scotland were a sight we had only seen on picture postcards,’ said Michael Cullen. ‘Although winter was setting in, the beauty of this place really was something to us city lads. We arrived at Inverness and pitched camp in a wood. The weather was pretty damp and consisted of a perpetual drizzle they called Scotch mist. We asked one of

the locals if it ever stopped raining. “Well, laddie,” he answered, “Can you see those hills over yonder? Well, when you can see them, you can be sure it’s going to rain and when you can’t see them, it’s pissing down!” (Please excuse the descriptive language).

‘The camp was a quagmire of mud, but that didn’t stop the Major from the bullshit, we still had to Blanco our webbing! I’m pretty sure the Tory brasshats had shares in the Blanco and Brasso factories! Despite the weather, we continued loading and unloading trucks, setting up and dismantling the gun and they timed us to the clock until we had become proficient and could unhitch and jack up the gun in the space of one minute. We were like drowned rats at the end of each day! Loch Ness was a huge expanse of water, but the only monsters we saw were wearing three stripes!

‘After a month of this, it was back to base at Castle Douglas. On the way back, we witnessed a nasty accident. One of the three Hurricanes that had been practising the dive-bombing of our convoy had failed to notice the power lines that stretched across the road, and had gone through the overhead wires. There was a terrific blue flash and the plane dived into the ground. It had corkscrewed into an adjacent field.

‘The whole convoy had stopped at this point and we had all gone across to offer assistance, but sadly the pilot was beyond any help. This had brought home to us all the stupidity of all this, and how easy it was to depart this life. This accident had highlighted our resolve to get this lot over as soon as possible, and get back home in one piece, if possible. It was only a “barmstick” who wanted to die for his country – we wanted to live for ours.’

As the historic year of 1944 opened, the rest of the regiment was training apace, especially with vehicle waterproofing, which was vital to prevent engines becoming stalled in the surf of the invasion beaches. The 92nd REME workshop smothered vulnerable parts of the motors in a greasy paste and attached breather tubes to be used for air intakes and long pipes to take the exhaust gases clear of the water. In one waterproofing trial on January 15, a convoy drove into the River Dee near New Galloway, north of Castle Douglas. Three-tonner lorries fared well, but the strong current submerged 15cwt trucks and jeeps.

Fast-flowing water was not the only hazard. Although the SP Bofors were strong and solidly-based, they could become bogged down, especially in the swamplier parts of the Scottish countryside. On these occasions, their built-in winches proved very useful, pulling the gun free by fastening the winch cable to trees or to other vehicles and slowly winding it in. Even so, it could sometimes be a close-run thing.

‘One of our guns once became so deeply swamped in a bog that it took two others as well as its own winch to drag it to hard ground,’ recalled

John (Jack) Prior, who as a young lieutenant joined 317 in December 1943, transferring to the 92nd after service with ADGB units on the hazardous Dover Command.

‘It had sunk to its axles and we seriously wondered if we would lose it altogether. I could almost hear the court of inquiry being turned into a court martial, with yours truly committed to repaying the loss from his pay – spread over several hundred years!’

On January 17, 317 moved up to Brackla for its two months of intensive invasion exercises with Task Force S and the rest of 3rd Division. The south shores of the Moray Firth were substituted for the Normandy beaches as, amid swirling snowstorms, they practised assault landings in Burghead Bay. During one of these exercises, tragedy struck. A brigadier, waiting on the dunes to observe the landings, was hit and killed by a tank which had failed to spot him as it crested the rise.

Early in March, 317 travelled further north to Tain on the Dornoch Firth, where destroyers and a cruiser demonstrated a naval artillery bombardment on the headland of Tarbat Ness. This dramatically showed the men the weight of firepower that would be supporting them during the Normandy landings and gave them some idea of the hellish noise of it all. On the 27th, the battery moved south again to concentrate at Munloch near Inverness for further exercises, which took the men into the hills around Culloden.

On January 26, the CO of the 92nd, Lieutenant-Colonel Loder-Symonds, left to take over as artillery commander of British 1st Airborne Division. He was in charge of artillery during Operation Market Garden at Arnhem in September 1944. Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Bazeley DSO RA assumed command. February started for 318, now back from Brackla, with anti-tank training at Cummertrees.

The regiment practised telephone silence, communicating by radio only. On the 6th, a detachment left for a 3rd Division conference at Langholm, north of Carlisle, to be addressed by Montgomery, who was Commander-in-Chief of 21st Army Group and the land commander for Overlord. The rest of the month – amid snow – saw telephone silence, casualty evacuation and mine practice, assault training, lectures and further waterproofing trials. A new troop of eight 20mm guns was attached to each battery.

Throughout March, there were further lectures, instructional films and organised recreational training, including forced marching competitions. RHQ personnel practised on Craignair range with Sten guns and Piat anti-tank weapons. But, as always, the main thrust of training was on deploying the guns for swift action. ‘Above all, the guns had to be at instant readiness in case of sudden enemy aircraft attack,’ recalled Jack Prior, who later became Intelligence Officer of the 92nd.

‘This was emphasised and practised ad nauseam, but the work paid off when we reached Normandy and I cannot recall any gun getting stuck or caught on the hop by a 350mph ME 109 or FW 190. Other specialised training included taking cover on the gun, nearby, or under other shelter against shelling and mortaring, which were the main fire to be avoided. In fact of course, there was little chance of this, because the shelling was often accompanied by bombing or strafing, for which we had to be prepared and ready for action.

‘Knowledge of the gun mechanism had been gathered years before and we had been handling the guns until it had become second nature. But we had to ensure that in doing our own specified jobs we did not get in each other’s way in a very confined space, albeit in the open air.’

As winter slowly gave way to spring, the men of 92nd LAA, along with the rest of 3rd Division, were reaching a peak of fighting fitness and perfecting their Overlord tasks. Now enthusiasm began to be tinged with impatience. ‘We knew we were to be part of the invasion,’ said George Baker. ‘We just didn’t know where or when. The men were all for getting on with the job. The feeling was, “Why don’t we go and get it over with?”’

Another young 92nd LAA man, Len Harvey – a Cockney in a regiment overwhelmingly consisting of ‘Scousers’ from Merseyside – said: ‘I reckon by 1943 we were the fittest men in the whole of the British Army with the training that we’d had. We were ready. The adrenaline was high and the feeling was, “Let’s get on with it and get it over with. The war won and get back home” – that was the feeling.’

But as April opened, the years of waiting were finally drawing to a close. From all parts of Britain, hundreds of thousands of soldiers and gigantic quantities of tanks, guns and equipment began streaming south by road and rail to assembly areas ready for the great cross-Channel operation. On April 5, 1944, 92nd LAA started its own journey, with RHQ and 318 in the vanguard.

After leaving Castle Douglas, 318 stopped overnight at Preston – bivouacking in the stand at Preston North End FC, Deepdale, a stone’s throw from Fulwood Barracks – and at Stevenage, Hertfordshire. Finally, on the 8th, the battery reached Camp A4 south of Horndean, near Portsmouth, one of thousands of vast tented towns that had sprung up in the Hampshire countryside to accommodate the invasion forces. 317, still in the Inverness area, travelled via Carlisle, Doncaster and Lutterworth to reach Horndean on April 11. 319 did not start its journey until the 20th, transferring from Castle Douglas via Preston, Wellington and Cirencester to a holding camp at Tournay Barracks, Aldershot.

The 92nd was to be split into four detachments for the invasion. The major task fell to F Troop of 318 Battery, which – with a signals section –

would be the only unit of the regiment to land on D-Day itself, coming ashore on Queen Red sector of Sword Beach. Its assignment was right at the sharp end of Overlord – protecting the vital bridges across the Caen Canal near Benouville and the River Orne near Ranville on the eastern flank of the invasion area.

At that time, the bridges were known only by their codenames of Rugger and Cricket, but would go down in history as Pegasus Bridge and Horsa Bridge.

On D plus 1, D and E Troops of 318 would land with RHQ to reinforce F Troop. At the same time, a marching party of 318 men would land separately and make its way to the bridges. On D plus 6, 317 would make its crossing to France, followed by 319 on D plus 21.

With these schedules in mind, RHQ and D and E Troops left Portsmouth at the end of April for Aldershot, from where they would travel to their disembarkation point in East London. F Troop, under the command of Captain Reid, stayed at Horndean, with 317 based nearby. In the following days, unit censorship was imposed and the regiment's operational codes for Overlord were handed out.

For the men sealed in the camps, there was little else to do but play endless games of cards, bingo and pitch and toss, to re-check equipment – and to wait. Cut off from the outside world, the perimeter patrolled by Military Police, they were given small pre-printed cards to send to their relatives, telling them little else but that they were in good health. As the build-up to D-Day intensified, F Troop and its vehicles were moved out of the camp for three days while other units of the assault forces were given their briefings. The nearby roadside became the gunners' temporary home and they bedded down each night under their SP Bofors and lorries. There were strict orders not to speak to civilians.

During this lull, waterproofing of vehicles was carried out and the soldiers each received an inflatable lifebelt, 24-hour ration packs and self-heating soup and cocoa. French francs were issued, along with a booklet telling the soldiers about France and the French. Bright yellow pennants were also distributed, which were to be used to identify themselves to other troops and planes when in battle. All personal letters and papers were ordered to be burned. Some men erased their home addresses from their Army paybooks, in case of capture by the Germans.

Finally, the soldiers of F Troop were transferred back inside the camp and fully briefed on their mission. Codenames were still being used for specific locations and enemy strongpoints, but the 92nd's objective was clear – they must get to the bridges. Between May 1 and May 5, the battle-ready troop and the rest of 3rd Division took part in Exercise Fabius, a final large-scale rehearsal for Overlord. All along the South Coast, the invasion forces were assigned to beaches corresponding to

those they would attack in Normandy. Loaded on to landing craft, the division disembarked near Littlehampton, with the objective of 'capturing' the town of Arundel – unknown to most of the soldiers, the equivalent to Caen in Normandy, the D-Day target for the Iron Division.

This was one of several occasions when the men, still now knowing when D-Day would be, believed the operation was going ahead for real. 'We thought, "This is it – we must be going,"' George Baker recalled. 'We would get into the landing craft, go so far out into the Channel, then come back again. You had to always be on the alert.' Len Harvey remembered a sailor guiding them on to the landing craft, saying: 'Come on boys, this is the real thing.' The men laughed – they had heard that one before.

During Exercise Fabius, 317 was transferred from Horndean to Camp 60 at Brookwood near Aldershot.

On Saturday May 13, at Denmead outside Portsmouth, 50 men of 92nd LAA paraded for a visit to 3rd Division by the Supreme Commander, General Dwight Eisenhower. He moved among the troops, speaking to several, then addressed them all on their forthcoming mission – promising that once they had crossed the Rhine, he would stand them a party. 'It was good to see your division looking so fit and in such good spirits,' Eisenhower later wrote to the divisional commander, Major-General Tom Rennie.

In the same village on the 22nd, the men of F Troop and others from the regiment were called to join another parade. While they stood waiting rigidly at attention, they were amazed to see sergeants coming around and frantically giving each man's boots a final polish with a duster. Soon after, the reason for the extra-special treatment became clear. The uniformed figure making the inspection was the King.

But now, with D-Day fixed for June 5, all sections of the great assault army began dispersing to final assembly areas. From Aldershot, D and E Troops of 318 and RHQ transferred to Camp T7 at Wanstead Flats, an open area of East London, where they carried out final waterproofing trials and prepared vehicles and guns for embarkation. On June 3, at Tilbury, the marching party of two officers and 58 men from 318 went aboard tank landing ship 3203, which would carry them to Normandy.

At the same time, D and E Troops and their equipment, plus RHQ, were loaded aboard the liberty ship *Sambut* at Victoria Dock on the Thames and steamed to Southend. From there, they were due to leave in convoy for Normandy on D-Day, landing on June 7 to reinforce F Troop at the bridges.

At 9am on June 3, the waiting also finally ended for F Troop. Carefully threading their way through the mass of troops and equipment crowding the harbour at Gilkicker, Gosport, near Portsmouth, the six guns, accompanied by lorries and signallers, reached the Stokes Bay Hards

berthing area. By 9.30pm that evening, they had boarded two tank landing craft, fleet numbers 405 and 408 – three guns to each vessel.

Clutching their myriad personal equipment – including rifle and pack, ‘inspiring’ leaflets from Eisenhower and Montgomery, and a supply of vomit bags – the men saw their vehicles safely chained to the decks, then slipped into the spaces in between the mobile guns, trying to get some rest and to clear their minds of growing apprehension.

Once all was secure, the two LCTs moved out of harbour as part of Flotilla 47 to link up with the rest of the gigantic fleet. But, agonisingly, the waiting continued. With summer storms lashing the Channel, Eisenhower was forced to postpone the invasion. Confined in their swaying ships, the troops could only try to quell their seasickness and hope that the misery would soon end.

Time dragged by with painful slowness, testing nerves to the limit. Twenty-four hours passed and still the storms raged, still the soldiers waited. By now, many a man was fervently praying to get to the far shore despite all its dangers – the prospect of facing the shot and shell of the enemy seemed nothing compared with the terrible nausea brought on by the heaving seas.

Then Eisenhower’s meteorological experts told him there would be a temporary improvement in the weather around June 6. Conditions would be far from perfect, but it was the only chance on offer – any further delay could mean Overlord being aborted, with unimaginable consequences. After a final conference with his senior officers near Portsmouth on the evening of June 4, the grim-faced Supreme Commander took his momentous decision: ‘We go.’

As the historic order went out to the task force, the bearded skipper of the 92nd’s lead LCT, number 405, Lieutenant John Francis ‘Jack’ Pointon – a New Zealander known as Kiwi – assembled the gunners for a briefing. He grimly assured them that when they reached the coast of France, he would get them as far up the beach as possible, particularly if the Germans set the sea on fire.

He ended his address by reciting to the men the prayer that Nelson had written before the Battle of Trafalgar: *‘May the Great God whom I worship grant to my country and to the benefit of Europe in general a great and glorious victory! And may no misconduct in anyone tarnish it! And may humanity after victory be the predominant feature in the British fleet. For myself individually, I commit my life to Him who made me – and may His blessing light upon my endeavours for serving my country faithfully. To Him I resign myself and the just cause which is entrusted me to defend. Amen. Amen. Amen.’*

With such stirring sentiments, the men of F Troop set sail at 6pm on the evening of June 5. And this time, there would be no turning back. From

the coves of Cornwall to the Thames estuary, the great grey armada of the invasion fleet got under way. Off the coasts of Hampshire and Dorset, the vessels of Task Force S slipped their moorings and steamed slowly towards their assembly areas below the Isle of Wight.

Then, in the gathering darkness, they turned south for the Normandy beaches.

6. SWORD BEACH AND THE BENOUVILLE BRIDGES

Tuesday, June 6, 1944

‘As we approached the beach, we quickly came under fire from a large gun to the east. The first shell landed on the port side, with the noise as if we had been hit on the underside by a giant hammer.’

ABOARD LCT 405, there was immediate drama. ‘A submarine had been detected and destroyers began racing up and down the convoy dropping depth-charges,’ George Baker recalled. ‘As they exploded, the landing craft almost jumped out of the water with the blast.’

In choppy seas, the massive convoy – in the 3rd Division assault force alone, there were 350 vessels, including 132 tank landing craft – steamed through the short summer night.

On board, apprehension was growing. ‘But the main feeling was that we wanted to get on with it,’ said George. ‘We still didn’t realise what we were going into, but there was no turning back.’

On LCT 408, the crew of Gun F3, despite their desperate seasickness, made a pledge among themselves. When the traditional naval rum issue was handed out during the crossing, none of them drank it. Instead, their NCO Sergeant Fletcher suggested that they should pour each individual portion into one single jug and put the whole lot to one side aboard the gun for safe keeping.

The rum would not be drunk, they vowed, until they could use it to toast the end of the war.

High above the darkened ships, men of the British 6th Airborne Division were also en route for France. At 16 minutes after midnight, a specially-trained reinforced company of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry commanded by Major John Howard landed by glider almost on the Benouville bridges. In a swift and dramatic coup de main attack – easily the most successful operation of D-Day – they captured both crossings from German soldiers who were stunned by the unexpectedness of the assault.

The canal crossing was later renamed Pegasus Bridge in honour of the

winged horse symbol of the Airborne forces and the river crossing was dubbed Horsa Bridge, after the gliders which carried the men to war.

Control of the bridges, and keeping them intact, was vital to the success of the invasion. It meant the Germans could not use them for a flank attack on the seaborne assault troops, while Allied forces could cross them and form a defensive shield east of the Orne. F Troop's D-Day mission was to race to the bridges, deploy its guns around them, and stop enemy planes destroying them or ground forces recapturing them.

As the grey dawn of June 6 broke in the Channel, a sight unfolded that would forever be imprinted on the memories of the men who saw it. More than 6,000 vessels covered the sea from horizon to horizon, the greatest seaborne force ever assembled, carrying 150,000 troops of the spearhead divisions to the beaches of France.

The air shook with a deafening barrage of noise. Waves of bombers and fighters blasted German positions, battleships sent massive shells roaring overhead towards the shore and rocket-firing vessels recoiled violently as they unleashed their deadly cargoes. 'It was incredible,' said George Baker. 'You would never believe how it could have been done – the organisation it must have taken to land so many men and all their vehicles and equipment in such a short time.'

At 7.25am, preceded by amphibious Sherman tanks of the 13th / 18th Hussars, the assault infantry of 3rd Division's 8 Brigade began landing on Queen sector of Sword Beach between the small seaside resort of La Breche d'Hermanville and Lion sur Mer and started fighting their way inland. On their left, towards Ouistreham, a Commando force under Lord Lovat, memorably accompanied by Piper Bill Millin, headed for the Benouville bridges to reinforce Howard's hard-pressed Airborne troops.

Next to land would be 185 Brigade, followed by 9 Brigade – to whose convoy the 92nd's two LCTs were attached. However, the first men ashore from the regiment were the F Troop CO, Captain Reid, and Sergeant Francis Connor, whose job was to reconnoitre suitable positions where the Bofors Guns could be sited around the bridges. They went into the beachhead with the assault infantry, then made their way to Benouville by motorcycle with the Commando force to be ready to receive the main body of the troop.

F Troop's two LCTs started their run-in at 1pm and were due to touch down on the beaches at 1.25pm. But heavy fire from German artillery began landing dangerously close to the convoy, sending up gigantic plumes of water as the shells roared in. The vessels had to turn back while the battleship HMS Warspite went in to reply with its own formidable firepower. On LCT 405, there was a brush with danger as a loose mine floated along the port side, but fortunately passed by without doing any damage.

For Ken Nash, a young driver-operator aboard the landing craft, there came a moment of poignancy amid the drama. By coincidence, his father, a naval officer, was aboard the corvette escorting the convoy. As the run-in started again at 2pm, his father sent across a message of good luck. Soon, Queen Red beach was in sight – smoke rising from it as the German bombardment intensified, with long-range guns from Le Havre, nearly 20 miles away to the east, finding their range among the packed Allied ships.

Jim Holder-Vale, another young driver-operator of 92nd LAA aboard LCT 405, recalled: ‘The first shell landed not too far away on the port side, with the noise as if we had been hit on the underside by a giant hammer. We were told to go to the sides of the LCT, where wooden packing cases had been placed to help us keep afloat in the event of us being hit and having to abandon ship. The next round landed in the sea on the starboard side, and I remember thinking, “We’ve been bracketed!” But we were now close to the beach and had to join our vehicles and start up.’

At 2.30pm, as the landing craft approached Queen Red near the village of Coleville sur Orne (renamed Coleville Montgomery after the war in honour of Field Marshal Montgomery), its First Lieutenant, Arthur Walters, went forward to supervise the lowering of the ramp and the disembarkation of men and vehicles.

He recalled: ‘I can remember during this time seeing bodies floating past and wrecked landing craft drifting some way off the beach – in particular, an LCT of similar mark to my own, with an empty open tank space but with a vacant, flattened, smoking quarterdeck, where there used to be a wheelhouse, wardroom, and bridge superstructure – and no sign of life. The sight of such a familiar craft in such an unfamiliar, almost unrecognisable, state, I found quite uncanny.’

Ahead of the First Lieutenant went an Able Seaman – an Irishman named Breen – wearing a lifebelt and attached to a lifeline, with the unenviable task of checking the submerged beach for hidden shallows and mines before the vehicles began rolling off the LCT. He returned safely and was rewarded with an extra tot of rum.

Jim Holder-Vale recalled: ‘When the ramp came down, the first vehicle off was one with a winch at the rear in case of any mishap and a vehicle needing help, but it drove straight into a large crater in the sand and we had all disembarked by the time it was freed.’

As First Lieutenant Walters watched the guns and men safely disembark, he clutched thoughtfully at the Colt .45 pistol with which he had been issued before setting out. ‘I had orders to wear it and to use it against any unauthorised person who might attempt to board while we were beached,’ he recalled. ‘And it was made clear to me that this included friend or foe.’

At this hour of the invasion, the military planners had anticipated a counter-attack by the Germans being in progress, with the possibility that some British troops might be keen for a quick return to England. Thus came the uncompromising command to the landing craft officers. 'I was relieved at not having to put this order into effect,' said Arthur Walters. 'And at not causing myself any accidental damage, for which these Colt .45s were notorious!'

At 3pm the LCT, despite triggering a small beach mine, pulled back off the sand to return to England and pick up further loads for Normandy. The vessel immediately on its starboard side, LCT 1023, was not so lucky. It suffered a direct hit from a German shell and was badly damaged, but later salvaged.

For the other F Troop men on LCT 408, there was equal drama and hazard. Approaching the beach, the landing craft was diverted at the last minute by a patrolling Navy motor launch – thought to have been the Crocus – possibly because of some unseen hazard, such as a mine.

Then, when it finally started its run-in, a wave carried it on to an overturned landing craft, and the impact pierced the side of the vessel. The LCT became stuck fast on the wreck, with shells starting to land all around it. But, just as its prospects were starting to look bleak, a second wave came along – and, mercifully, pushed it off again. However, the peril was not over. As the landing craft came free, the hole in its side left it in danger of foundering.

The skipper urgently ordered everyone to move to the opposite side of the vessel, and the listing LCT 408 managed to complete its run-in on to the beach. Because of the diversion, the landing craft came ashore at La Breche on Queen Green beach, about a quarter of a mile west of its designated sector. By now, the rapidly rising tide was narrowing the strip of sand on Sword, which was a melee of men, guns, vehicles and wreckage under constant enemy fire.

As the ramp went down, the same sailor who had called out to the men during the pre-invasion Fabius exercise appeared again to give them a final send-off, shouting: 'Soldiers, you are about to find out this is the real thing.' But as the guns splashed into 4ft of water, the crews had a more immediate worry: Would they come to a dangerous, perhaps fatal, halt in the shallows, or would the engine waterproofing work?

Seconds later, they had their answer as engines revved healthily and the three SP Bofors powered up out of the surf. Aboard F3, a spontaneous cheer went up for driver Ike Parry – who was responsible for the waterproofing – and Gunner Leo McCarthy reached forward to pat him gratefully on the back. The first test had been passed.

Having become separated from their comrades in LCT 405 – who had already set off for Benouville – the three guns made all speed to catch up.

Weaving through the chaos, carnage and confusion on the beach, they drove up the sands and on to the coastal road, past lines of infantry who were digging in – and the tragic figures of soldiers who had fallen. Eventually, they were reunited with the other three guns in Colleville and the whole troop began an agonisingly slow trek through the afternoon to try to cover the four hazardous miles to Benouville.

At St Aubin d'Arquenay, all traffic was halted for a time because the road ahead was under accurate enemy fire from nearby woods and from Benouville itself. 'From somewhere came the order that, "We shall have to go and clear the buggers out", and we were told to fetch our small arms and any grenades,' recalled Jim Holder-Vale. 'Almost at the same time, deliverance arrived.' This 'deliverance' came from the skies – the follow-up waves of the British Airborne attack. At a few minutes before 9pm, the men of F Troop watched awestruck as the sky suddenly started to fill with Dakotas and Halifaxes towing 250 Horsa and Hamilcar gliders, bringing reinforcements of 6th Airlanding Brigade into the Benouville bridgehead. Minutes later, the gliders cast off from their towplanes and began sweeping into land, crashing and tearing across fields and through hedges, straight across the line of advance of the six Bofors. Nothing, it seemed, was going to stop them.

'The Germans had planted the fields with huge poles which ripped the wings off as the gliders landed,' George Baker recalled. 'But the Airborne poured out, firing at anything – including us.' As the glider troops sprayed machine gun fire, several infantrymen from the Suffolk Regiment, one of the 3rd Division assault battalions, were hit and fell wounded by the roadside. The Bofors crews also had to take cover, having possibly been mistaken for Germans.

'The reason, I am sure, was because of our helmets,' recalled Len Harvey. 'Just before we left England, we had been issued with the new-style helmet which had a rim curving slightly downwards towards the back. In profile, and from a distance, it could have looked to the Airborne troops like a German helmet. I found out later that they were just following their training – to get out of the aircraft as quickly as possible, firing all the time, until they could take cover by the wheels. But their arrival threw everything into confusion.' With the column of vehicles temporarily stalled by the Airborne landings, German snipers took advantage – leading to a remarkable brush with death for one man of the 92nd.

Bill Husband, another driver-operator, tells the story: 'I was standing up in the cab of our lorry and two or three trucks in front, a gun mechanic was also standing up. Suddenly, he disappeared. I crawled down to a ditch to find out what had happened to him. He was okay. When I asked what had happened, he showed me his tin hat. A sniper, probably in the

wood, had taken a shot at him. The bullet had gone into one side of his hat, parted his hair and come out the other side – luck!’

That evening, finally reaching the outskirts of Benouville, the Bofors crews found buildings still occupied by snipers. One particularly troublesome German was targeting the British from the belfry of the church tower at nearby Le Port and when the F Troop convoy arrived, it too came under fire from him. But an Airborne officer told the artillerymen to turn their guns on the church and the sniper was rooted out with a blast of 40mm, leaving a big hole in the tower.

The German survived and was taken captive. Many snipers on both sides were routinely shot out of hand, but this German was a young man and the compassion of his captors even in the heat of battle may possibly have saved him. Or it could simply have been the case that prisoners were more valuable alive than dead at this stage of the invasion, because they might provide vital intelligence.

According to the history of The Loyal Regiment by Captain C G T Dean, the guns were also fired at short range directly into windows and doorways and the troop took 12 prisoners.

But, because of the disruption caused by the Airborne landings, it was decided to dig in for the night on the approaches to the bridges, rather than attempt a direct deployment in the gathering darkness. Huddled in their slit trenches, the men kept a tense vigil until dawn.

At 7am, F Troop finally deployed its guns – two around the canal bridge, two around the river bridge, and two in between. Troop headquarters was set up on the edge of a field along the Le Port road, about a quarter of a mile from Benouville town hall and offering a good view of Pegasus Bridge and the Caen Canal. Today, that view is obscured because trees have grown along the canal bank.

Half an hour later, the first enemy aircraft – a squadron of Messerschmitts – came roaring in and were engaged by the Bofors. Throughout the next nine days, as the Germans tried to retake the narrow Airborne bridgehead east of the Orne, the F Troop men were to endure a true baptism of fire, including 11 attacks by formations of up to 30 aircraft. At the same time, persistent German shelling, sniping and mortaring of the gun positions started inflicting casualties.

As the first day wore on, with the Bofors constantly in action, it became apparent that the troop’s expected reinforcements would not be arriving. Unknown to the gunners around the bridges, the liberty ship Sambut, carrying the rest of 318 and RHQ to Normandy, had been sunk around noon on D-Day by shellfire near the Goodwin Sands in the Dover Strait. Eight men of the 92nd died and all guns and equipment were lost.

Despite this, the bridges had to be defended at all costs. On June 8, waves of FW 190s came in at treetop height to attack both crossings, and time

after time were repulsed by the Bofors.

The following morning, more enemy aircraft were engaged and at midday the river bridge came under a ferocious mortar barrage, lasting half an hour. During the bombardment, the breech of Gun F3 was set on fire and Sgt A Clements risked his life by courageously unloading its high-explosive shells – earning a Mention in Dispatches. When the barrage finally lifted, Gunners Leo McCarthy and Joe Lavender of Gun F3 were found to be wounded and were evacuated.

There were some bizarre moments. During one particularly fierce mortar attack near Pegasus Bridge, when most men were huddled in slit trenches, George Baker glanced across from the gully where he had taken refuge and was stunned to see a padre from the Airborne calmly conducting divine service. Another gunner, doubtless trusting to the greater protection of the Almighty, left his own refuge and ran across to join in the prayers.

One stricken Messerschmitt crash-landed close to George's gun. He watched as the pilot strutted Nazi-style out of the wreckage – to be helped into captivity by a push from the rifle butt of a Royal Ulster Rifles infantryman. Men reacted in various ways to their first experience of war, George recalled. 'Some took to it like ducks to water, others couldn't stand it.'

The first four days around the bridges saw desperately intense action, with F Troop firing 5,000 rounds of 40mm at German raiders and shooting down 17 – but it paid off. Enemy aircraft continued their attacks over the next two days, but at higher level, having found their treetop tactics too costly. As Len Harvey recalled one Airborne corporal remarking to the weary F Troop men: 'It looks like your guns have won Round One.' Captain Reid was later awarded the MC for leading the defence of the bridges.

Thwarted by day, the Germans instead launched night sorties, mainly dropping the hated anti-personnel bombs, capable of tearing a man apart. On June 9, the marching party of 60 men from 318 Battery – which had landed in the Canadian sector, east of Sword Beach, having travelled separately from the Sambut contingent – reached Benouville, bringing some respite to their hard-pressed comrades at the bridges.

A REME workshop detachment also arrived. But there was still no sign of the battery's remaining guns. Next day, the F Troop men finally heard news of the Channel tragedy from the CO, Colonel Bazeley, who made his way into the bridgehead. The Sambut had sailed from Southend in convoy early on D-Day, with the remainder of 318 and RHQ – 120 officers and men – aboard. In all, the liberty ship was carrying a total of 562 troops from 28 different units, 63 crew, plus vehicles, weapons and large quantities of ammunition and high explosives.

Just after midday on June 6, disaster struck. Three miles off Dover, the ship was hit by two 16-inch shells fired from German gun batteries in Calais – the most terrible misfortune, for the salvoes could not have been aimed. Fierce fires broke out and could not be tackled because the pumping gear was put out of action.

After about 45 minutes, the master had to order abandon ship. ‘The troops went over the side in a very orderly manner,’ wrote Captain Bill Almond of 92nd LAA. ‘The wounded were also taken off the ship and by 1400 hours she had been completely abandoned and the survivors had been picked up by a variety of small craft. One officer and 73 other ranks swam to a corvette and were not disembarked in the UK until three days later, after enjoying a ringside view of the landing beaches, whither the corvette was steaming at the time.’

In his book *Liberty – The Ships That Won The War*, author Peter Elphick gives fuller details of the *Sambut* disaster, pointing out that she was the first Liberty ship lost during the Normandy campaign. The *Sambut*, launched in August 1943 in Portland, Orgeon, as the *C S Jones*, was under the command of Captain Mark Willis.

The first shell which struck her landed just behind the engine room, the second just forward of the bridge. Inflammable equipment on deck, including lorries loaded with explosives and cases of petrol and diesel, immediately caught fire. The petrol cases had been covered with sandbags, but that did not prevent them igniting. Unfortunately, the first shell damaged much of the firefighting equipment and in consequence within ten minutes fire had really taken hold.

A few minutes later, a consignment of gelignite in a lorry stowed on No 2 hatch exploded, completely wrecking the bridge and the port side lifeboats. Captain Willis later reported: ‘As the fire was spreading rapidly, I rang the emergency alarm bell and ordered abandon ship. All my crew were clear of the ship in the two remaining starboard lifeboats by 12.30. The ship carried some 30 rafts for the troops. These were released and I told the soldiers to jump overboard to them.

‘At first some were rather diffident at the thought of jumping, but they quickly jumped on being told that the ship was likely to blow up at any moment. Everyone should have been wearing lifebelts and I had given specific instructions to the OC troops at 0600 that morning that lifebelts were to be worn from that time onwards. The pilot, chief officer and I were last to leave the ship at approximately 12.40.

‘We jumped over the side and swam to a raft. A number of dead bodies were floating in the water, many with lifebelts on. It is possible that many of the missing troops were drowned, but some were undoubtedly killed as they were having dinner in the troop deck which was in the vicinity of the explosion.

‘Four Naval motor launches from Dover appeared very quickly, but I thought were extremely slow in picking up survivors. MLs are totally unsuitable for rescue work, sides too high and inexperienced crews. I would like to point out that the convoy did not use a smokescreen. After my vessel was struck, I started my own smoke apparatus and other ships in the convoy followed my example.’

The author gives the loss of life as 130 soldiers, plus six Sambut crew members. Of the 92nd contingent, three men were killed, four were missing presumed dead, one died of wounds and 14 were wounded. All the regiment’s equipment and records on board the ship were lost. The burning hulk of the Sambut, rocked by explosions, was finally sunk by a Royal Navy torpedo at location 51 08 N, 01 33 E because its wreckage was a hazard to the rest of the invasion fleet.

Those who died from 92nd LAA were Sergeant Frederick Blaker, Sergeant Percy Ring, Bombardier John Wolfe, Gunner Wilfred Lever and Gunner Walter Hartley – all of 318 Battery – Bombardier Sidney Crane and Gunner Herbert Davies – both of RHQ – and Corporal George Challinor, of the Royal Corps of Signals, attached RHQ.

For the F Troop men dug in at Benouville and Ranville, it was a tragic loss, both in comrades and much-needed reinforcements. But gradually, Luftwaffe raids against the bridges became sporadic and the gunners were able to lend more support to infantry operations with ground shoots. On June 12 came a potentially more formidable task. A German counter-attack from the east by Tiger tanks was thought to be imminent, and all the Bofors Guns were driven back to the bridges and loaded with armour-piercing shot ready to meet the assault. Fortunately – especially since tank armour was unlikely to be penetrated by the relatively light 40mm Bofors fire – the ground assault never materialised. On June 15, F Troop was finally relieved by corps LAA and sent to defend the airstrip at Plumetot.

7. BATTLE OF THE BRIDGEHEAD

June to August 1944

‘All ranks enjoyed these night barrages, which were fired along likely bomber run-ins. At first sight, they appeared a trifle chancy, as early warning consisted largely of the whistle of the first bomb. But they worked very well.’

ON the night of June 13, headquarters and A Troop of 317, now camped at Rowland’s Castle outside Portsmouth, boarded a US tank landing ship.

After anchoring for 36 hours in the Solent, they sailed for Normandy on the morning of June 15, arriving off Jig Beach opposite Le Hamel near Arromanches the same evening.

Next day, as German aircraft attacked the beachhead, the battery disembarked and linked up with its B and C Troops, which had sailed earlier in tank landing craft. The newcomers were immediately deployed on the high ground at Periers-sur-le-Dan, west of the Orne, in defence of 3rd Division field guns. HQ was established at Hermanville. Ironically, a marching party of reinforcements for C Troop under the command of Jack Prior had arrived in advance of the whole battery, landing on Juno Beach at La Valette in the Canadian sector on June 11.

After helping out with traffic duty in the severely congested beachhead, Jack made his way to Benouville, where F Troop was still valiantly holding the line against repeated German attempts to destroy the bridges. On June 14, he temporarily joined F Troop as a replacement for Lieutenant A J Hands of 318, who was wounded during shelling.

Two days later, three enemy aircraft – two JU 88s and a DO 217 – were shot down as they targeted the bridges, but Gunner Golbourne was wounded. On the 18th, there was a concerted attack by ME 109s, coming in waves of three and two. Jack Prior finally linked up with C Troop at Periers-sur-le-Dan on June 20, the same day that the troop scored its first Category One in Normandy by shooting down an FW 190, capturing its pilot after he baled out. Over the following fortnight, shelling intensified, inflicting casualties throughout the regiment.

At the Plumetot airstrip, F Troop guns took part in the protection of Auster light planes, which were carrying out artillery spotting for the battleship Rodney – whose massive long-range guns were helping keep the enemy at bay by breaking up tank and troop formations up to 20 miles inland. It was a job close to the heart of the 92nd's CO, Colonel Bazeley – who had put his gunners up for the job – because he had earned his DSO while serving with Austers in North Africa.

June 24 saw tragedy strike C Troop as it took its guns across the road junction at Mathieu under mortar fire. Sergeant John Hesford, standing up as he attempted to force his men's heads behind the armour plating of the guns, was killed and Lieutenant John 'Robbie' Roberts was wounded. 'Lieutenant Johnny Kitchin and I managed to reach a trench just in time to be missed by the mortar shell,' Jack recalled. 'But it took Robbie a few seconds longer to get off his motorbike and throw himself on top of us, by which time he had been hit in the hand.'

The body of Sergeant Hesford was taken aboard his gun and carried to the field regiment area. There were more mortar attacks next day. But on June 26, the British artillery unleashed a devastating bombardment on the German positions north of Caen, with one thousand guns each firing 250

rounds. The following day, Gunner Newcomen of C Troop was seriously injured by mortar shrapnel as he raced for the cover of a trench. At Colomby-sur-Thaon and Anisey-le-Mesnil, B and F troops gave anti-aircraft protection to observer planes.

Following the Sambut disaster, the survivors of RHQ and the two troops of 318 returned to Britain and re-equipped at Blenheim Barracks, Aldershot. On June 28, they moved to a camp at Silvertown in the East End of London prior to embarkation. Here, by an amazing but happy coincidence, there was an encounter between Major George Williams, CO of 318 Battery, and the father of Len Harvey.

Len's father, a veteran of the First World War, was working as a stonemason for Stepney Council on bombed buildings near the docks. Seeing the 92nd LAA convoy passing, he noticed that the men wore the same uniform markings and badges as Len – but he had no idea of what had happened to Len since before D-Day. Len's father approached Major Williams and told him that he thought his son may be part of his unit. To his delight, Major Williams told him he knew Len and that he was already in France, and – as far as he knew – was well.

Next day, the 92nd RHQ contingent embarked from Southend in convoy aboard the liberty ship SS Samark, the same day that 319 Battery and some Canadian units sailed from Tilbury aboard the transport ship Coombe Hill. On July 2, the Samark landed off Creully and the Coombe Hill off Graye-sur-Mer – at last reuniting the whole of 92nd LAA in Normandy. 318 was deployed in the Hermanville area to protect a gun and vehicle concentration, while 319 moved to the Anguernay area of the Periers Ridge, joining 317.

Soon after, 319 almost achieved a Category One which might have changed the course of world history. Ronald Prince, the former corporal from the 7th Loyals who was now a bombardier, recalled how G Troop was on alert one day when one of the air sentries spotted a Fiesler Storch flying over. The Storch (Stork, in English) was a short take-off and landing light plane used by the Germans for reconnaissance and artillery spotting – the equivalent of the British Auster. 'It's a bloody Fiesler Storch,' said the excited spotter as he told the Bofors gunners to range in on it.

The crews confirmed the sighting and got the slow-moving, low-flying plane in their sights. It would have no chance. Then, as they were preparing to fire, Bombardier Prince suddenly recalled that one of the Allied top brass, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Harry Broadhurst, head of Fighter Command, was known to be using a captured Storch for his sorties over the battlefield. 'It's not a German – it's one of ours,' he frantically told the gun crews.

But they didn't believe him. Aircraft recognition had been drummed into

the gunners from day one, and – although in Allied markings – this was definitely an enemy plane. And to an AA artilleryman, an enemy plane had only one purpose – to be shot down. However, Bombardier Prince pleaded desperately with the gunners to spare the little aircraft, pending confirmation, and it moved safely out of range.

It was a close-run thing. For during this period, Broadhurst was regularly using the Storch – which he had captured during the Western Desert campaign – to take visiting VIPs on a tour of the battlefield. And his distinguished passengers included the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and the Supreme Commander, General Dwight Eisenhower, a future U.S. President. The loss of either would have given 92nd LAA a very unwelcome place in history. As for the quick-thinking Bombardier Prince, his possible saving of one or two of the most important figures of the 20th century has gone unrecorded until now.

Heavy shelling, strafing and low-level bombing continued to inflict casualties on the gunners as the Germans tried to drive the invaders back into the sea. But on July 4, Maida Day – marking one of The Loyal Regiment's main battle honours – was remembered, as was the fourth anniversary of the raising of the 7th Loyals.

Later that day, as the guns again engaged enemy planes, the unit's beach ammunition dump was shelled, the resulting blaze attracting salvos of enemy artillery fire. Two days later, there was drama off the beachhead when a flotilla of German 'human torpedo' one-man midget submarines infiltrated between the Allied ships and sank three. Fifty Germans were reported to have landed. 'Prisoners to be taken alive,' was the order.

On July 7, men of the 92nd watched in awe as 450 bombers pounded much of Caen to rubble in an attempt to force a way into the city for the ground forces. 'They flew directly overhead, quite low, straight into the flak from Epron and round Caen and dropped phosphorus and high explosive bombs,' said Jack Prior. 'The raid was very concentrated and a cloud of dust, ashes and burnt paper spread over our area, so that it was impossible to see more than a few yards. 'The raid lasted for half an hour, after which we felt it fairly safe to assume that the German Army on the rear slope of the ridge before Caen had had it, for we too were affected by the phosphorus fumes.'

Next day, A, B and C Troops moved forward with the advance, but the attack stalled. As the Allied bridgehead was consolidated and the battle to capture Caen continued, the 92nd remained static with its HQ at Colleville, suffering many casualties. On July 9, Captain Reid, commander of F Troop, was wounded in both hands. On July 11, the men of F Troop – who had been in the line since D-Day – and those of 317 were given priority to move to rest areas in La Delivrande for a brief respite from the battle. As the Luftwaffe tried to recover its balance, its

planes made frequent bombing and strafing sorties. At St Aubin on July 12, a bombing raid by a JU 88 left a crater 50ft wide and 20ft deep, but no casualties. Two days later, the Germans made a concerted attack on the forward field gun areas with waves of between nine and 15 ME 109s and FW 190s. Seven Category One claims were submitted. On the 17th, D and E Troops of 318 moved east of the Orne to protect an airstrip.

The following night, the men of 318 came under devastating attack by a JU 88, dropping anti-personnel bombs. Sergeant Alfred Penrose, Lance-Bombardier Cyril Guest and Gunners Gordon Bone and Frederick Kemp were killed and Lieutenant Russell and two other men were wounded. At noon next day, the fallen were buried.

The 18th saw the start of Operation Goodwood, Montgomery's mass armoured attack out of the Airborne bridgehead to try to capture the Bourgebus Ridge south-east of Caen. 3rd Division, now commanded by Major-General Lashmer 'Bolo' Whistler after Major-General Rennie was wounded on June 13, protected the left flank, fighting forward to Toffreville, Manneville and Troarn.

On July 19, Major Crane and three other officers of the 92nd equipped themselves with Jeeps and a wireless and moved forward to set up a counter-mortar observation post, hoping to strike back at the German weapon which was causing so many casualties.

Next day, amid torrential rainfall, two posts were established on the ridge of the Butte de la Hogue with a radio link to divisional artillery headquarters. 'They met with fair success, although the methods at that time were somewhat experimental,' wrote Captain Almond. 'Their equipment was a compass, a watch and a map. Despite initial lack of skill, many accurate fixes were made and a number of mortars were knocked out or otherwise silenced.'

Lieutenant Johnny Kitchin of C Troop, 317, wrote: 'All busy junctions could expect to receive showers of mortar bombs several times a day, as we found out when trying to move our guns forward. I was the first officer sent from our battery and I had with me Sergeants Allen and Kendrick (great chaps) and a wireless operator. We approached our vantage point at night and called in at 318 Battery HQ.

'They gave us a cuppa before we went on over the ridge. We found an old German dugout, which was useful, except that the entrance faced the Germans, but it was big enough for four of us and we built a wall in front of the entrance. There were other similar small units like mine spaced out along the ridge overlooking the Germans, and when a shower of mortars fell, we had to take the time of flight, then get an angle on the small crater in order to pinpoint the position of the minenwerfer (mortar projectors), which were mobile and as soon as they had discharged their 20 barrels moved away smartly.

‘All the units such as mine were in radio contact with brigade or Army HQ and from the information sent immediately by us, they could put down a concentration of artillery at once and hopefully catch the Germans before they could move. When the mortars were not falling, we had the nasty experience of being shelled by 88mm guns – with their flat trajectory and high muzzle velocity.

‘It was not pleasant, especially as we had a pile of German mortars a little distance from our dugout. They were probably booby-trapped, so we dared not try to move them. However, we survived, and I believe relieved the infantry casualties from mortar attacks.’

Jack Prior recalled how the counter-mortar system – though seemingly makeshift – worked remarkably well right from the beginning, especially because of the radio link-up. ‘It had, of course, to be practised before it worked every time. But within a few hours, the German mortar crews suddenly found themselves being bombed or strafed by our Typhoons or Spitfires.

‘Naturally, the mortar crews speeded up their delivery and then tried to hide in nearby woods, but the RAF pilots were not easily fooled and it was very rewarding for us when we sent in a target and saw within seconds that the enemy was under severe attack from the air as a result of our efforts.’

As the counter-mortar units pioneered by the 92nd became more experienced and successful, they formed a vital element of the division and were eventually afforded the status of a distinct unit. Later, in Holland, they also targeted V2 launch sites along the Maas and Rhine – helping alleviate some of the destruction the rockets were wreaking on London and the South East of England.

On July 21, as Goodwood developed, more elements of 92nd LAA – including F Troop, back from its rest area – crossed the Orne and deployed in the neighbourhood of Ranville and Herouvillete, with RHQ at Escoville. Two days later, 317 took up positions at Escoville, 318 at Le Mariquet and Herouvillette and 319 at Cuverville. Units also deployed on the Butte de la Hogue.

Bombing attacks continued, and on July 25, Sergeant Connor and Gunner Arthur Greaves were killed when four 500lb bombs were dropped on F Troop area, collapsing their dugout on top of them. Corporal Wright and Gunners Connor – the sergeant’s brother – Hardwick and Furniss were wounded. The blasts also destroyed all F Troop stores and several vehicles, including a water carrier.

Two days later, Signaller John Henderson was killed and three other men wounded in heavy bombing during which three 1,000-pounders fell around 317 headquarters. But an FW 190 was shot down and 318 and 319 took part in a night barrage on the Hermanville Ridge under the control of

40th LAA Regiment.

This period was ‘singularly unpleasant,’ Captain Almond noted. Bedevilled by lone JU 88s which dropped anti-personnel and high explosive bombs – as well as propaganda leaflets advising the British to surrender – the regiment countered by starting night barrages. ‘All ranks enjoyed these barrages, which were fired along likely bomber run-ins. At first sight, they appeared a trifle chancy, as early warning consisted largely of the whistle of the first bomb. But they worked very well and there was an appreciable slackening of the enemy’s air effort.’

The night barrages were controlled by a command post back near the beaches, with orders transmitted by radio. Each gun had a set bearing and elevation for a particular ‘box’ – or sector – of the sky, which was named or numbered.

‘The command centre gave its orders over the radio and operators such as myself would relay them to someone who shouted the details to the gun,’ said Jim Holder-Vale. ‘The area was plagued with mosquitoes, which we tried to keep away by continuously smoking – as we were in a tarpaulin-covered hole, we could scarcely breathe. We were also issued with anti-mosquito cream, a pleasant-smelling green Vaseline-like stuff.’

Another experiment by the 92nd around this time proved to have its share of hazards – instant excavation of gun pits. ‘We soon cottoned on to the fact that there was quicker way of producing a large deep hole than by merely using a pick and shovel,’ recalled Jack Prior. ‘This was to get hold of some anti-tank mines and set one of them off in the desired location. We tried this several times and it worked a treat, so long, of course, as one took ample cover while the debris was being flung to the four corners.

‘Of course, there is always one idiot in any group of people, and when one chap suggested it would save us even more digging if we used two mines one on top of the other, we decided to give it a go. A brave “volunteer” dug a suitable small hole, put the mines in, fitted a detonator, tamped down and withdrew to join the rest of us before winding the handle.

‘Unfortunately, we had all overlooked the synergetic effect, and on this occasion one plus one certainly equalled more than two. First, the world went up into the sky; then, as is its wont, it all came down again. But, in addition to going higher, it also spread itself wider and we were bombarded with mud and stones for what seemed ages. Fortunately, the gun was well away, but even that was hit. There were questions by neighbouring troops as to the origin of the exceptional bang, but that was all – except, so far as I know, the experiment was not repeated.’

After holding the Goodwood flank for almost three weeks, 3rd Division moved back west of the Orne on July 31 and next day 92nd LAA

occupied St Aubin and Beuville, with 319 Battery at Cresserons. The division's next task was to join Eight Corps in a southward drive out of the beachhead towards Vire. The aim was to intercept German forces falling back under the onslaught of the Americans, who were now breaking eastwards in Operation Cobra.

By August 2, the 92nd were on the move, with 318 camped in an orchard near Caumont and 317 at Quesney-Guerson. August 3 saw 319 drive forward to St Martin des Besaces on the main Caen-Avranches road, defending divisional HQ administrative area, while 318 protected field gun areas.

That same day, Major Williams was killed in a road accident near Reviere as he travelled back to Cresserons to be a member of a court martial. He was stepping out of his Jeep when he was struck by another vehicle. Major Williams's brother, Lieutenant Ronnie Williams, had been killed in France in 1940.

On the 4th, a gun of G Troop was blown up by a mine, but only one man was injured. Next day, the regiment went three miles further down the Caen-Avranches road to Foret L'Eveque, with 318 established at Le Beny Bocage – where Major J Wilkinson, commander of A Troop, took command of 318. 317 deployed at Mazieres and 319 at Le Bas Mougard, still defending divisional HQ. Here, Lieutenant Richard Forbes of 319 died of wounds and was buried in the cemetery at St Jean des Essartiers by the padre, Captain L J Birch.

On August 7, the regiment was deployed in front of Vire, with RHQ at La Viellere. At this stage of the campaign, with the Allies in complete command of the air, the need for anti-aircraft cover was not as pressing as it had been in early June – since July 31, the 92nd had fired only ten rounds against fleeting German targets. But in the protracted fighting for Caen, British infantry casualties had been unexpectedly high.

So on August 8, came an order which was 'a bitter blow' to everybody, Captain Almond wrote. The regiment's strength was halved, with three of the 40mm troops – C, E and H – and the three 20mm troops, X, Y and Z, being disbanded. Each 40mm battery was reduced to two troops, each having one tractor-drawn and one self-propelled Bofors detachment. The personnel thus released were sent back to England for redeployment as infantry or as artillery specialists. Some were dispersed to other units in the division. The regimental make-up was now 317 (A and B), 318 (D and F), 319 (G and I).

Each battery retained a mobile counter-mortar observation team consisting of a sergeant, a bombardier and four gunners, equipped with wireless, Jeep and a 15cwt truck. The divisional anti-tank regiment furnished the plotting centre and an armoured observation post and 92 LAA provided HQ. 'It was hard to say goodbye to so many old friends in

the 40mm troops and to the 20mm troops who, although they had been in the regiment a comparatively short time, had by their work firmly established themselves as part of the regiment,' wrote Captain Almond.

The reorganisation was barely sinking in when there was fresh drama. On August 9, the regiment nearly became a victim of its own side when three American Thunderbolts wheeled over the 92nd's area and dropped six bombs around 318 and 319 headquarters. As the explosions reverberated, recognition flares in the colour of the day were desperately sent skyward to warn off the pilots. There were no casualties, but the incident was immediately reported to divisional headquarters.

By this time, the American air force had become notorious for bombing shortfalls which had killed hundreds of troops from their own side. Recalling the 92nd's narrow escape, Jack Prior ruefully quoted the battlefield maxim: 'When the British start bombing, the Germans take cover. When the Germans start bombing, the British take cover. But when the Americans start bombing, everyone take cover.'

Next day, 319 moved to La Groudiere, two miles north east of Vire. On the 12th, 318 moved forward to La Diabline, encountering many mines and booby traps – one detachment of F Troop neutralised more than a dozen Teller mines. The local people were 'very friendly' and were allowed to listen to the news in French on 318's radio.

Indirect firing, using radioed or telephoned co-ordinates to bombard an unseen ground target, was becoming a larger part of Bofors operations as the threat of German aircraft temporarily receded. Because the 40mm shells self-destructed after a few thousand feet, they could be used in open country for low-level airbursts against enemy positions – sending out a fierce hail of shrapnel. Fired into buildings or wooded areas, the shells would explode against walls or trees, with similar devastating anti-personnel effects.

'By the time we left the Caen sector we were confident that we could shoot along the ground and shoot with success,' wrote Captain Almond. 'A salvaged steel pipe sawn into cross-sections, tinned and engraved by REME personnel, provided our sight drums and officers and NCOs trained hard in the new method of firing whilst keeping watch on the skies.' The first major indirect fire shoot took place in support of Operation Wallup, a divisional artillery barrage, on August 11. Some 1,200 rounds were fired at a crossroads, but the Germans had pulled out of the target area.

On August 13 the regiment moved to La Graverie and three days later to La Saliere, with 319 HQ at Landisacq and 317 in the Tinchebray area. The battle was moving very quickly, with frequent actions against enemy aircraft. At one point, 318 engaged six FW 190s which carried black and white striped Allied markings under the wings.

The regiment moved to St Quentin les Chardonnets before concentrating on August 20 near La Chapelle Biche, south-west of Flers. 'In perfect weather we enjoyed ten days' refit and rest.' The regiment was strung out along the edge of the 'great dark' Foret de Halouze. After looking at it 'apprehensively' for a day or two, it was decided to comb it for German stragglers – 'Boches, booby-traps, booty and any suspicious persons or materiel.'

By now, the German armies in Normandy were being wiped out as the great Allied pincer closed around Falaise – the Americans swinging north from their eastward drive, the British and Canadians pushing south out of the Caen bridgehead. Trapped in what became known as the Falaise Pocket, 10,000 enemy troops died and 50,000 were taken prisoner. The sight – and smell – of the German columns of men, machines and horses strung out in smoking devastation along the roads where they had vainly tried to flee from the Allied onslaught etched itself into the minds of those men of the 92nd who saw it.

After capturing Flers, 3rd Division was ordered to halt for a period of rest and refitting. This started for the 92nd around La Chapelle Biche, where on August 24 a gymkhana and sports day was held. Recreation was interspersed with training, including a night bridge-crossing exercise and Piat anti-tank shooting. At the start of September, 3rd Division began moving north-east to a concentration area near Les Andelys, south of Rouen, to prepare for its next assignment – the thrust into Holland and Germany as part of Operation Market Garden.

The 92nd crossed the Seine at 2am on September 3, and deployed around the village of Vatismesnil near Etrepagny, with 318 basing itself in an old brickworks. The success of the Allied breakout was causing severe problems as the armies outran their supply lines, so petrol was temporarily rationed to 18 gallons per battery. For the 92nd, there followed a fortnight of training, maintenance, PT and route marches. Sightseeing trips to newly-liberated Paris were arranged, but only one party went before the programme was cancelled.

F Troop practised indirect firing at Les Andelys and A and B troops at Beauvais. On September 8, 319 personnel searched woods at Provemont for enemy troops. After the bitterly-fought battles of the beachhead, there was a temporary respite and a chance to reflect. 'The magnificent sight of the chateau at Les Andelys in moonlight will always remain with me as a contrast to the unpleasantness of the previous weeks,' said Jack Prior. 'Another enduring memory is of the unlimited masses of mosquitoes, which prevented sleep almost as effectively as the enemy. Sleep was also difficult in the bocage area, when we had to be alert for "friendly" tanks turning off the roads through the hedges where we were trying to sleep. The safest places at that time were close to the field guns, but of course

their noise inhibited sleep much of the time.'

Jim Holder-Vale was also enthralled by the sight of the chateau. 'It was the Chateau Gaillard, in which Richard the Lionheart had been held prisoner, and it was lit up by bright moonlight above us on the cliffs as we crossed the Seine by pontoon bridge,' he recalled. 'Although I had only ever seen a picture of it as a schoolboy, I knew instinctively what it was – if not its name – and I am still thrilled by the thought of it.'

8. WINTER ON THE MAAS

September to December 1944

'It was our sixth war Christmas, but it was the view of everyone that it was the best of the six, which says much considering it was our first in the line.'

SUNDAY, September 17 saw the start of the ill-fated Market Garden operation. The plan was for British and American airborne troops to capture the bridges at Eindhoven, Nijmegen and Arnhem in Holland and hold them until 30 Corps could punch its way across them. Montgomery hoped the Allies could then pour into Germany's industrial heartland and end the war before Christmas. The task of 3rd Division was to widen the breach in the German lines opened by 30 Corps.

On September 18, 92nd LAA left Vatismesnil to head west, via Beauvais, Froissy, Warfusse, Abancourt, Albert, Bapaume, Cambrai, Valenciennes, Mons, Braine le Compte and Braine L'Alleux before reaching the Petit Broren neighbourhood of Louvain in Belgium. Their route skirted the battlefields of an earlier generation on the Somme, and of an earlier age at Waterloo. On the way, food and ammunition were dropped by parachute.

A day later, 3rd Division forced its way across the Meuse-Escaut Canal and 92nd LAA followed up to protect the canal bridge at Lille St Hubert, deploying along the Heeze-Zomeren road. 'After five weeks of quiet, we found the return to battle rather a shock. Three of the advance party were wounded by bomb splinters in the concentration area and the main body arrived to find frantic digging in progress.'

The regiment then crossed the Dutch frontier near Hamont and defended the vitally important bridges over the s'Hertogenbosch Canal. 318 and 319 moved to the neighbourhood of Asten and Zomeren, while 317 went to Vaarsek via Weert with 8 Infantry Brigade.

At Weert on September 26, A Troop of 317 shot down an ME 109 in spectacular fashion. The troop was just pulling out from its positions

protecting 76 Field Regiment when two ME 109s broke from the clouds and started low strafing attacks. Despite their Bofors being on the move, the troop opened fire and destroyed one of the raiders. 'These were the first rounds fired by the regiment in over six weeks and success gave a great lift to morale.'

The kill earned a special signal from the divisional artillery commander, Brigadier Gerald Mears, congratulating the men on their alertness and good discipline. 'To have hit such a fleeting target after weeks of inactivity is an achievement of which all concerned may be proud.' The following day, the 92nd was established at Helmond, ten miles north of Asten, with 319 HQ in a slaughterhouse east of the town.

On the 28th, Five ME 109s were engaged near Bakel. Guns also took part in night barrages on the German lines. Four days later, with RHQ at Heuman, five miles south of Nijmegen, 317 Battery and D Troop of 318 crossed the Maas at Grave and went into action on the edge of the Reichswald Forest. The remainder of the regiment, 319 and F Troop of 318, was deployed west of the Maas in the neighbourhood of Mil, Haps and Beer.

In early October, the regiment encountered the worst enemy air activity since Caen, fighting off daily attacks by ME 109s. On the 5th came their first encounter with an ME 262, the Germans' new jet-propelled plane. 'It became involved with some Spitfires over Nijmegen and showed them a clean pair of heels as far as Heuman, where it banked sharply to starboard,' wrote Captain Almond.

'As it banked, it exposed its belly to D Troop, which was deployed in defence of divisional HQ. Three guns fired at very short range and a burst of four rounds entered the aircraft. It was observed to stagger violently, then endeavoured to gain height in the direction of Grave. D Troop guns broke off their engagement, as the Spitfires were now hot on the trail again and indeed closed with the 262, pouring rounds into it. The plane crashed near Grave and the pilot was killed in a vain attempt to parachute.'

Soon after, F Troop brought down an ME 109 whose pilot parachuted into captivity near Overloon. Next day, the same unit destroyed another ME 109 as it made a low-level strafing attack in the Oefeltt-Gennep area. On the 12th, as ME 262s and a JU 88 raided the regimental area, indirect fire support totalling 1,800 rounds was given to 3rd Division as it fought ferociously for Overloon in Operation Aintree. Four days later, amid very bad weather, the Bofors again opened up to help the attack continue on to Venraij.

By this time, after the failure of Market Garden, enemy resistance had hardened. Montgomery decided not to attempt a crossing of the Rhine that autumn, but to concentrate on clearing the port of Antwerp. So 3rd

Division was withdrawn across the Maas and on October 15, the 92nd established its RHQ at Oploo, where the regiment was destined to remain for the next four months.

But drama and death were never far away. On the 25th, 'buzz-bomb' V-1 rockets were spotted heading west. Two days later, Bombardier John Nicholson of the counter-mortar unit was killed by a shell. On October 31, Gunner John Rowland of 319 died and Bombardier Gregg was wounded when two 108mm shells hit I Troop billet area. The 'calmness and initiative' of Gunner J Smith while attending the wounded NCO during this attack earned him a commendation from the divisional commander.

Gunner Rowland, from Runcorn, Cheshire, died heroically. The 31-year-old tannery worker, a Cheshire bowls champion, had joined up at Caernarvon in 1940 along with his brothers – one brother, Sam, served with him in 319 Battery. Back home, Gunner Rowland had a young wife and a new baby, their first child. His grandson, Jamie Rowland, told the story of his death that was later given to his family:

'Around 10pm, a Captain Chubb was spying out a German machine gun nest or position when he got wounded in the leg and started crying out for help. Well, some of the fellows in the unit said "leave him there" – but my granddad said, "We can't" and volunteered to go out and get him with his brother Sam, using a stretcher.

'Well, they put Chubb on the stretcher and proceeded to carry him to safety when Sam – who was younger than grandad – started to complain to my granddad that Captain Chubb's head and upper body were too heavy to carry and asked my granddad to swop positions on the stretcher.

'So my granddad agreed and they swopped. When my granddad and Sam were bending down and were just lifting up the stretcher, that's when my granddad was hit with shrapnel right through his chest. The force of the impact also blew his boots off. All the lads in the unit got their first aid kits out and and tried to pack the wound with cotton wool, but there wasn't enough cotton wool even from all the fellows to stop the bleeding. The shrapnel had left a huge hole straight through his chest and out the other side. He lived for about 30 seconds, in which he said to his brother, "Look after John" (my dad) and then he died.

'After the event, my Nan said that all the blokes in the unit were annoyed, as Captain Chubb received a award for bravery – the fellows thought that it should have gone to my granddad, who gave his life saving Chubb. After the war, my Nan was visited by one of the lads from the unit.

'He told her that my granddad was a popular guy among the lads and that he used to entertain them singing – I have heard he had a great singing voice. He also said he loved the Scouse sense of humour and he and his mates in the unit used to play pranks. My Nan was also resentful after the

war because she said out of his service money the Army charged her for burial and other things.’

At the end of the month, 8 Corps, on 21st Army Group’s right flank, had to extend its front and B, D and F Troops went into the line as infantry, forming platoons to hold a sector of the Maas at Groeningen. There was sporadic shelling and mortaring, plus ‘intense and exciting’ night patrols, but no contact with the enemy.

As November opened, torrential rain turned highways to mudbaths and men were put on road works to maintain communications. On the 10th, Lieutenant Roberts of 317 was wounded for the second time when a truck in which he was travelling ran over a mine. An NCO was also hurt.

The regiment provided parties for mine-lifting in the wooded areas of Overloon, Venraij and Horst. ‘We had taken a keen interest in mines whilst training in the UK and special teams were ready to deal with major commitments of this sort. We had no casualties in minelifting throughout the whole of the campaign.’ The 92nd took part in several ground shoots and night barrages, but some operations had to be cancelled because of the weather.

Section shoots across the Maas, targeting German billets, strongpoints and particularly meal parades, were popular. ‘This enthusiasm was not always shared by neighbouring units, as our fire sometimes drew angry reprisals, which usually arrived just after the guns had gone out of action and retired to their anti-aircraft pits.’

The regiment’s stay in Holland also brought home to the men that as well as fighting the Germans, they were liberating a conquered people. Jack Prior recalled an incident in September 1944 when one of the 92nd’s petrol cookers exploded in the built-in barn of a farm. ‘The barn and attached living accommodation were destroyed and Peter Crane and I organised salvage teams, rescuing as much as possible – saving the occupants, animals and some of the furniture. But it was a fairly hopeless task to save any of the buildings.

‘In due course, there would have been a degree of recompense from the British government. But to me the most embarrassing aspect was that the farmer and his family did not castigate us, but were quite phlegmatic about it, making clear that they still preferred to have us there than the Germans.’

As 1944 drew to a close, there were frequent sightings of vapour trails from rockets, believed to be V-2s, and engagements with ME 262s around Oploo and Venraij. Towards the end of November, the Germans remaining west of the Maas started pulling back and by the beginning of December, 3rd Division had cleared the area to the river line, holding a 20-mile front between Boxmeer and Grubbenvorst.

As December opened, it was decided that only two 92nd batteries should

be kept at readiness in defence of local areas while one took turns to stand down. Several younger men in the regiment were marked for transferral to the infantry. On the 5th, a 15cwt truck of 319 was destroyed when it strayed into a minefield after the white marker tapes had blown down. One officer suffered superficial injuries.

Regimental HQ moved to St Anthonis on December 8. Three days later, Major Crane was invested with the Military Cross by Montgomery in a ceremony at Gimers Monastery, in recognition of his heroism during the sinking of the Sambut on D-Day, when he saved many men by his calm and resolute action.

Throughout the month, rocket sightings continued. There was a mass raid by 18 ME 109s and eleven ME 262s on the 17th, with two hits claimed. Next day, 13 ME 262s were engaged, with one hit claimed. That same day, HQ moved to Leunen and on Christmas Eve an unusual prisoner was taken – a German carrier pigeon. The message it carried was indecipherable and it was handed over to divisional HQ. Christmas Day, which dawned bitterly cold with the temperature down to minus 12F, was marked in as festive a mood as possible.

318 took dinner in a decorated barn, followed by a sing-song around a borrowed piano. 'It was our sixth war Christmas, but it was the view of everyone that it was the best of the six, which says much considering it was our first in the line,' the war diary noted.

On Boxing Day, at the height of the German counter-offensive further south through the Ardennes, 340 enemy aircraft were spotted approaching the corps area from the north-east, but there was no attack. On the 29th, 318 took part in an indirect fire shoot, and several flying bombs passed over on the 30th. On New Year's Eve, as snow swept Holland, a German plane crashed on the east bank of the Maas, but its crew was recovered by a Wehrmacht patrol.

By the end of the year, 92nd LAA had engaged enemy aircraft on 93 occasions, expending 14,047 rounds of 40mm and 8,687 rounds of 20mm. It had 33 Category One claims, including 13 shared. Some 5,826 rounds of 40mm had been fired on ground targets.

9. FOURTEEN RAIDERS DOWNED

New Year's Day, 1945

'The enemy attacks were very low-level indeed. On several occasions the guns had to break off firing owing to the target disappearing behind buildings or trees.'

ON January 1, Lieutenant Colonel Peter Henderson RA, of the 97th Anti-Tank Regiment, took command when Lieutenant Colonel Bazeley transferred to 7th Field Regiment. That same morning, the Germans launched a massive air offensive with almost 1,000 planes against 16 Allied airfields in forward areas of Belgium and Holland. Operation Bodenplatte (Baseplate) was the last major attack in the West by the Luftwaffe – and brought the 92nd's most dramatic and successful engagement of the war.

At 9.15am, the regiment's air sentries saw a long line of 50 to 60 enemy aircraft approaching from the east. The first wave consisted of between 15 and 18 FW 190s, flying in line astern at treetop level. The planes, each carrying one bomb slung below the fuselage, passed over the 92nd's guns towards Helmond and became involved in dogfights with British Spitfires, Typhoons and Tempests. As they broke off from the battle, they swept back in strafing runs across the 92nd's area.

Ten minutes later, three more FW 190s roared across at 500ft from west to east, followed shortly afterwards by a single unidentified aircraft flying at between 200ft and 300ft and an ME 109 at 100ft over Leunen church. The planes had light green camouflaged livery and their German insignia were small – some of the ME 109s were reported to have RAF roundels and markings and some had an unusual red surround to the black German cross.

As more and more raiders – including at least one jet-propelled ME 262 – filled the skies, it became clear that for the anti-aircraft crews, this was a moment of extreme danger, but also a golden opportunity. All their years of training had been devoted to identifying targets in a couple of seconds, aiming and shooting almost instantaneously. And here, on this first day of 1945, there were targets galore. For the next 45 minutes, with Jack Prior co-ordinating the radio links with the gunsites from the school playground in Leunen, the Bofors fired almost continuously with devastating effect.

One gun of D Troop 318, commanded by Sergeant William 'Taffy' James, destroyed three aircraft and shared in the destruction of a fourth. 319 – which was at rest at the time, with many guns stripped down for maintenance – rapidly brought its Bofors into action and shot down two more. 317 destroyed at least one FW 190. 'The enemy attacks were very low-level indeed,' Major Crane wrote in a report soon after. 'The pilots were determined, and displayed great skill in low flying. On several occasions the guns had to break off firing owing to the target disappearing behind buildings, trees, or flying below prescribed safety limits.'

In all, the regiment fired 1,765 rounds and destroyed seven planes outright. Two more were shot down in conjunction with a neighbouring

regiment, and five more were awarded as probably destroyed. Four of the German planes were downed in an area only 1,000 yards square – testimony to the intensity of the battle.

As the action ended at 10.15am, the gunlayers slumped from their Bofors, exhausted and dizzy from the frenzied pace of the firing. ‘Today was a really happy one for us,’ the 318 war diary recorded. ‘The Luftwaffe came seeking action and we took it up.’ The CO summed it up even more succinctly. ‘Sheer good shooting, entirely visual,’ he said.

By the end of the day, the Germans had lost more than 200 aircraft over Holland and Belgium and the Luftwaffe’s last gamble had come to nothing. Later, the 3rd Division intelligence summary acknowledged the 92nd’s superb performance during the New Year’s Day attack. Twenty-nine planes had been destroyed by the corps, but the 14 shot down by the 92nd were ‘by far the largest to the credit of a single LAA regiment on that memorable morning’.

10. ACROSS THE RHINE TO VICTORY

January to May 1945

‘Through the early hours of April 25, the regiment’s batteries used up 36,000 rounds. By that evening, organised resistance in Bremen was collapsing and prisoners testified in no uncertain terms as to the effect of sustained Bofors fire in an area shoot.’

FOR the next fortnight, amid snow and deep frost, sporadic shelling, bombing, mortaring and nebelwerfer strikes followed as the Germans tried unsuccessfully to gain a bridgehead across the Maas. On January 5, a V-1 was spotted passing over at low level, followed by 15 more vapour trails. Next day, 17 were seen. Six shells landed on divisional HQ and others on A Troop area.

On the 7th, a Mosquito which passed across the regimental area on reconnaissance over the German lines was shot down. The pilot was seen baling out and was assumed to have parachuted into captivity. Two days later, 92nd LAA was again reorganised, with one troop in each battery being re-equipped with Mark I towed instead of self-propelled guns. Its strength was 36 guns and about 560 personnel. Towards the end of a snowy, foggy month, more rocket trails were sighted, and indirect shoots were carried out against German positions of the east bank of the Maas.

Early in February, as a rapid thaw set in, 318 moved to defend the Venraij-Deurne road and on the 8th an ME 262 was engaged. Next day, 3rd Division was relieved and two days later 92nd LAA moved to rest areas at Koersel, east of Diest, near Hasselt, Belgium. Here, regimental

church services were held, and there was a visit by the regiment's old CO, Brigadier Loder-Symonds.

On February 24, 3rd Division crossed the Maas to reinforce 30 Corps in Operation Veritable, the clearance of the Rhineland. Its job was to penetrate the Siegfried Line on the Xanten-Bonnighardt Ridge and clear the way for a breakout by the Guards Armoured Division. That same day, the 92nd moved from its rest area to Oisterwijk, near Tilburg, Holland.

Two days later, at 2.30am on Tuesday February 27, it crossed the German frontier at Hekkens and deployed around Goch, setting up headquarters in cellars on the south side of the town. Shoots were carried out on enemy-held woods south of Udem and there was a major indirect fire operation to support 185 Brigade's attack on Kervenheim. In 20 minutes, 318 Battery poured 2,400 rounds on enemy trenches. Later, infantry observers reported 'considerable execution.'

By March 3, 185 Brigade had breached the Siegfried Line along the Bonninghardt Ridge and German resistance was broken. RHQ of the 92nd moved to a farmyard in Kervenheim, while the troops were temporarily employed in road construction, traffic duties and guarding PoWs. A sweep of the area for abandoned German equipment recovered 44 rifles, ten panzerfaust anti-tank weapons, four machine-pistols and more than 1,000 jerricans.

Five days later, RHQ was established near Sonsbeck in a farmhouse on the Winnekendonk-Kappellen road. On the 11th, as 3rd Division closed up towards the Rhine, the 92nd defended its line of march along the Xanten-Kalkar road, engaging three separate waves of enemy aircraft. The following day, the regiment moved north to Bedburg, near Kleve. On the 17th, three troops engaged attacking FW 190s, ME 109s and an ME 262, shooting one down. Several planes were hedge-hopping, too low to be fired at.

Between the 15th and 22nd, as the weather again turned icy and roads froze, planning and reconnaissance went ahead for Operation Pepperpot, the 3rd Division bombardment to support 51st Highland Division in Operation Plunder – Montgomery's massive setpiece crossing of the Rhine.

Preliminary operations, dumping ammunition between Wissel and Honnepel, were carried out in great secrecy – under cover of early morning mists, at dusk, or beneath the swirling 20-mile smokescreen that blanketed the west bank of the river. 'We grew to respect it for its complete cover, but hate it for its pungency,' said Captain Almond.

On March 23, 92nd LAA added its weight to the greatest artillery barrage of the war, involving more than 5,500 guns of all types. 318 deployed its Bofors 1,200 yards from the Rhine, west of Rees, aiming on the Emmerich and Vrsasselt area – also the target for 317. 319 was based in a

disused factory near Wissel.

Between 7pm and 8.55pm that night, the skies erupted in flame as each 92nd battery fired between 4,500 and 6,500 rounds across the river, paving the way for the assault troops. As the Bofors pounded away remorselessly, several overheated and suffered damage to recoil mechanisms and barrel wear – parts had to be cannibalised to keep up the rate of fire.

There was a pause on the 24th to allow 21,000 airborne troops to land on the far shore. Then the regiment redeployed north of Wissel to pour fire on the sector of the Rhine between Praest and Emmerich. Over the four days from March 23 to 27, the 92nd fired a total of 32,000 rounds. D Troop of 318 also sent across 46 rounds from a captured German 88mm gun. On the 28th, with 319 leading, the regiment crossed the Rhine, Germany's last major geographical barrier, and moved to Neder Mornster before concentrating at Rees next day.

Now 3rd Division launched an all-out drive north-east to capture Bremen, Germany's second port. With air attacks only sporadic, 12 three-ton lorries were detached from 92nd LAA and used to form a troop-carrying platoon to assist 185 Brigade's advance. The greater part of the regiment and the towed guns remained behind at Rees and only RHQ and the three self-propelled gun troops – attached to the field regiments – accompanied 3rd Division in its pursuit towards the River Weser.

These left Rees on April 1 and advanced north via Werth and Halderm, then just within the Dutch frontier, passing through Lichtenvoorde and Enschede. Here, delighted crowds lined the road to cheer the troops on. But when the convoy re-entered Germany near Nordhorn on April 3, there was no such welcome, only a sullen acceptance of defeat. 'The contrast was very great,' the war diary noted.

On April 4, troops of 185 Brigade in assault boats crossed the Dortmund-Ems canal under fire and started moving on Lingem. The 92nd moved up to defend the bridges over the canal and the River Ems, and over the next two days the gunners were caught up in a ferocious battle with the Luftwaffe. On the 4th, they fought off waves of up to 15 FW 190s and ME 109s which made strafing and bombing runs as 'heavy and accurate' mortar fire stopped deployment of the Bofors on the east bank of the canal.

Next day, moving on to the Sudlohn area, more than a dozen ME 109s and FW 190s made machine-gun and skip-bombing attacks – one ME 109 and one FW 190 being shot down. Between April 4 and 6, the total kill was five enemy aircraft, plus one probable. April 8 saw the regiment concentrated at Hungarian Barracks, Lingem. The following day, after moving through Rheine to Halderm, the 92nd started advancing with 3rd Division directly on Bremen. An FW 190 and an ME 109 were shot down

as they machine-gunned the regimental area at Schwarforden on the 12th. On April 15, with the 92nd at Apelstadt, 1,000 rounds were fired in 'Pepperpot' support of 8 Brigade's attack on Brinkum. Two days later, advance parties moved on to Bassum, Stuhren and Melchiorshausen and ammunition dumping started for an artillery bombardment to support 3rd Division's drive to capture the sector of Bremen south of the River Weser.

Just before midnight on the 24th, the barrage opened – with the 92nd targeting two stretches of road in the Kattenturm area and the city's airfield. Like the Rhine bombardment, the rate of fire was staggering. Through the early hours of the 25th, the regiment's batteries used up 36,000 rounds – equivalent to 37 and a half lorryloads of ammunition. The guns of 319 needed seven new barrels.

By that evening, organised resistance in Bremen was collapsing and 'prisoners testified in no uncertain terms as to the effect of sustained Bofors fire in an area shoot.' Four days later, the 92nd moved to Delmenhorst, west of Bremen, where 62 captured enemy AA guns and 33 panzerfaust anti-tank weapons were destroyed. A sentry of 317 shot a German air force unteroffizier who acted suspiciously after being challenged.

On Thursday May 3, the Bofors were fired in anger for the last time, when D Troop sank two enemy boats on the Weser and blasted a signal station on the far bank of the river. Next day, the Germans in North West Europe surrendered and the order went out to 3rd Division: 'Cancel all offensive operations forthwith and cease fire 0800 hours May 5.'

It was the signal so many had waited so long for – not least, the crew of F Troop's Gun F3. Eleven months after secreting away their rum ration during their D-Day crossing on the LCT carrying them to Sword Beach, they were able to break open the flask and – as they had promised themselves – toast victory.

The following day, the 92nd moved to Gesmold, south-east of Osnabruck, where it took control of the district around Melle. On May 8, VE Day was marked with a service of thanksgiving and a day's holiday. Since D-Day, the regiment had fired 95,627 rounds of 40mm ammunition at air and ground targets. In the air, there were 117 separate engagements, expending 18,878 rounds of 40mm and 8,687 of 20mm. The 92nd's final tally was 48 enemy aircraft destroyed and probably 21 others. During the campaign, two officers and 18 men were killed and four officers and 42 men wounded.

11. OCCUPATION ARMY AND THE FINAL DAYS

May 1945 to February 1946

'You are proud to be Loyals, and the division is proud of you. You can feel happy and proud to have fought through from D-Day and to have earned, by your behaviour and your skill and courage, the affection and admiration of 3rd British Infantry Division.'

FROM VE Day onwards, the regiment remained with the army of occupation, but was employed virtually as infantry, concentrating on supervising displaced persons, arresting SS men and other Nazis, destroying enemy equipment and policing troublesome freed Russian PoWs. On May 10, Lieutenant Colonel Henderson stepped down and Lieutenant Colonel C M Adderley took command.

May 18 saw the regiment move from Gesmold to the neighbouring town of Melle. Towards the end of May, 3rd Division moved 100 miles south-east to the neighbourhood of Kassel, and the 92nd became responsible for the district around Warburg. It guarded signals bases, hospitals, warehouses and a camp for Polish, Russian, Rumanian and Serbian displaced persons. After a week here, the regiment moved on June 5 to Sennelager Camp – where the men learned that the regiment was to leave 3rd Division and come under the command of 51st Highland Division.

On June 11, the 92nd paraded at Sennelager before the 3rd Division commander, Major-General Whistler, to say farewell. In a special Order of the Day, he paid an elegant and emotional tribute to the regiment. He told them: 'You are proud to be Loyals, and the division is proud of you. There is no doubt that the work you did before D-Day has shown its results in battle, and nothing could be finer than that. You looked after the division, protecting it from air attacks almost constantly from the moment you landed on D-Day until VE-Day, and I personally have never been seriously worried about the air.

'Once or twice we had a party, but the raids were more enjoyable than dangerous. Whenever there was an attack, you never failed to get your men. I am quite satisfied that you got more German planes than any other regiment of your kind in 21st Army Group. You have been called upon to do some queer tasks. You have fought for me as infantry. You have backed up the infantry of this and other divisions by your barrages, particularly at the crossing of the Rhine and again at Bremen, which was the division's last real battle of the war.

'You can feel happy and proud to have fought through from D-Day and to have earned, by your behaviour and your skill and courage, the affection and admiration of 3rd British Infantry Division. On its behalf I wish goodbye to you and Godspeed and good luck in our future, whatever it may be. I want you to remember whom you have fought with, and

whom you belong to. In the days to come, there may be a reunion of the 3rd British and I shall expect all of you to be there to join again your brothers-in-arms in battle.'

General Whistler had decreed that June 6 should henceforth be kept as a holiday because of 3rd Division's historic role in the Normandy landing. Because the 92nd had been on operational duties that day, it instead observed the holiday on June 12. Four days later, the regiment moved to the north-east of Bremen, guarding 3,000 prisoners at the Milag detainee compound in Westertimke.

Towards the end of the month, three new troops were formed and the batteries were reorganised, each with three troops. On July 14 the regiment moved to Harpstedt. Here, the 92nd finally said farewell to the guns which had served it so well for so long. On July 17 in the gun and vehicle park at Weezendorf, the oiled and cleaned Bofors were handed over to ordnance troops for shipment out via Hamburg.

On August 13, Lieutenant Colonel Adderley was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel R McLay. Although occupation duties still kept the bulk of the 92nd in Germany, some personnel were being transferred to the Far East, where Japan was stubbornly refusing to surrender – Major Crane and Jack Prior were sent to India.

In a top-secret plan, codenamed Downfall, 3rd British had been earmarked as one of the assault divisions for a gigantic American-led invasion of the Japanese home islands, scheduled for March 1946. The 3rd was to have formed part of a Commonwealth corps with a Canadian and an Australian division – attacking the main island of Honshu, eventually taking Tokyo. Elements of one 3rd Division unit, the 20th Anti-Tank Regiment, got as far as being emplaned for America. Mercifully – with Allied casualties predicted to be one million – the atomic bombs were dropped and Japan finally capitulated on August 15.

Back in Germany, the 92nd continued its policing duties. On August 18, the regiment evicted all Russian displaced persons and freed PoWs from Harpstedt and Dunsen to camps at Luneburg. At the beginning of September, while 318 stayed at Kreis Hoya, Harpstedt, the regiment moved to Scheessel in the Kreis Rotenburg area. On the 25th, the batteries completed the reorganisation into three troops.

During the month, men began to be released or transferred to other units and by the beginning of October, the regiment's strength was 607. On October 9, the 92nd REME workshop was disbanded. Pioneers took over Harpstedt from 318 on the 22nd and the battery moved to Rotenburg aerodrome. On November 13, Lieutenant Colonel G E C Sikes, DSO took over command and as December opened, the regiment's assignment was guarding a vehicle park on the Bremen-Hamburg autobahn.

All the time, numbers had been gradually dwindling. Because two drafts

of men were scheduled to leave on December 24, Christmas celebrations were held on the 23rd, with the weather snowy. By now, the regiment numbered only 552.

As 1946 opened, the run-down accelerated – and notification came that disbandment was scheduled for February. Throughout January, personnel numbers dwindled rapidly as men were discharged or given other postings. By February 2, most remaining stores, equipment and vehicles were being shipped out.

Two days later, on February 4, 1946, as rain swept Scheessel, the 92nd (Loyals) Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery, was formally disbanded.

It was five years and seven months to the day since the 7th Loyals had been formed at Fulwood Barracks. Most of the men and many of the officers who had made up the newly-raised battalion in that desperate summer of 1940 had stayed with it on its long, eventful journey from fledgling infantry unit to crack mobile anti-aircraft regiment.

Through the long years of training in Britain and their many battles – from the Normandy beaches to Bremen – they had served the guns well. And had proved by their skill, courage and dedication that they were indeed ‘true Loyals.’

*Quo Fas Et Gloria Ducunt
Loyaute M’Oblige*

**SPECIAL REGIMENTAL ORDER
by Lieut-Col C M ADDERLEY, RA
Commanding 92 (Loyals) Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, RA
BLA, Sunday, 13 May 1945**

The following is a list of casualties (excluding accidental injuries and cases of exhaustion) which have occurred in the Regiment since 6 June 1944 until the cessation of hostilities.

KILLED IN ACTION

4123325 A/BSM Connor T (318 Bty)
1567317 W/Sgt Hesford J (317 Bty)
3862765 W/Sgt Penrose A (318 Bty)
1506637 A/Sgt Blake F (318 Bty)
3862752 L/Bdr Guest C G (318 Bty)
14305642 Gnr Bone G R (318 Bty)
3863578 Gnr Davies H A (RHQ)

11403127 Gnr Greaves A (318 Bty)
3862678 Gnr Kemp F (318 Bty)
3863592 Gnr Rowlands J (319 Bty)
2343775 W/Cpl Chalinor G (R Sigs att RHQ)
14233428 Sigmnd Henderson J L (R Sigs att 317 Bty)

MISSING – PRESUMED KILLED

3862773 A/Sgt Ring P D (318 Bty)
3863436 W/Bdr Crane S W (RHQ)
3862777 W/Bdr Wolfe J T (318 Bty)
3862770 Gnr Lever W S (318 Bty)

WOUNDED – SINCE DIED OF WOUNDS

3862870 Gnr Hartley W (318 Bty)

ACCIDENTAL DEATHS

T/Major G L Williams, RA (134363) (318 Bty)
W/Lieut R G Forbes, RA (233023) (319 Bty)
3858941 Gnr Goodman J (317 Bty)

WOUNDED

T/Capt R T Reid, RA (212433) (318 Bty)
W/Lieut C G Russell, RA (229004) (318 Bty)
W/Lieut A J Hands, RA (247705) (318 Bty)
W/Lieut J Roberts, RA (179344) (317 Bty) (wounded twice)
3851645 W/WO 1 (RSM) Nott L (RHQ)
3858822 W/Sgt Cooney T P (317 Bty)
2083723 W/Sgt (AC) How T K (RHQ)
3862670 W/Bdr Jones W (318 Bty)
3859075 W/Sgt Fletcher W (318 Bty)
1550339 W/Sgt Kendrick H T (317 Bty)
3863710 W/Bdr Knight J (317 Bty)
3863610 A/Bdr Gregg P J (319 Bty)
11402813 L/Bdr Bale J F (317 Bty)
3864064 Gnr Andrews S (317 Bty)
862784 Gnr Brady D (317 Bty)
1836295 Gnr Burgering J W (318 Bty)
3863728 Gnr Connor J (318 Bty)
3863671 Gnr Dalton P (318 Bty)
11402498 Gnr Furniss J (318 Bty)
11403130 Gnr Gutteridge F L (318 Bty)
3862795 Gnr Hawley F (318 Bty)
11263228 Gnr Mackay W (318)

3863688 Gnr Newcomen R (317 Bty)
3863744 Gnr Stanley E (318 Bty)
1156070 Gnr Ward A (319 Bty)
14306869 Gnr Young H R (318 Bty)
3525625 W/Bdr Squirrell W (317 Bty)
3862192 Gnr Astley T (317 Bty)
14312144 Gnr Bolton J E (RHQ)
1836540 Gnr Broughton L (318 Bty)
3863726 Gnr Cameron A E (319 Bty) (wounded twice)
3859003 Gnr Eastwood T (319 Bty)
1836657 Gnr Goulbourn T (317 Bty)
11403135 Gnr Hardwick L (318 Bty)
14314464 Gnr Keddie J (319 Bty)
3863586 Gnr McNeil W J (318 Bty)
14317196 Gnr Oakes W F (RHQ)
3863802 Gnr Preston W (317 Bty)
1802527 Gnr Skolton D (20mm)
1802533 Gnr Sorsby S (20mm)
14276848 Gnr Yardley F B (RHQ)
2125498 W/Cpl Wright F (ACC att 318)

ACCIDENTAL WOUNDS

3863608 Gnr France H H (319 Bty)
3854329 Gnr Hayes E S (317 Bty)
1705290 Gnr Perkins W R (319 Bty)

HONOURS AND AWARDS

A list of honours and awards to personnel of the Regiment for the period 6 June 1944 until the cessation of hostilities is published below:

MILITARY CROSS

T/Major P S Crane RA (124164) (RHQ)
T/Capt R T Reid RA (212433) (318 Bty)

CROIX DE GUERRE

W/Lieut N S Coombs RA (247674) (318 Bty)

CROIX DE GUERRE WITH BRONZE STAR

14582468 L/Bdr Donovan J (318 Bty)

COMMANDER IN CHIEF'S CERTIFICATE

3856897 W/Sgt Clements A (318 Bty) 3863519

L/Bdr Foulkes S (317 Bty) 3852774
Gnr Forshaw S J (319 Bty) 3860256
Gnr Smith J (319 Bty)

DIVISIONAL COMMANDER'S COMMENDATION CARD

T/Major P S Crane RA (124164) (RHQ)
W/Lieut N S Coombs RA (247674) (318)
797696 W/Bdr Booth J L (317 Bty)
5677614 L/Bdr Burgess P W (317 Bty)
3859387 L/Bdr Crompton S (317 Bty)
3862159 L/Bdr O'Dowd A (317 Bty)
3864665 Gnr Billingsley T (319 Bty)
3865812 Gnr Duncalf J (317 Bty)
11425165 Gnr Marcus G R (317 Bty)
1834045 Gnr Kemp J W N (317 Bty)
3864272 Gnr Riskey A (319 Bty)
3863829 Gnr Sherlock D (319 Bty) 3860256
Gnr Smith J (319 Bty)

**(Signed) Captain
Adjutant,
92 (Loyals) LAA Regiment RA**

THE FALLEN OF 7th LOYALS / 92nd LAA

FROM the formation of 7th Loyals on July 4, 1940, to D-Day, at least six men died while on duty in England, although new information received in 2009 suggests this figure could be substantially larger – and I am still researching this aspect.

The unit's first recorded fatal casualty was Private Albert Stones, killed by German bombing during the Blitz in Liverpool in December 1940. Three more men were killed by mines during training. A further two died in traffic accidents.

A total of 21 officers and men from the regiment, or attached to it, are officially listed as having been killed during the 11 months from D-Day to VE-Day, a casualty rate of around six per cent. Again, this figure may have been larger and is still being researched.

The official casualty list is not comprehensive, especially in respect of men who were wounded. For instance, the wounding of the author's father, Leo McCarthy, a few days after D-Day is officially unrecorded and I was told by the late Jack Prior that other wounded casualties were also not recorded.

The largest death toll for any one incident was on D-Day, when seven men were killed in the shelling of the liberty ship *Sambut* in the Channel. An eighth man died three days later of wounds. On July 18, four men were killed in the Orne bridgehead by German bombing, and on July 27 two men died in another bombing attack. Other deaths came singly. Details of casualties listed here are supplied by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Those who have no known grave are honoured on the appropriate war memorial. Names are given in chronological order of death. Where several men died on the same day, the list is in alphabetical order. Numbers refer to positions on memorials or to grave plot numbers.

3863483 Private Albert Edward Stones, no age recorded (C Company, 7th Loyals). Died December 21, 1940. No further personal information.
St Pancras Cemetery, Middlesex, Joint Grave 69.

3863734 Private William Hewitt, aged 28 (7th Loyals, Company unknown) Died April 6, 1941. Son of William and Sarah Ellen Hewitt, of Wavertree, Liverpool.
Scarborough (Manor Road) Cemetery, Section U, Row 4, Grave 18.

3863734 Private Edward Stephen McGreavy, aged 28 (7th Loyals, Company unknown) Died April 6, 1941 No further personal information.
Liverpool (Ford) Roman Catholic Cemetery, Section A.F, Grave 638.

3862219 Private Sydney Taylor, aged 28 (A Company, 7th Loyals) Died September 15, 1941 Son of George and Annie Taylor, of Openshaw, Manchester.
Droylsden Cemetery, Lancashire, Section S, Grave 299.

1836235 Gunner George Harry Albert Dansey, aged 20 (Battery unknown) Died May 20, 1942. Son of Victor George and Florance Lavinia Dansey, of Clacton-on-Sea, Essex.
Hertford Corporation Cemetery, Hertfordshire, Section D, Row D, Grave 45.

3853592 Gunner Frederick Wilson, no age recorded (318 Battery) Died June 21, 1942. No further personal information.
Fulham New Cemetery, Surrey, Section CC, Grave 463.

1506637 Serjeant Frederick Blaker, aged 25 (318 Battery) Died June 6, 1944. Son of Edwin A and Beatrice M Blaker, of Worthing, Sussex.
Bayeux Memorial, Panel 11, column 1.

2343775 Corporal George Challinor, aged 28 (Royal Corps of Signals attached RHQ) Died June 6, 1944. Son of Arthur and Emma Barlow Challinor, of Nantwich, Cheshire.

Dover (St James 's) Cemetery, Kent.

3863436 Bombardier Sidney William Crane, aged 30 (RHQ) Died June 6, 1944. Son of William George Crane and Hannah Crane (nee Marshall); husband of Ivy Winnifred Crane, of Fulham, London.

Bayeux Memorial, Panel 11, column 1.

3863578 Gunner Herbert Alexander Davies, aged 32 (RHQ) Died June 6, 1944. Son of George and Maud Davies, of Liverpool; husband of Grace Elizabeth Davies, of Liverpool.

Bayeux Memorial, Panel 11 Column 2.

3862770 Gunner Wilfred Stanley Lever, aged 35 (318 Battery). Died June 6, 1944. Son of James Albert and Alice Lever, of Northwich, Cheshire.

Bayeux Memorial, Panel 11, Column 2.

3862773 Serjeant Percy David Ring, aged 32 (318 Battery). Died June 6, 1944. Son of Mr and Mrs John Ring; husband of of Jessie Ring, of Redhill, Surrey.

Bayeux Memorial, Panel 11, Column 1.

3862777 Bombardier John Thomas Wolfe, aged 32 (318 Battery). Died June 6, 1944. Son of John and Elizabeth Wolfe; husband of Amy Wolfe, of Liverpool.

Bayeux Memorial, panel 11, column 1.

3862870 Gunner Walter Hartley, aged 31 (318 Battery). Died June 9, 1944. Son of Joseph and Hannah Hartley, of Bootle.

Bootle Cemetery, Lancashire.

1567317 Serjeant John Hesford, aged 30 (317 Battery). Died June 24, 1944. Son of Albert Thomas and Maud Hesford, of Astley Bridge, Bolton, Lancashire.

La Delivrande War Cemetery, Douvres, VI.J.4.

14305642 Gunner Gordon Raymond Bone, aged 21 (318 Battery). Died July 18, 1944. Son of Mr and Mrs C Bone, of Botley, Hampshire.

Hermanville War Cemetery, 5.D.6.

3862752 Lance Bombardier Cyril Griffiths Guest, aged 31 (318 Battery). Died July 18, 1944 Son of Martha Guest, of Chester.
Hermanville War Cemetery, 5.D.11.

3862678 Gunner Frederick Kemp, aged 32 (318 Battery). Died July 18, 1944. No further personal information.
Hermanville War Cemetery, 5.D.7.

3862765 Serjeant Alfred Ernest Penrose, aged 33 (318 Battery). Died July 18, 1944. Son of Alfred Ernest and Isabella Penrose, of Liverpool; husband of Elsie Penrose, of Liverpool.
Hermanville War Cemetery, 5.D.13.

4123325 Warrant Officer Class II Francis Joseph Connor, aged 32 (318 Battery). Died July 25, 1944. No further personal information.
Ranville War Cemetery, II.B.23.

11403127 Gunner Arthur Greaves, aged 34 (318 Battery). Died July 25, 1944. Son of Mr and Mrs Arthur Greaves, of Nottingham; husband of Louisa Mary Greaves, of Nottingham.
Ranville War Cemetery, II.A.33.

14233428 Signalman John Lewis Henderson, aged 23 (Royal Corps of Signals, attached 317 Battery). Died July 27, 1944. No further personal information.
Ranville War Cemetery, I.E.14.

134363 Major George Leslie Williams, aged 32 (Commanding 318 Battery). Died August 3, 1944. Son of Jesse and Victoria Evelyn Williams; husband of Constance Mary Williams, of Meols, Hoylake, Cheshire.
Bayeux War Cemetery, III.J.2.

233023 Lieutenant Richard George Forbes, no age recorded (319 Battery). Died August 6, 1944. No further personal information.
Bayeux War Cemetery XX.F.27.

3858941 Gunner James Goodman, aged 25 (317 Battery). Died September 4, 1944. Son of Lawrence and Edith Goodman; husband of Mary Goodman, of Horwich, Lancashire.
St Desir War Cemetery, II.C.1.

3858979 Bombardier John Nicholson, aged 26 (Counter–Mortar Unit).
Died October 27, 1944. Son of John William and Eliza Nicholson;
husband of Ada Nicholson, of Little Hulton, Lancashire.
Overloon War Cemetery, Netherlands, II.E.12.

3863592 Gunner John Lockett Rowland, aged 32 (319 Battery) Died
October 31, 1944. Son of Thomas and Mary Rowland, of Runcorn,
Cheshire; husband of Monica Rowland, of Runcorn.
Overloon War Cemetery, Netherlands, I.E.13.

Their Name Liveth For Evermore