

TRUE LOYALS

SECOND EDITION

A History of 7th Battalion,
The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) / 92nd (Loyals)
Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment,
Royal Artillery, 1940-1946

By

Tom McCarthy

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Foreword

I STARTED this project in 1992, five years after my father's death. Although he had sometimes talked about his war service, I knew very little detail other than that he had landed in France on D-Day.

However, when I tried to find out more about 7th Loyals / 92nd LAA, I discovered that published material was sparse. So I decided to do my own research – and it became something of a labour of love.

In the ensuing 20 years, I gathered a mountain of information and managed to piece together the whole story. My main documentary source was the regimental, battalion and battery war diaries and other official military papers held at the Public Record Office (now the National Archives) in Kew, South West London.

But by far the most valuable contribution has been that of my father's old comrades, several of whom I was lucky enough to trace. As well as sharing their time and their memories, they have twice given me the privilege of accompanying them back to the Normandy battlefields. I will always be grateful to them.

In addition, I have been helped immensely by the families of deceased regimental members who have passed on to me photographs, documents, letters and memoirs, and by other amateur researchers and historians – mostly via the magic of the Internet. All have been unfailingly kind and generous and I offer my thanks.

7th Loyals / 92nd LAA was one of scores of Army units which were raised specifically for service in the Second World War and disbanded soon after. In most cases, they had no tradition or longevity to commend them to the historian. Thus,

many valiant deeds have almost certainly gone unrecorded and many heroes remain unsung. I hope this history may perhaps inspire others to tell the stories of such units before endeavours fade.

Having said all that, this is not a definitive or official record of 7th Loyals / 92nd LAA – and any errors or omissions are mine alone. However, it is a story well worth the telling. The five-and-a-half year journey of the recruits from drilling with broom handles in the shadow of Caernarvon Castle to becoming one of the crack light anti-aircraft regiments of the British Liberation Army is a tale of dedication, skill and – above all – courage.

In particular, 92nd LAA's tenacious defence of the vital bridges across the Caen Canal and River Orne (Pegasus Bridge and Horsa Bridge) in the days after D-Day, despite losing its reinforcements, was a remarkable feat of arms.

Scores of people have helped me with this history, in ways large and small. Sadly, some are no longer with us. Among many others, I would like to record my debt to Ronald Prince, George Baker, Len Harvey, John (Jack) Prior, Jim Holder-Vale, Tom Mason, David (Dai) Jones, Arthur Walters and Bill Wills. I would also like to thank the Imperial War Museum for its generosity in allowing me to use several photographs.

But most of all, I want to thank my wife Eileen for giving me love and encouragement above and beyond the call of duty during my many years of research.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, 3862893 Leo John McCarthy (Private, B Company, 7th Loyals / Gunner, F Troop, 318 Battery, 92nd LAA) to the memory of my mother Mary, and to all who served.

Tom McCarthy

April 2012

The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire)

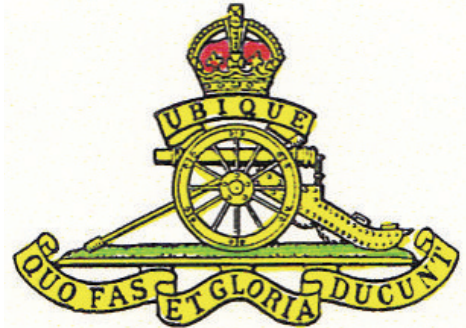
THE Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) originated in 1741 from the 47th Regiment of Foot, raised by Major-General John Mordaunt. It had early connections with Lincolnshire, but established a depot in Preston in 1782. ‘Lancashire’ was added to its title in 1881 and the crest of the Duchy of Lancaster – the Royal crest – was adopted. The rose in the regimental badge is the red rose of Lancashire. The regiment’s motto was *Loyaute M’Oblige* (My Loyalty Compels Me). During the Loyals’ 230-year history as a regiment of the line, its men fought in virtually every campaign of note. At Quebec in 1749, their actions won them the title of Wolfe’s Own. Other campaigns included the American War of Independence, the Napoleonic Wars – when the regiment won honours at Maida in Italy – and the Boer War, where the Loyals stood fast in defence of Kimberley.



In the First World War, the regiment fought on the Western Front and saw service in Baghdad, the Dardanelles and East Africa. This admirable record continued in the Second World War, when the Loyals were among the last soldiers to leave Dunkirk. The regiment later fought in North Africa, Italy and the Far East. In the North West Europe campaign, 92nd and 93rd LAA – formerly the 7th and 8th battalions of the Loyals – served with distinction. The Loyals, whose headquarters were at Fulwood Barracks, Preston, were amalgamated with the Lancashire Regiment in 1970 to form the Queen’s Lancashire Regiment. In 2006, the QLR was amalgamated with the King’s Own Royal Border Regiment and the King’s Regiment to form the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment.

The Royal Artillery

THE Royal Artillery, full title The Royal Regiment of Artillery, was formed in 1716. Its most familiar badge shows a muzzle-loading cannon with the motto *Quo Fas Et Gloria Ducunt* (Whither Right and Glory Lead). Another badge is a grenade emitting seven flames, with a scroll beneath inscribed *Ubique* (Everywhere).



The 3rd British Infantry Division

THE 3rd Division was formed on the orders of the Duke of Wellington in June 1809 as he reorganised his brigades into larger formations in Portugal to continue the Peninsular War against Napoleon. It became known as 'The Fighting 3rd'. During the First World War, the divisional sign was a St Andrew's Cross over a circle, taken from the arms of the GOC, Major-General Aylmer Haldane. During the bitter fighting of 1916, the 3rd earned the title 'the Iron Division'. In 1940, when General

Bernard Montgomery commanded 3rd Division, it was nicknamed 'Monty's Ironsides'. Montgomery introduced the three-in-one red and black triangle as the division's insignia, representing its basic make-up of three infantry brigades, each of three battalions. Today, the division's proud tradition continues as the 3rd (UK) Division.



3rd British Infantry Division

Order of Battle, D-Day

Sword Beach, Normandy, June 6, 1944. H-Hour: 7.25am

8th Infantry Brigade (*Assault brigade*)

1st Battalion, The Suffolk Regiment

2nd Battalion, The East Yorkshire Regiment

1st Battalion, The South Lancashire Regiment

185th Infantry Brigade (*Follow-up brigade*)

2nd Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment

1st Battalion, The Royal Norfolk Regiment

2nd Battalion, The King's Shropshire Light Infantry

9th Infantry Brigade (*Reserve brigade*)

2nd Battalion, The Lincolnshire Regiment

1st Battalion, The King's Own Scottish Borderers

2nd Battalion, The Royal Ulster Rifles

Divisional Troops

7th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery

33rd Field Regiment, Royal Artillery

76th (Highland) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery

20th Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery

92nd (Loyals) Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery

3rd Reconnaissance Regiment (Northumberland Fusiliers)

Royal Armoured Corps

2nd Battalion, The Middlesex Regiment (Machine Gun)

17th Field Company, Royal Engineers
246th Field Company, Royal Engineers
253rd Field Company, Royal Engineers

Units under command for assault phase

27th Armoured Brigade

13th / 18th Royal Hussars
1st East Riding Yeomanry
The Staffordshire Yeomanry

1st (Special Service) Brigade

3, 4 and 6 Commandos
45 Royal Marine Commando
Two troops 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando (French)
One troop Royal Marines Engineer Commando

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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 Loyal Regiment, you can – and I know you will – live up to your old motto, *Loyaute M'Oblige*.

– Brigadier John Wells, Colonel of The Loyal Regiment, to 7th Loyals on the battalion being converted to 92nd LAA at Redcar, November 15, 1941

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.

– Major-General Lashmer 'Bolo' Whistler, officer commanding 3rd British Infantry Division, to 92nd LAA on the regiment leaving the division at Sennelager, Germany, June 11, 1945

CHAPTER ONE

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 its new Prime Minister, Winston 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 woodland 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. There was also a sprinkling



**First headquarters: Coed Helen
is now a caravan park**

**View from the camp: Looking
across the River Seiont estuary
from Coed Helen
to Caernarvon Castle**

of new recruits in the cadre, one of whom was Joseph Worrall, a 23-year-old from Farnworth, Bolton. He had been called up in January that year and had already completed his basic training. So when the cadre went to Caernarvon to prepare for the arrival of the bulk of the 7th Loyals, he was promoted to lance corporal. 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 recruits were a mixed bunch in terms of age, ranging from their late teens to their late twenties. My father, Leo McCarthy, was 29 when he made his way down to Caernarvon from Birkenhead, where he had been a labourer at the Cammell Laird shipyard. On the train taking him to the camp on July 24, he met another conscript, Jack Hartill from Ellesmere Port, who was of similar age and with whom he would form a lifelong friendship.

Among the hundreds of Liverpool recruits – the Scousers who made up the bulk of 7th Loyals – were Billy Baker, Peter Connelly, Michael Cullen, Douglas Davies, James Lyon, John Potter, Henry Woodall, Philip Gregg and Tom ‘Mogsy’ Mason.

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 Lieutenant-Colonel) William Plant and the adjutant was Captain (later Major) Peter Crane.

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



Leo McCarthy

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.’

The lack of basic necessities extended to furniture. Finding there was not enough seating for the recruits in the camp’s meal tents, officers had to scour Caernarvon to try to make up the shortage – and even borrowed benches from local chapels.

As the men tried to settle into dozens of bell tents strung out across the Coed Helen



Major Peter Crane

estate, it was very much make do and mend.

‘We were still wearing our civilian clothes for weeks after we got there and drilling with broom handles,’ recalled Ronald Prince, a Birkenhead-born printer who was called up into 7th Loyals at the age of 28 and later became a corporal in the battalion.

In his memoirs, Michael Cullen left a vivid and often colourful account of his service with 7th Loyals after he was 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



James Lyon



John Potter

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. A former cotton mill worker from Summerseat, near Bury, he joined the Loyals in 1925 at the age of 18 and was with the regiment during the Dunkirk evacuation.

Michael Cullen continued: ‘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.’ When eventually the recruits received their uniforms and equipment, it was all a bit hit-and-miss. ‘We were

marched to the quartermaster's stores to be fitted out with kit. The quartermaster 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



Ronald Prince



Tom Mason



The new recruits: Soldiers of 7th Battalion at Coed Helen Camp in 1940



The new recruits: More soldiers of 7th Loyals at Coed Helen



The new recruits: These are possibly men of C or D Company



The new recruits: A fourth group of conscripts pictured at Coed Helen



Joseph Worrall



Len Nott

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!"'



Peter Connelly

Tom Mason had a similar experience on arrival at Coed Helen. He recalled how their first meal was a pot of plum jam, a loaf and half a kipper. 'We slept eight men to a tent, but there were no beds, we lay on the ground. We were still in civvies for weeks and at first only had old Ross rifles from the First World War to train with.' Coming to terms with military life was not

easy for many of the men and led to some amusing situations. Tom recalled how one young conscript was put on sentry duty at the entrance to the camp and instructed by his NCO that if anyone in uniform approached, he was to turn out the guard. Soon after, the rather nervous new soldier saw a uniformed figure heading his way and shouted for the guard to turn out. The troops duly emerged from the guard hut, armed and ready – only to find the local postman riding towards the camp entrance on his bike.

However, Tom and his comrades gradually became used to the routine and got to know one another, forming firm friendships. They also got to know their officers, including one who was rather too fond of a drink. One day, meeting a group of off-duty soldiers in the street in Caernarvon, and being rather the worse for wear, this officer forgot he was not in camp and ordered the men to start drilling. Baffled and bemused, the raw Loyals could only comply – an order was an order, after all.

Passers-by looked on in amazement as the men were marched up and down the road. However, such light-hearted episodes were few and far between as the war situation deteriorated and a German invasion was thought to be imminent following the Fall of France. Throughout the summer and early autumn, training was combined with beach defence, patrols and practice



Henry Woodall



Douglas Davies

Picture: Cameron Robb



New 7th Loyals recruits, including Philip Gregg and John Rowland (far right)

alerts, 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.

With the onset of autumn, the weather worsened and the tented camp at times became almost uninhabitable as it was battered by wind and rain. However, on September 28 the stay in Wales finally ended when the battalion was transferred by train to Liverpool to take up its first major operational role – helping protect the port against German invasion. The 7th's base was to the north of the city in Great Crosby, with headquarters at the Northern Cricket Ground in Elm Avenue. A and C companies were stationed at 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 major air raids as the Luftwaffe attacked the miles of docks and wharves either side of the river and the 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,' Ronald 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. ‘The bombing was very bad,’ said Tom Mason. ‘It was hell on Earth.’

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 (*anti-aircraft*) 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 during the busy Christmas period and Private Albert Stones, who volunteered for this work, was killed by a bomb blast in billets in Bootle on December 21.

Despite the mayhem of the air raids, the battalion’s normal training was fitted in as often as possible, with the emphasis on physical fitness. Every day, sometimes before breakfast, the men would be sent out on runs of ten or even 15 miles. The soldiers also regularly took advantage of the nearby rifle ranges at Altcar, giving them an excellent grounding in firing small arms.

But as 1941 opened, another period of change dawned for the 7th. At the start of February, the CO, Colonel Wilson, stepped down because of illness and his second-in-command, Major Plant, took over – later being promoted to lieutenant-colonel. 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.

CHAPTER TWO

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. Battalion headquarters was at the Raven Hall Hotel, Ravenscar, with A and C companies at Cloughton, B Company at Robin Hood’s Bay and D Company at Hayburn Wyke.

‘The battalion’s role was entirely operational and training was fitted in wherever possible,’ wrote Major Crane. ‘However, opportunities for normal



Raven Hall Hotel, Ravenscar: Battalion HQ

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



Whitby: The soldiers operated the anti-submarine boom

struck along the coast on April 6, 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



**It was a hard winter:
Snowbound Robin Hood's Bay**

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: Company HQ

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, the Loyals 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



**Highland Laddie Inn:
Battalion HQ, July 1941**



Kirkleatham Hall, Redcar: HQ during conversion

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. Ironically, Grangetown was only a decoy airfield, built to lure German bombers away from RAF Thornaby, six miles further west. Back in Redcar, a German bomber struck on the 21st, causing civilian casualties.

One rather dispiriting exercise for the battalion involved testing the Boys anti-tank rifle, which even at that early stage of the war was largely ineffectual against enemy armour. A Bren Gun carrier was driven on to the beach at Redcar and the men

were assured by the CO, Colonel Plant, that the rifle's bullet would blast a hole in the vehicle. 'But it just bounced off,' recalled Tom Mason. 'It was useless.'

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.

However, 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.

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in co-operation with the War Office

Beating the INVADER

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER

IF invasion comes, everyone - young or old, men and women - will be eager to play their part worthily. By far the greater part of the country will not be immediately involved. Even along our coasts, the greater part will remain unaffected. But where the enemy lands, or tries to land, there will be most violent fighting. Not only will there be the battles when the enemy tries to come ashore, but afterwards there will fall upon his lodgments very heavy British counter-attacks, and all the enemy's lodgments will be under the heaviest attack by British bombers.

troops are landed in their neighbourhood. Above all, they must not cumber the roads. Like their fellow-countrymen on the coasts, they must "STAND FIRM". The Home Guard, supported by strong mobile columns wherever the enemy's numbers require it, will immediately come to grips with the invaders, and there is little doubt will soon destroy them.

Throughout the rest of the country where there is no fighting going on and no close cannon fire or rifle fire can be heard, everyone will govern his

CHAPTER THREE

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.

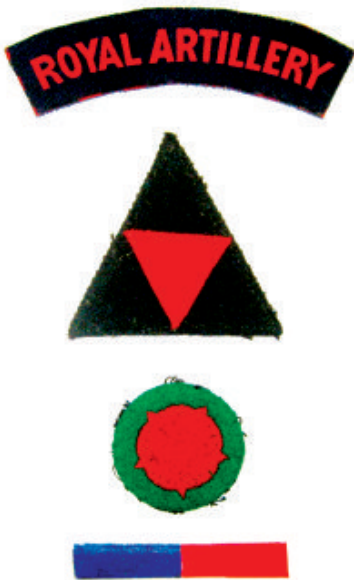
Two days later, on November 15, 1941, the battalion was officially converted to an artillery unit. But its proud origins as part of The Loyal Regiment were enshrined in its new title. It became the 92nd (Loyals) Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery.

The 7th Loyals was one of 22 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 regimental headquarters (RHQ) and three batteries. Each battery was

When 7th Loyals converted to 92nd LAA, the soldiers kept a reminder of their Loyal Regiment origins on their shoulder badges – the red rose of Lancashire. The four badges consisted of the Royal Artillery name, the 3rd Division triangular insignia, the RA field identification bar and the red rose. The badges pictured here (except the field identification bar) are the actual ones worn by Len Harvey of 92nd LAA on active service from D-Day onwards.

The sequence of badges can be seen in this picture of Gunner Idwal Lewis of 92nd LAA.



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.

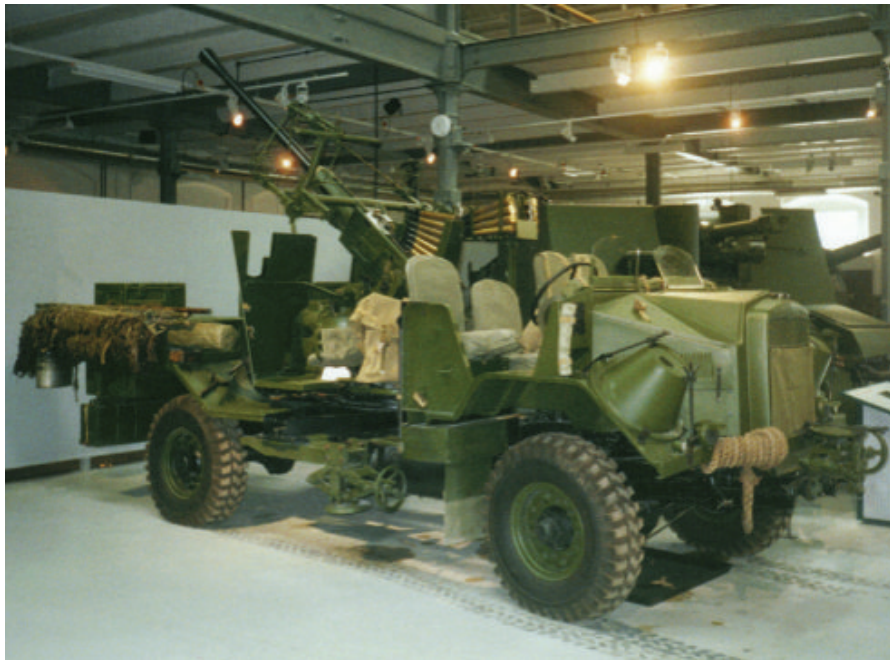
Initially, LAA regiments used towed versions, but self-propelled models – with the gun set on the back of a Morris C9B Commercial lorry chassis – were later built for even greater mobility and battle-readiness. Another mobile version, not used by LAA regiments, had a Bofors mounted on a Crusader light 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



**A towed 40mm Bofors Gun:
The classic light anti-aircraft weapon**



**A self-propelled 40mm
Bofors Gun:
These were developed
later in the war**

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 (consisting of A, B and C Troops), 318 (D, E and F Troops) and 319 (G, H and I Troops). Three of the 7th's four rifle companies – A, B and C – were simply converted into 317 Battery, 318 Battery and 319 Battery, with the men of the remaining rifle company, D, being distributed among the three.

Battery commanders were Majors N H Joynson, M S Gornall and Peter 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 300 yards 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, who had been called up with the original intake of Merseyside men when the 7th Battalion was formed in 1940. Before being drafted into the Loyals, Leo was 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 Ark's anti-aircraft guns – which were quick-firing Vickers 40mm pom-poms, a similar weapon to the Bofors. So when as a new artilleryman he encountered the Bofors, Leo had more idea than most how an anti-aircraft gun 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.

CHAPTER FOUR

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.’

PRELIMINARY training for 317 and 319 started at Aberystwyth in mid-Wales and for 318 at Saughton Camp, outside Chester. But 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 anti-aircraft school at Stiffkey, near Wells-next-the-Sea on the Norfolk coast – ‘a desolate, lonely place with one little pub that was full if it had four people in it,’ Ronald 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 60-room redbrick Victorian mansion set in 180 acres of wooded grounds near Watton-at-Stone, Hertfordshire. While 317 and 319 moved into this impressive 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



Stiffkey Army Camp: Light anti-aircraft gunnery school



Stiffkey village: The city lads of 92nd LAA found it rather lonely

Frogmore Hall: Sixty-room mansion set in wooded grounds



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 Ashe Down. The non-swimmers among the 92nd's men were taught to swim.

On August 15, Lieutenant-Colonel James Bell Hollwey took over from Lieutenant-Colonel Plant as commanding officer of the 92nd. 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



**Clacton-on-Sea, Essex: The regiment was sent here
for firing practice**



**Sandbanks: The 92nd's guns guarded
the entrance to Poole Harbour**

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 Gunner George Baker of the 92nd. ‘When they got near the coast, they would sweep up and in, either aiming at targets or just giving harassing fire.’

George, a 19-year-old Liverpudlian, had volunteered for the Army in April 1941 despite having a reserved occupation in weapons manufacture. But military service became less than exciting for him after he found himself posted to a coastal defence battery on the tiny island of Inchkeith in the Firth of Forth.



George Baker

Wanting to see more action, he arranged for his brother Billy – who was already in 92nd LAA – to ‘claim’ him into the regiment in the autumn of 1942, under the system that allowed brothers to choose to serve together.

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 217 (DO 217) bomber was engaged by 317, but managed to drop its



Officers of 318 Battery, 92nd LAA, at Folkestone in 1942. Back row, from left: Lieutenant Frank Simpson, Lieutenant Andy Andrews, Lieutenant Nigel Coombs, Lieutenant Jack Hands, Lieutenant Des Marsh, Lieutenant Bill Almond, Lieutenant Jack Shepherd. Front row: Captain C Murdoch, Captain Jack Graystone, Major George Williams, Captain John Campbell, Captain Des Barnes

bomb load on Ashford. On December 30, four FW 190s were engaged at Camber. This dramatic encounter was graphically recorded by Michael Cullen in his memoirs. He told 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 (*a soldier who loads ammunition into the gun*), 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



**Camber Sands: German FW 190 raiders attacked
a 92nd LAA gunsite**

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.

These cumbersome box-like devices, a type of early computer, were powered by a separate electricity generator and

set up to feed targeting information to the gun by ‘predicting’ where an enemy plane was likely to be at a given time. But they were so heavy they needed four men just to lift them into position – clearly impractical for units where speed and dexterity were the watchword. Indeed, 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. 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



**Brighton: Guns were sited on the promenade
in front of the Grand Hotel**

were sited along the front in case of any sudden attacks from the air.’ On the 9th, a DO 217 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 217 over the sea at Newhaven with a five-second burst of fire. On the 22nd, the batteries returned to Folkestone and Aldington.



Newhaven: G Troop of 319 Battery achieved the regiment’s first Category One

CHAPTER FIVE

COUNTDOWN TO OVERLORD

March 1943 to April 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, where the gunners bivouacked under the racecourse grandstand. The regiment's 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.

The regiment deployed at various locations around the two towns. In Castle Douglas, regimental headquarters was established in a large house at the eastern end of the main road, King Street. Much of the unit's activities centred around Carlingwark Loch at the western edge of Castle Douglas, where Nissen huts were set up to house the troops. Other billets included a church and a bowling clubhouse.

The routine at Castle Douglas was constant training – PT, route marches, cross-country running, sport and, most of all, gun drill.

‘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 Harris 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.’ Third Division was

**Castle Douglas,
Kircudbrightshire:
92nd’s LAA’s base for
invasion training**



**Carlingwark Loch, Castle
Douglas: Part of the regiment was
encamped here**

initially earmarked not for the invasion of Normandy, but for the attack on Sicily. The men of 92nd LAA had some inkling of the Sicily mission and one day early in 1943, the news went round the regiment that hot weather equipment had now arrived in the quartermaster's stores in preparation for the operation.

But it was not to be. In late April, at the insistence of Canadian Military Headquarters in Britain, a Canadian division – the 1st Infantry – was instead given the Sicily invasion task, displacing the British division.

Len Harvey, a 19-year-old Londoner in F Troop, 318 Battery, recalled that he and his comrades were disappointed at this news. 'We did feel let down because our adrenaline was



Len Harvey

high – we were hyped up and ready to go.'

But soon after, the CO of 318, Captain Robert Tennant Reid, called the men together to read them a letter that had arrived from the top brass, telling them that they would instead now be training for the invasion of North West Europe.

From then on, each Bofors crew was boosted from seven men to nine men. This was when Leo McCarthy was transferred to Gun F3 of F Troop, a tight-knit team under the auspices of Sergeant Bill Fletcher.

'Sergeant Fletcher always said he needed a regular, good No 2 layer for line and we certainly got one in Leo,' said Len. 'He oozed confidence and Gun F3 was now complete. Leo became a very good friend – he was 11 years older than me and was almost a father figure.'

Len also admired Sergeant Fletcher, who came from Little Hulton, near Bolton. 'He was a good sergeant, a good leader,' he said. 'He was a very special man.' In 92nd LAA, Len was a

Cockney surrounded by Scousers – but he got on famously with them. Born in Limehouse, East London, he volunteered for the Army after working as a page boy at the Langham Hotel in the West End and later as a fitter's mate in Barking power station. Following training as an artilleryman, he found himself in a quiet posting near Edinburgh. Wishing to see more action, he put himself forward for service overseas. Instead, he was sent to join 92nd LAA in Castle Douglas.



Bill Fletcher

Now the countdown to Overlord had begun, life got ever harder for the 92nd LAA men. ‘If we thought previous training was tough, we soon learned it was mild compared to the regime we were now put under,’ said Len. ‘There were physical exercises every morning at 6am, route marches up to 20 miles, cross-country running in ten-mile stints. We were woken from sleep, put into troop-carrying lorries, dropped 15 miles away at 6.30am and told to make our own way back to camp, with breakfast being served at 8am. If we were late back, we missed breakfast.’

Because Len looked so young, Sergeant Fletcher used to send him across to farms to ask for eggs when the troop was out on manoeuvres. Len recalled that the Scots were kind and generous. ‘The people were wonderful. I think they took pity on me – I only looked about 16 or 17. It is said that Scottish people are thrifty, but on every farm I went to, the farmers gave me eggs willingly and never asked for a penny or anything in exchange, though I would have been prepared to pay them if they had asked. The Women’s Institute could not do enough to help us, at times laundering and sewing and in Dalbeattie a

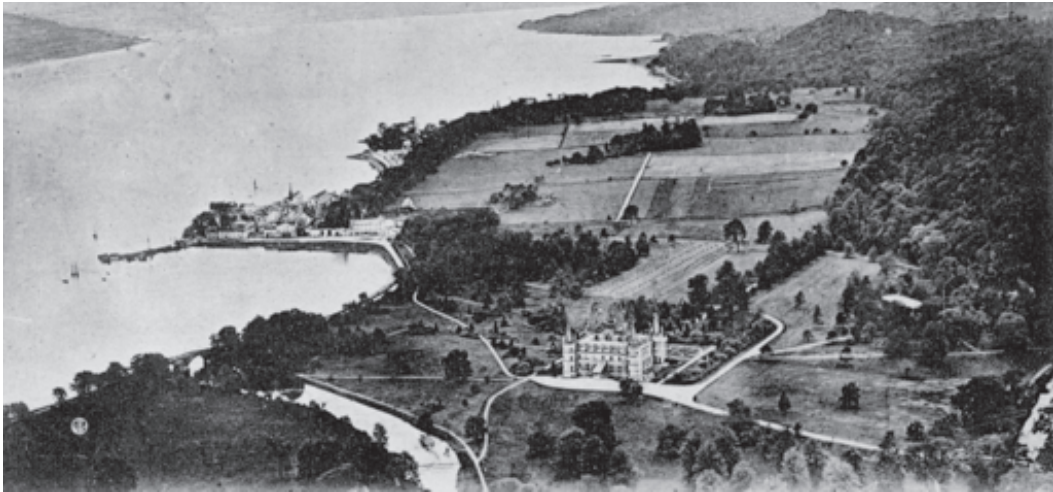
WI lady would make sure that the men on guard duty got a hot beverage. In helping us, they must have felt they were helping their husbands and sons, because they too were in the Forces. My time in Scotland left me with a feeling of immense respect for the people and the way they welcomed us.’

By contrast, the French farmers would turn out not to be so generous after the regiment landed in Normandy the following year. On the evening of D-Day, as the troop was dug in near Benouville, Sergeant Fletcher sent Len to a nearby farm to ask for eggs. Len recalled: ‘In broken English, the farmer asked, “What have you got for the eggs? Money no good. You got soap, cigarettes, chocolates?”’ Eventually, Len swapped three bars of soap for a dozen eggs.

The 92nd’s initial invasion exercises started 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



92nd LAA soldiers in Castle Douglas: John Potter is top right



Inverary and Loch Fyne: The 92nd practised beach landings here



Henry Woodall's comrades in E Troop

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!’

Back in Castle Douglas, classes in aircraft recognition, a vital skill for Bofors gunners, were held three times a week. The men had to know instantaneously if a plane they spotted was a friend or an enemy. ‘By the time we actually got to Normandy and went into action, we could tell every plane that was in the sky,’ said Len Harvey.

‘We had a class with models and charts. A little fellow would teach us and try and catch us out. He’d show you a silhouette and say, “What’s that?” or he’d show you a model and say, “What’s that?” But you got to know the aircraft from all different angles. I could tell every plane later on in the war and it was all because of the training we got there.’

As May opened, the emphasis was on endurance work, including day-long hill walking and river crossing. But there was an unexpected off-duty spree for a few of the men – a night on the town in Castle Douglas.

It came courtesy of Joe Lavender, the second gunlayer on F3. Joe, who came from Chester, was also the unit’s unofficial barber, earning sixpence or so a time for cutting the men’s hair. This money steadily accumulated and one day in early May he placed a £10 bet on a horse called Herringbone in the 1,000 Guineas – and it won.

With his windfall, Joe took his fellow gunlayer Leo McCarthy and two other friends out for the evening, and the



Officers of 319 Battery, 92nd LAA, possibly in Castle Douglas, 1943

drink flowed. The four returned to their billets extremely late and the worse for wear, making a lot of noise. Needless to say, their comrades took a dim view of being so rudely awakened by the revellers.

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 Reid 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, the rest of the regiment was suddenly ordered south to Kent for a month of ADGB duties. Sending gunners 450 miles from Scotland to the South Coast when presumably there were already adequate anti-aircraft units in Kent seems at first glance a trifle odd. However, the surprise operation was designed by the top brass to test the 92nd's battle-readiness and its ability to mobilise swiftly.

Travelling in convoy via Catterick, Doncaster and Stevenage, the gunners reached their new locations on June 17. Guns were deployed at Birchington, Finglesham, Lympne RAF aerodrome, Richborough, Cheriton and Hawkinge aerodrome. Another task was apparently to protect slipways that were earmarked for invasion craft from possible German bombing raids. 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 217 raider.

However, one unit of the regiment managed to combine the move to Kent with a little unofficial recreation. When the order came to go south, the 92nd's group of driver-radio operators were 70 miles north of Castle Douglas in Stewarton, between Kilmarnock and Glasgow. They had been sent there to meet up with their Canadian counterparts, who were now earmarked for Sicily, in order to train them on their new wireless sets.

'It was a very pleasant experience with the young Canadians – and we also learned to drink coffee instead of tea and smoke Sweet Caporal cigarettes,' recalled Driver-Op Jim Holder-Vale, from Walthamstow in North East London, who had joined the regiment in December 1942 at the age of 18. 'We said goodbye

to them as they left in their trucks. The windshields were painted green to prevent reflection of the Mediterranean sun, with just vision slots for the driver and passenger.’

Arriving back at Castle Douglas, the driver-ops found the rest of 92nd LAA had already left for Kent. They were given food



Driver-Radio Operator Jim Holder-Vale



92nd LAA driver-operators in Castle Douglas, 1943: From left, Bill Wills, Jim Holder-Vale, Ken Nash (later Hawkes), Bombardier Jack Taylor, Bill Husband, Frank Symons, Murray Harrovan (Royal Signals), Russell ‘Yossell’ Young

**92nd LAA driver-ops
Dai Jones, Eddie Price,
Dai Richards, Les Hall**



and supplies and told to follow. ‘But we decided we would make our own way there,’ said Jim. ‘We would not use the Army camps en route and I thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea to call in and see my Mum and Dad in London. So off we went and we eventually turned up in our four trucks outside my parents’ house.’



**Lt Col Robert
Loder-Symonds**

Jim picked up his girlfriend Joan, who lived nearby, and they all went back to his parents’ house. ‘We had a marvellous evening,’ he recalled. ‘Mum and Dad made us as welcome as possible with rationed grub.’

The driver-ops parked for the night in nearby Epping Forest, sleeping in their trucks, and returned to Jim’s house for breakfast before finally continuing their journey to Kent. It had been a welcome interlude of normality.

The regiment was in Kent until July 14, when it was ordered back to Scotland, arriving at Castle Douglas 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 Hollwey 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 a visit by the band of The Loyal Regiment, plus inter-regiment rugby and boxing matches.

Among the regiment's boxing enthusiasts was Philip Parks, a Liverpudlian who had volunteered for the Army on the outbreak of war in 1939, when he was 19. On one occasion, he had three fights in Castle Douglas town hall, winning two. While in Scotland, he also won the heart of a girl who was working in the Naafi and they were married.



Philip Parks

Another soldier who found a sweetheart in Castle Douglas was the Regimental Sergeant Major, Len Nott. One day, he saw a girl called Eileen Maloney crossing the road in the town and it was 'love at first sight'. Eileen, from Glasgow, was stationed in Castle Douglas with the Land Army. They married in February 1944, witnessed by his best man, Robert Wright – a fellow NCO from 92nd LAA. Len and Eileen remained devoted to each other and were married for 38 years until his death in 1982.

At least three other 92nd LAA men, Lieutenant Johnny Kitchin, Sergeant Bill Fletcher and Gunner Billy Baker, also wed local girls.

Philip Parks, meanwhile, was promoted to bombardier, but things did not go smoothly. 'His duty one particular day was to deliver military mail around Castle Douglas, which entailed meeting officers all day long and, of course, saluting them,' his son Philip recalled.

'Dad got a bit fed up with all this and on one occasion, seeing an officer, he pretended to be sorting his mail and did not salute, which resulted in him being on a charge, i.e. failing to salute. This led to him being reduced back to a gunner. While on this charge, he was confined to regimental headquarters, which was Craig Royston House. But at night, the sergeant in

**Brackla, near Nairn:
92nd LAA was camped
in the airfield**



**Invasion training zone:
Fort George seen from
Chanonry Point**

**Nairn: A plinth on the beach
commemorates 3rd Division**



charge suggested that as Dad was a married soldier living in Castle Douglas, he could go home – but be back by 6am.’ At the end of January, the final phase of 3rd Division’s assault training started when units moved 100 miles north-west to the area around Nairn and Inverness on the Moray Firth. There, they linked up with the ships of Naval Task Force S (for Sword), which was to carry the division to the Normandy beaches.

Farms as far as eight miles inland were evacuated to make way for the thousands of soldiers pouring into the coastal area. On November 28, 318 journeyed to Brackla airfield near Nairn, a few miles from Inverness. Billeted in a Nissen hut inside one of the hangars, the gunners spent the next two months taking part in a series of full-scale invasion exercises along the Moray Firth. Often amid appalling weather, the men refined their loading and assault techniques in tank landing craft, with 92nd LAA concentrating on the stretch of water between Chanonry Point and Fort George.

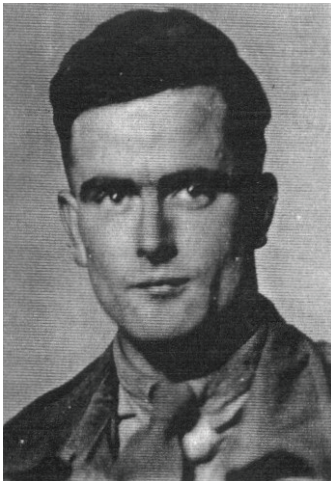
‘The Highlands of Scotland were a sight we had only seen on picture postcards,’ said Michael Cullen. ‘Although winter was setting in, the beauty of this place really was something to us city lads. We arrived at Inverness and pitched camp in a wood. The weather was pretty damp and consisted of a perpetual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



Jack Prior

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 (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) 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 Lieutenant John (Jack) Prior of 92nd LAA. 'The gun 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!'

Jack had joined the Home Guard on leaving school in 1940 before going on to officer training and receiving a commission. After service with ADGB units on the hazardous Dover Command, he joined the 92nd in December 1943 and later became the regimental Intelligence Officer.

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, the gunners 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 Munlochy 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 would be in charge of artillery during Operation Market Garden at Arnhem in September 1944.

Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Charles Bazeley DSO RA assumed command of the 92nd. 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. Gunner Philip Parks was among the men chosen for the Langholm detachment – but, because he was at his in-laws' home in New Galloway, it meant he had first to pedal 12 miles by bicycle to join the trucks going there.

The rest of the month – amid snow – saw telephone silence exercises, 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. ‘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?"'

Len Harvey said: 'I reckon by 1944 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.

'It was supposed to be a secret, but the people knew that we were going south to take part in the invasion,' said Len Harvey. 'Every hamlet, village and town we passed through, they lined the pavements waving and cheering as we drove by, some throwing flowers into the vehicles. Our two gunlayers, Leo McCarthy and Joe Lavender, must have had sore backs because everyone was patting them as they went by, saying: "Go on, lads – give it to them."''

21 ARMY GROUP
PERSONAL MESSAGE
FROM THE C-in-C

To be read out to all Troops

1. The time has come to deal the enemy a terrific blow in Western Europe. The blow will be struck by the combined sea, land, and air forces of the Allies—together constituting one great Allied team, under the supreme command of General Eisenhower.
2. On the eve of this great adventure I send my best wishes to every soldier in the Allied team. To us is given the honour of striking a blow for freedom which will live in history; and in the better days that lie ahead men will speak with pride of our doings. We have a great and a righteous cause. Let us pray that "The Lord Mighty in Battle" will go forth with our armies, and that His special providence will aid us in the struggle.
3. I want every soldier to know that I have complete confidence in the successful outcome of the operations that we are now about to begin. With stout hearts, and with enthusiasm for the contest, let us go forward to victory.
4. And, as we enter the battle, let us recall the words of a famous soldier spoken many years ago:—
*"He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dare not put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all."*
5. Good luck to each one of you. And good hunting on the main land of Europe.

1944.

CHAPTER SIX

HORNDEAN

April to June 1944

‘Don’t think, when we go into action, that it is going to be as easy as this practice run. We will be going to fight in a war and I am confident that you will all put up a good show.’

AFTER leaving Castle Douglas, 318 stopped overnight at Preston – bivouacking on straw-filled palliases in the stand at Preston North End FC, Deepdale, a stone’s throw from Fulwood Barracks – and under canvas at Stevenage, Hertfordshire. Finally, on the 8th, the battery reached Camp A4 south of Horndean, near Portsmouth, one of hundreds 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.

‘We were very well looked after at Horndean,’ Len Harvey recalled. ‘They must have been preparing the camp for months, as it had everything – dining rooms, a cinema, a theatre, recreation huts for indoor sports and bingo sessions. There was everything in that camp for the troops’ entertainment. Card games and coin-toss games could be seen everywhere. The order of the day was rest and enjoyment. It was here that we were given printed cards to send home to our families to say

that we were in good health. However, the cards did not say where we were. After posting these cards, we were all confined to camp so that there was no contact whatsoever with civilians. Secrecy was top priority. We all knew what might happen if the Germans found out about the invasion and were ready and waiting.’

Jim Holder-Vale recalled how most of the men on arrival in their bell tents at Horndean set about building themselves beds. ‘Instead of sleeping on the ground, we went into the woods and cut down trees and branches to make ourselves something more comfortable.’

The 92nd was to be split into four detachments for the invasion. The major task fell to F Troop of 318 Battery, which had undergone special training for a crucial mission. Accompanied by a signals section, it would be the only unit of the regiment to land on D-Day itself, scheduled to come ashore on Queen Red sector of Sword Beach.

Its assignment was right at the sharp end of Overlord – protecting the vitally important bridges across the Caen Canal near Benouville and the River Orne near Ranville, on the eastern flank of the invasion area, which were to be seized in an assault by glider-borne troops. 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.

However, only senior officers knew the precise location and nature of the F Troop task. The rest of the men would not be told until they were actually in the Channel en route to Normandy.

On the day after D-Day, D and E Troops of 318 would land in France 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. Six days after D-Day, 317 would make its crossing to Normandy, followed by 319 just over a fortnight later. 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. They were cut off from the outside world and the perimeter was constantly patrolled by Military Police.

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. 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 and a string of miniature bonfires could soon be seen along the road. Some men erased their home addresses from their Army paybooks, in case of capture by the Germans, who might use such details in propaganda broadcasts.

For Jim Holder-Vale and his comrade Bombardier Jack Taylor, there came an unexpected bonus as they waited at the roadside. A local doctor got talking to them and asked them if they would like a hot bath at his nearby home. They accepted the offer with alacrity. 'He made us very welcome,' said Jim. 'It was a luxury.' Finally, the soldiers of F Troop were transferred

back inside the camp and briefed on their mission, but still without being given any specific geographical information. They knew their task would be protecting something, but did not know what that something would be.

In the confines of the camp, things could understandably become a little heated. Philip Parks found he could not get on with a particular sergeant and it led to a flashpoint. ‘Whether it was because of tension on Dad’s part or not, one evening he chased the sergeant with a baseball bat,’ said Gunner Parks’s son, Philip. ‘Needless to say, the sergeant made a hasty retreat! I asked my Dad, “Were you not afraid of getting into trouble?” To which he replied, “What could they do to me, as we were very likely to be killed anyway!”’

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 was carried the equivalent distance it would cover when it finally crossed the Channel. The 3rd disembarked near Littlehampton, with the objective of ‘capturing’ the town of Arundel – unknown to most of the soldiers, the equivalent of Caen in Normandy, the D-Day target for the Iron Division.

This was one of several occasions when the men, still not 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. All went well

during the exercise, but Sergeant Fletcher told the men of Gun F3: ‘Don’t think, when we go into action, that it is going to be as easy as this practice run. We will be going to fight in a war and I am confident that you will all put up a good show.’

Back at Horndean, the soldiers were given a good meal followed by a show in the theatre with guest performers, including the famous jazz trumpeter Nat Gonella.

Regular concerts became a feature of the gunners’ time in the camp. However, the intention of raising morale was not always achieved, particularly by one emotional female entertainer who gave a show in a marquee. Jim Holder-Vale recalled: ‘She was singing to us and then she suddenly broke down in tears as the occasion got to her, saying, “Oh, you poor boys!” We gave her a great cheer.’

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

On Saturday May 13, in the village of Denmead outside Portsmouth, 50 men of 92nd LAA paraded for a visit to 3rd Division by General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied invasion forces. The American 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. One of the lucky soldiers who exchanged a few words with Eisenhower was Gunner Philip Parks of F Troop.

‘It was good to see your division looking so fit and in such good spirits,’ the Supreme Commander later wrote to the divisional commander, Major-General Tom Rennie. In Denmead on the 22nd, the men of F Troop and



**Eisenhower:
Met 92nd LAA troops**

others from the regiment were called to join another parade and told to smarten up and put on their best uniforms. ‘We marched out of camp and lined up along the road that leads to Portsmouth – the whole of 3rd Division, plus the men of 79th Armoured Division,’ said Len Harvey. ‘The rumour went round that Winston Churchill was to inspect us. When the NCOs came along the lines of paraded men and cleaned our boots with dusters, we knew it was going to be someone special.’

And it really was someone special. ‘As the inspection party drew closer, we could see it was King George VI, accompanied by Field Marshal Alan Brooke. The King stuttered and had difficulty getting his words out, but he spoke to a few of the men in the front rank. After the inspection, we marched back to the camp at Horndean.’



**George VI:
Met 92nd LAA troops**

The King’s visit gave the men a strong hint that they would very soon be going into action. Another indication was the issue of unlimited arms and ammunition. ‘It became obvious that things were getting close,’ said Jim Holder-Vale. ‘Ammunition boxes were brought in and we were told to take what we wanted. I must have taken about eight magazines for my Sten gun, which I stored in pouches round my waist.’

And 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 the following morning to reinforce F Troop at the bridges.

On the evening of June 2, the waiting also finally ended for F Troop, which was scheduled to embark from Stokes Bay, near Gosport, just west of Portsmouth. Len Harvey recalled: ‘The order came to prepare the guns and vehicles for action and put personal items in the 15cwt truck. Was this IT? It certainly sounded like it. But so many times before, we had thought it was the real thing only to find ourselves landing in England. This time, somehow, it felt different.

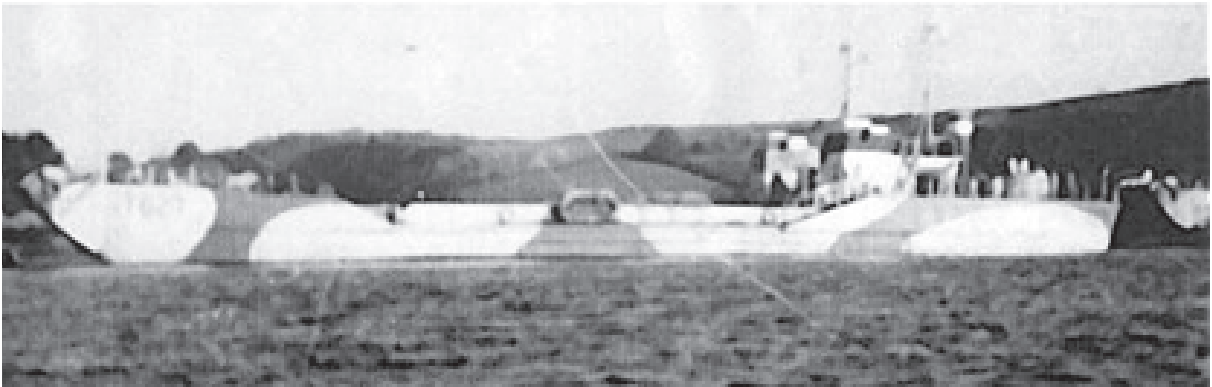
‘We took our positions on the gun, drove out of the camp and parked along the verge of the road to Gosport. Along with tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery guns of all sorts and sizes, we slept that night by the side of our gun, as did hundreds of men in other units. Come the morning, food was brought out to us and we prepared to move on to Gosport.’

At 9am on June 3, the men of F Troop set out along roads crowded with soldiers and vehicles to make the painfully slow 20-mile journey through the Hampshire countryside to the southern end of Stokes Bay near Gilkicker Point. There, they found the flat, curving shoreline of the bay filled with scores of landing craft berthed on ‘hards’ – specially-laid concrete loading ramps.

Awaiting F Troop were two tank landing craft, known as LCTs (Landing Craft, Tank), the workhorses of the invasion armada. LCTs had no names, but were simply designated by their numbers. One was LCT 627, which for Overlord had been given the fleet number 405. The second LCT, whose original number is not known, had the fleet number 408. For clarity, they



Stokes Bay, near Gosport: F Troop embarked here for Normandy



LCT 405: One of two tank landing craft that carried F Troop to Normandy

will from here on be called LCT 405 and LCT 408. By 9.30pm that evening, all the 92nd LAA soldiers – a total of 64 men – had boarded the two tank landing craft along with their guns, lorries and motor cycles. Guns F1, F2 and F3 went aboard LCT 408, while Guns F4, F5 and F6 went aboard LCT 405. Men and vehicles from various other units, such as the Royal Engineers and the Royal Army Service Corps, were also transported on both landing craft.

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 for 24 hours. Confined in their swaying, bobbing ships, the troops could only try to quell their growing seasickness and hope that the misery would soon end.

During the night of June 4, the two F Troop LCTs lay off Ryde, in the shelter of the Isle of Wight. But even that was not much help as the weather became rougher. ‘A lot of the lads started to feel seasick and were a variety of colours – some were blue, some green, some ashen white and all looked ghastly,’ said Len Harvey.

Time dragged by with painful slowness, testing nerves to the limit. 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.

‘Luckily, I was not affected with seasickness and I think I was the only one to have breakfast the next morning,’ said Len. ‘All the lads wanted to do was go and get the job done and get off that bloody ship.’

Aboard LCT 405, Jim Holder-Vale settled down in the back of his truck with his pal Ken Nash, another driver-op. ‘As usual, I slept like a log, a habit learned during the Blitz,’ he recalled. ‘The next morning, apart from being reminded by Lieutenant Desmond “Dizzy” Marsh that the Army frowned upon soldiers sharing their sleeping area, it was obvious there had been a storm in the night. An adjacent LCT had managed to get its

anchor cable under our boat and there was much shouting and manoeuvring. There were hundreds of LCTs all around us.

‘The only area set aside for the troops on our landing craft was a recess at the back of the loading deck beneath the bridge. It looked like a bus shelter with a seat all round the sides. So we slept in our trucks and our hot food was prepared by our cooks in a bulkhead near the ramp at the bow.

‘We were wearing battle dresses that stank of chlorine and the new large “assault” helmets, which were heavy and not well balanced. They had been painted with gas detector paint.

‘We had two 24-hour ration packs, which included boiled sweets and lavatory paper, and as many extra self-heating cans of soup and cocoa as we could lay our hands on, and finally an inflatable lifebelt. Because I was carrying a Sten gun with a large number of filled magazines in my pouches, I would have sunk like a stone if I had gone overboard.’



John Francis Pointon

Despite their discomfort, the thousands of fed-up, fearful and frustrated soldiers being buffeted by the wild waters of the English Channel could do nothing but wait until a decision was made about the invasion. Theirs not to reason why.

Then, almost miraculously, 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 conference with his senior officers near Portsmouth on the evening of June 4, after studying all the maps, hearing all the reports, canvassing all the opinions, after considering

all the facts and all the eventualities, the grim-faced Supreme Commander finally made his decision – one of the most momentous in history.

Eisenhower's decision was: 'We go.'

As the 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.

SUPREME HEADQUARTERS
ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE



Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

Good Luck! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

CHAPTER SEVEN

SWORD BEACH AND THE BENOUVILLE BRIDGES

Tuesday, June 6, 1944

‘We were told that if the enemy were to recapture those bridges, the whole invasion would be put in jeopardy. We were to defend to the last.’

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 flotilla 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.’

As LCT 408 ploughed through the swell, the crew of Gun F3 made a pledge among themselves. When the traditional rum issue was handed out during the crossing, none of them drank it, most being too seasick to stomach it. Instead, 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.

As the light faded, the landing craft were shepherded across the Channel amid a seemingly endless line of frigates, destroyers, cruisers and heavy warships, with motor torpedo boats swerving in and out of the fleet. ‘There were dozens of aircraft overhead – Spitfires, Hurricanes and Typhoons circling the fleet for protection, but soon it was dark and we could hear the noise of heavy bombers on their way to the Continent,’ said Len Harvey.

Late in the afternoon, the men finally learned what they would be facing when they landed in Normandy. ‘Our officer, Lieutenant Nigel Coombs, called all the boys together and told us where we were going and what our task was to be. He said we had to get through as quickly as possible to the two bridges to give support to the Airborne in holding them, even if it meant leaving the other half of the troop behind.

‘We were told that if the enemy were to recapture those bridges, the whole invasion would be put in jeopardy. We were to defend to the last.’

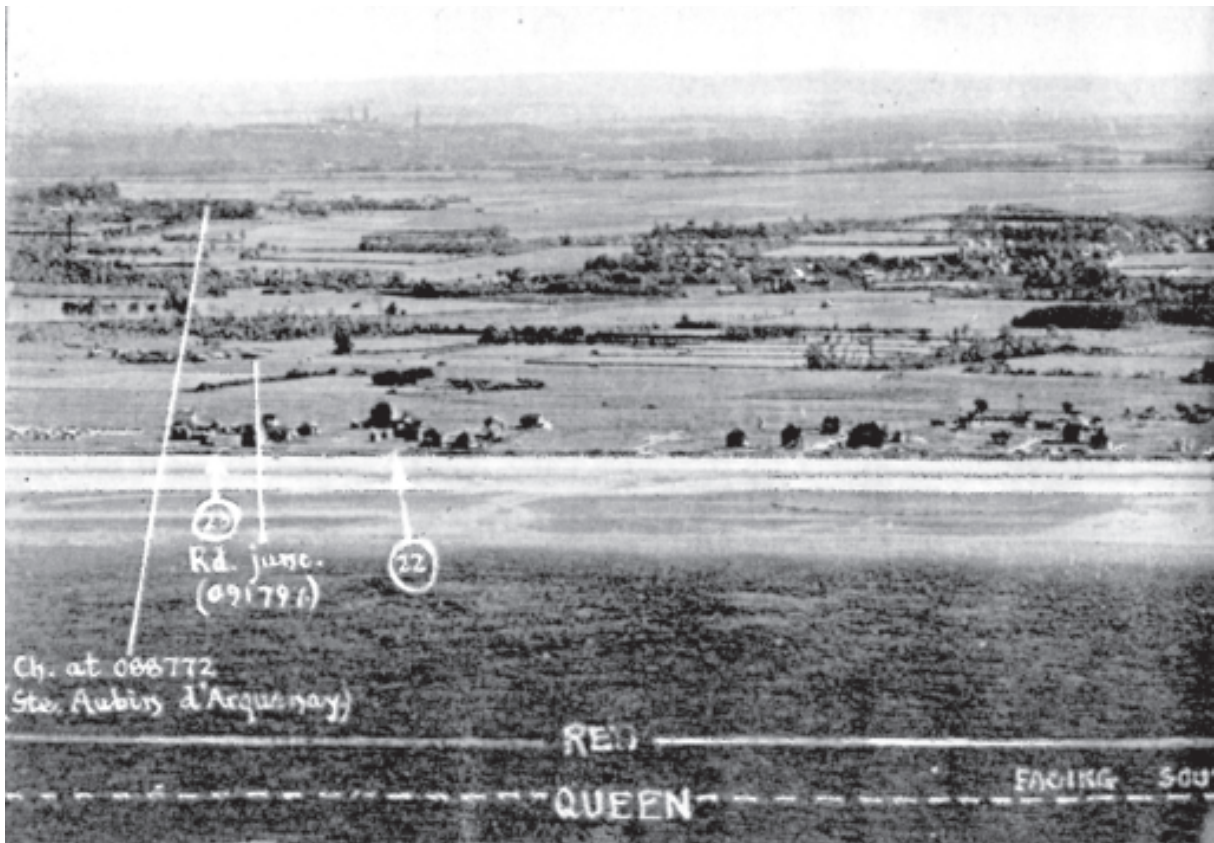
High above the darkened ships, men of the British 6th Airborne Division were also en route for France. At 16 minutes after midnight, a specially-trained reinforced company of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry commanded by Major John Howard landed by glider almost on the Benouville bridges. 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



Sword Beach, D-Day: 3rd British Infantry Division's assault troops landed at 7.25am



Target: F Troop 92nd LAA came ashore on Queen Red sector near la Breche d'Hermanville *Imperial War Museum*



Into battle: View from a landing craft as the invasion forces attack Sword Beach *Imperial War Museum*

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.

On LCT 405, George Baker watched awestruck. ‘It was incredible,’ he said. ‘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 Sword Beach on a narrow front between the small seaside resorts of Colleville and La Breche d’Hermanville and started fighting their way inland. Meanwhile, 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, both of whom went in with the first waves of the assault infantry.

They then accompanied Lord Lovat’s Commando force to reconnoitre towards Benouville by motorcycle. Their job was to find suitable locations around the bridges for the guns, mark them out, and to be ready to receive the main body of the troop.

On reaching the bridges, Captain Reid at one stage went forward alone and came under sniper fire as he checked out the area. But he and Sergeant Connor successfully completed their vital reconnaissance.

By 9.30am, the two F Troop landing craft were about three miles off the beaches. But they were not due to start their run-ins until 1pm, touching down at 1.25pm on Queen Red sector

of Sword Beach near Colleville Plage. Jim Holder-Vale, who was aboard LCT 405, recalled that it was a fine morning, with some sunshine. ‘I did a two-hour listening watch on the boat’s radio, for which the operator gave me a Navy blanket sleeping bag, which did good service over the next few months,’ he said. ‘Ken Nash and I spent most of the time on the port side of the craft under the bridge. Our skipper was the flotilla leader, so our LCT was leading a line of six with another line to our starboard. Accompanying us was a corvette.’

By an astonishing coincidence, one of the officers on the escorting corvette was Ken Nash’s father.

During the crossing, Philip Parks, on Gun F6, got into a game of cards – and won a sum of money which, after the landings, he sent home to his wife in a brown envelope. However, the sight of the envelope would initially fill her with dread rather than delight, because she feared it was an official letter saying he had been killed or wounded.

As LCT 405 got nearer to Normandy, those aboard strained to see the shoreline. ‘Eventually on the horizon we could see what looked like a film set, the dark line of the coast with plumes of dark smoke rising to the east,’ said Jim Holder-Vale. ‘About the same time, we saw our first body float by – a German airman in his pale blue flying suit.

‘Then, quite close, a horned sea mine wandered by, which Ken and I watched with some fascination. Kiwi, the skipper, came out on to the bridge and called down that a mine had been seen nearby and would we watch out for it. He was none too pleased when we told him it had already gone past – he thought we should have told him. Soon, we were starting our run-in. Then Kiwi told us that Ken’s father had sent across a radio message from the corvette, sending his best wishes to Ken and to all of us.’ Jim recalls that his feeling at this time was one of apprehension, a little fatalism, but also faith in his training.

‘Just go along with what was happening – that seemed to be the way I reacted. We were doing this and, like it or not, this was our fate.’ But instead of continuing its run-in, the landing craft turned and proceeded to circle. ‘Kiwi came on to the bridge again and told us the beach was too crowded for us to land and we had to wait until it had cleared. However, some years after, I found that according to the ship’s log we were delayed because the beach was under heavy shellfire. I gather that the battleship HMS Rodney was sent to deal with a heavy gun at Le Havre.

‘After a while, we started again. Our craft, as the leader, was now at the east end of the line as we approached the beach. Suddenly, a large spout of water shot up on our port side and it sounded as if the bottom of the LCT had been struck by an enormous hammer.

‘Kiwi called out to us to go to the sides. There we found a number of wooden packing cases had been lined up – at least we would have something to cling on to if we got hit. There was another spout on the starboard side and a loud bang, and it occurred to me that we had just been bracketed – that’s the way they got the range, with the first two shots. The next one should be a hit. But I don’t know if there ever was a third shell, because we were suddenly told to mount up into our vehicles and start up our engines, not forgetting to release the fixing chains.’

LCT 405’s 19-year-old First Lieutenant, Arthur Walters, recalled: ‘The German guns had found our range during the first run-in. It was quite fascinating, not particularly scary, but I remember well the plumes of seawater coming up in between our craft. Fortunately, none of the shells hit and so we just ploughed on through it.’

It was 2.30pm by the time the landing craft approached Queen Red opposite the village of Colleville sur Orne (renamed Colleville Montgomery after the war in honour of Field Marshal Montgomery). Arthur Walters, wearing his anti-flash gear of

protective gloves and balaclava, went forward to supervise the lowering of the ramp and the disembarkation of men and vehicles.

He said: ‘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 Arthur went an Able Seaman, an Irishman named Breen. Wearing a lifebelt and attached to a lifeline, he had 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: ‘The landing craft came to a smooth stop and the ramp was lowered. 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 bomb crater in the sand and we had all disembarked by the time it was freed. It didn’t take long for us to disembark. We had been directed by a beachmaster to turn to the left and make our way to the nearest exit.’

As George Baker drove off the LCT in a 15cwt truck, he was painfully aware that the huge fleet of Allied warships off the beaches were constantly firing inland. ‘You could hear the 16-inch shells rifling over your head,’ he recalled. ‘My one thought was, “I hope they don’t fall short.”’ Tom Mason recalled: ‘I wasn’t seasick going over and I didn’t feel scared at all – I don’t know why. Once things get going, you just don’t feel scared.’

Someone on the landing craft was singing and I smoked constantly – I was smoking my brains out! Then as we neared the beach I saw the big warships blasting away with their heavy guns and a few corpses floating by.

‘As we left the landing craft, the first thing I saw were bulldozers digging big temporary graves for the lads who had fallen. They filled them in until the bodies could be taken away later for burial.’

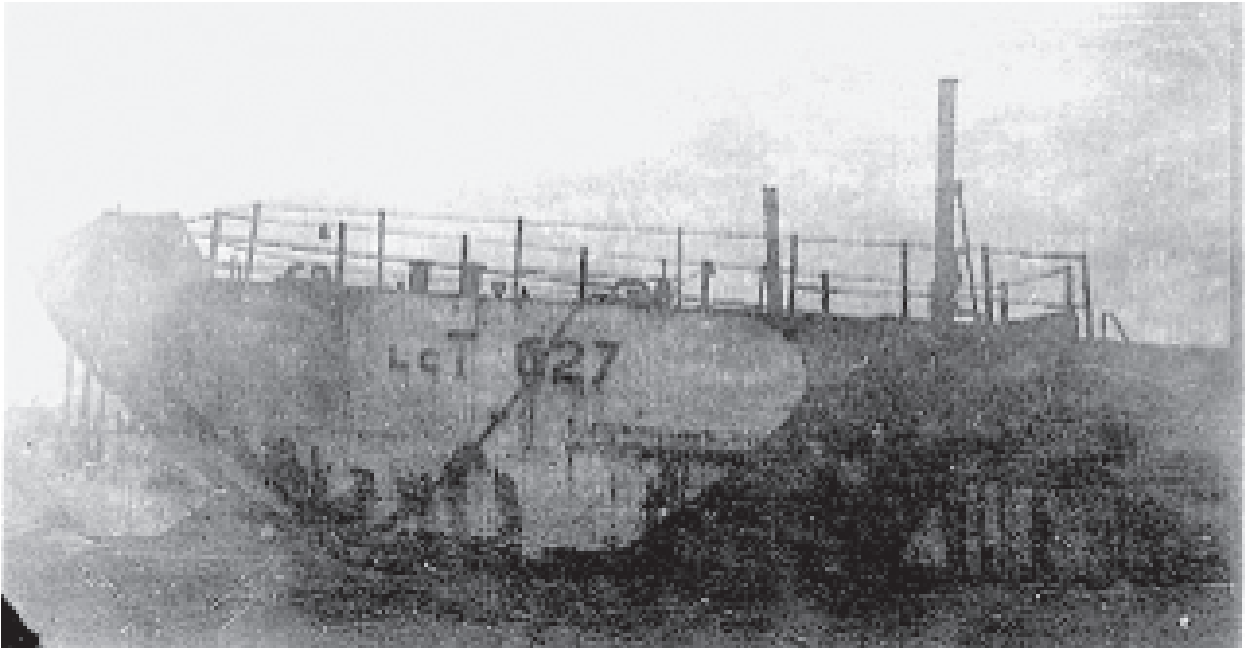
Tom also told how he witnessed a horrifying incident. ‘I saw a line of about eight German prisoners in the charge of two Redcaps, military policemen. Then a Scotsman came along with a Luger pistol, pointed it at one of the Germans and shot him, saying: “That’s for my mate.” The Redcaps wouldn’t touch him. He may have shot them as well.’

Jim Holder-Vale and Jack Taylor were last off the landing craft in their truck. ‘We were at the rear of the queue and stopped,’ said Jim. ‘I now had to jump out of the cab and get under the truck to remove the waterproofing sealant from the breather on the differential on the rear axle.

‘This gave me the chance to look round. The first thing I saw was a corpse rolling in the surf – that was pretty horrible. I came from under the truck and saw that the beach was very narrow and we were fairly close to the sea wall. Lying against the sea wall were dead bodies that had been collected, mostly covered with gas capes. There were quite a lot there. Looking further along the beach, I saw explosions from shell or mortar



Arthur Walters



LCT 405 on the beach – thought to be Sword Beach on D-Day



A second picture of the landing craft on the beach

fire. Back in the cab, Jack couldn't get the engine to start. This was prone to happen – unfortunately, for the D-Day landing our original 15cwt Bedford wireless truck had been replaced by a four-wheel drive Canadian Ford. The Ford's engine had the nasty habit of dying when the truck stopped. And that's

what happened on the beach. So Jack set off to get help while I admired the view. We got a tow start from a Bren gun carrier and set off to catch up with everyone else. The exit was through some sand dunes and was marked by white tape only wide enough for one vehicle. Just as we turned into the exit, a truck in front was hit by a shell. From nowhere, medics arrived with a stretcher.

‘I then looked up to see three Junkers bombers overhead. One pulled away and dropped a stick of bombs – I thought they were intended for the landing craft. Almost immediately, some Spitfires turned up and in no time two of the Junkers had been shot down. I didn’t see what happened to number three.’

As Arthur Walters watched the guns and men safely disembark, he clutched thoughtfully at the Colt .45 pistol which had been issued to him 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. ‘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 troops for Normandy. In all, it would make 27 crossings. 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

Saturday, 3rd June, 1944.

Place	Nb. 4 South Hot.
Sea at 1700	1-2
Wind "	3 N.W.
Barometel "	1016
Duties	Routine
0815 No. 1. and Store Party ashore.	
1145 No. 1 and Store Party returned.	
1215 Z.O., Alotilled Signalman and S.B.A. on board.	
1450 Slipped.	
1520 Exercised General Quarters.	
1610 Secuted to buoy in Stokes bay.	
1620 1068 alongside.	
2015 Slipped.	
2130 Secuted alongside Dolphin - Took on load.	
2230 Slipped - Secuted to buoy in Stokes bay.	

Sunday, 4th June, 1944.

Place	Buoy in Stokes bay
Sea at 2100 - 4-5.	
Wind " - force 6.	
Barometel " - 1010.	
Duties	Routine.
1400 " Exercise hoisted 24ft	

Monday, 5th June, 1944.

Place	Buoy, Stokes bay.
Duties	Routine.
1800 Slipped	
1900 Passed through gate.	
1930 Barometel - 1005, Sea 1-2. Wind S.W. - 2.	
Lat 7. 56 W. C 511 E	
1730 Wind 563 W. h. 6 of 56 W.	
2005 Bullock Patch buoy bearing 66. S. 10° W.	
2051 No. 5 Towel beam. 68. S 46° W.	

Log of LCT 405 covering the invasion period

2110 Buoy flashing red beam (unidentified).
 2115 Pan buoy beam No. 9.
 2123 bs S18°E
 2153 Buoy beam (unidentified) Bateau 1006, Sec 2. Wind E-2. bs S7°E
 2200. $\frac{1}{2}$ S 16 W
 2310 E.F. 3 buoy beam. bs S15°W
 0040 S 8 W Tuesday, 6th June, 1944.
 0047 $\frac{1}{2}$ S
 0110. Ean. Flag 9 beam
 1205 OKLP
 1300 Turned back from beach through enemy shelling.
 1400 Started for beach.
 1430 Beached.
 1500 Unbeached.
 1023 hit and destroyed on beach.
 1600 Landed convoy on way back to U.K.
 Wednesday, 7th June
 0211 F1 buoy beam. bs N 7 E
 1234 No 1 buoy beam - No 9.
 1500 (approx) Anchored off Newhaven.
 1600 Weighed.
 1630 Secured along side dolphin in Newhaven - picked up boxes & tanks.
 1700 Slipped.
 1730 Secured along side jetty - took on fuel and water.
 1900 Slipped and anchored in bay.
 2300 Weighed.
 Thursday, 8th June, 1944.
 0200 Landed L.C. 1 (L) who was to lead convoy.
 0817 F1 buoy beam. A/c S9°E
 0835 2 buoy beam.
 0940 F1 buoy beam 2 miles to starboard. A/c S5°W
 1115 F3 buoy 3 miles on starboard beam. bs S2°W

The log, continued With thanks to Arthur Walters



Arthur in 2004 with LCT 405's ragged and smoke-blackened ensign

the beach, the landing craft was diverted at the last minute by a Tannoy call from a patrolling Navy motor launch – thought to have been the *Crocus* – possibly because of some unseen hazard, such as a mine.

‘At first light, we could see the coast being bombarded by 16-inch guns from the *Ramilles* and *Warspite* warships,’

said Len Harvey. ‘In between the two heavy craft were two LCTs firing salvo after salvo of rockets. I was certainly glad I was not on the other end of what was going inland. Just then, shells from the shore started landing in the water around our craft. The skipper on his Tannoy ordered all Army personnel to keep down and take cover. I never saw another thing until the ramp went down.’

But there was further drama before the shore could be reached. When the LCT 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,

it came ashore on Queen White beach about a quarter of a mile west of its designated sector, landing at La Breche d'Hermanville. 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 of LCT 408 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 –



Landfall: The exact location on Sword Beach near La Breche where Guns F1, F2 and F3 came ashore

Landmark: The house that looks like a church. The guns drove through its garden

who was responsible for the waterproofing – and Leo McCarthy reached forward to pat him gratefully on the back. The first test had been passed.

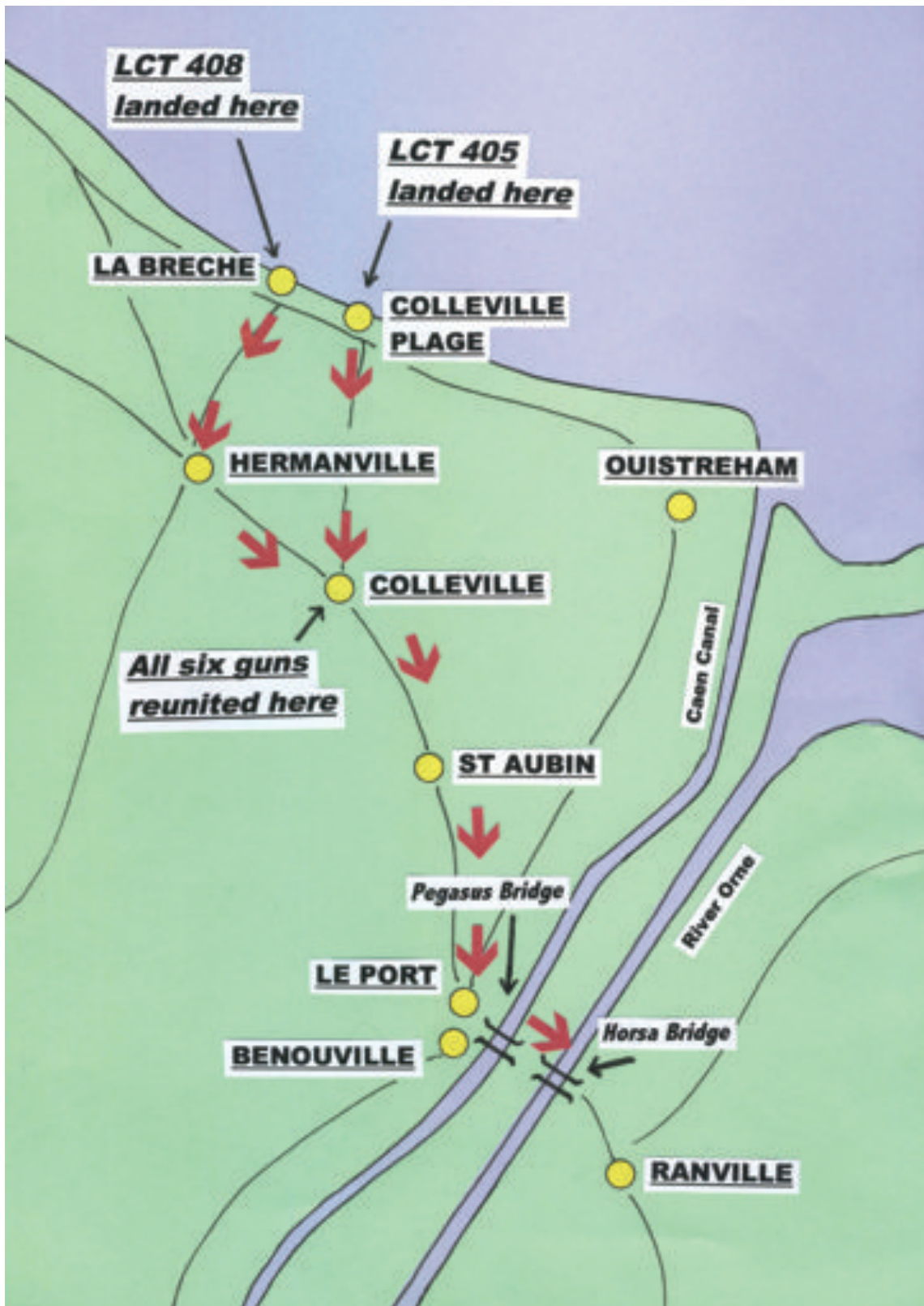
As they made their way ashore, a bizarre sight greeted the men straight ahead – a house that looked like a church, with a steeple-like tower to the right of the main building. Even at this most dangerous moment, humour came to the fore, with the soldiers asking: ‘Are we on church parade, then?’ Assured by Lieutenant Coombs that it was indeed a house, the gunners drove up the beach through taped-off lanes which had been cleared of mines and went straight through the garden of the property.

Having become separated from their comrades in LCT 405, the three guns from LCT 408 made all speed to catch up with them. Weaving through the chaos, carnage and confusion on the beach, they drove up on to the coastal road, past lines of infantry who were digging in and the tragic figures of soldiers who had fallen.

‘There was no fear at all,’ said Len. ‘When we got out of the water on to that beach, if you had said to any man, “You can get back on the landing craft and return to England”, no one would have gone. They wouldn’t go through that seasickness again.’

As the three guns made their way into Hermanville and then east towards Benouville, a truck behind them was blown up by a shell and a lump of shredded tyre struck F3 gunlayer Joe Lavender on the head, but he was not hurt. ‘That’s the one with your name on it, Joe,’ his comrades told him.

Meanwhile, the F Troop men who had disembarked from LCT 405 were getting their bearings before heading towards Benouville. After exiting the beach, Jim Holder-Vale and Jack Taylor made their way along the main lateral coast road in their truck, then turned inland along a lane. ‘On its corner was a large



From the beaches to the bridges: The route F Troop took to Benouville

unexploded shell – I think it was a 16-inch shell from one of our warships,’ said Jim. ‘We found ourselves entirely alone, driving very carefully and slowly up the lane. On the right was a hedge and on the verge lay the bodies of a number of Tommies. One was very young and looked asleep. His face still haunts me.

‘To the left, the ground was open and I could see troops advancing in the distance. Suddenly on the right looking out from a ditch was a German officer, steel helmet on his head and binoculars round his neck. Jack hadn’t seen him – he had terrible eyesight. I was just about to do something with my Sten gun when I realised the German was dead, and so were a few more behind him. We then passed a group of British officers standing by a duplex-drive Sherman tank, the one that floated in a canvas screen and had propellers like a boat. We just looked at each other as we passed.’

Eventually, all six guns of F Troop and their lorries were reunited in Colleville, where they joined up with infantrymen of the Suffolk Regiment, one of the 3rd Division assault regiments. ‘On our arrival, I saw a cloud of black smoke and could hear a woman screaming,’ said Jim. ‘She was very distressed at the sight of a dead Tommy lying beside his flaming motorbike. I am not sure how long we stayed in this area, but I have vague memories of brewing tea outside a church. On the shutters of a nearby house, the V for Victory sign in a laurel wreath had been faintly painted out.’

Now the whole troop began an agonisingly slow trek through the late afternoon to try to cover the final three hazardous miles to Benouville.

Tom Mason recalled that at one point a German Tiger tank was reported to be up ahead and they were ordered to prepare to fire against it. But the men were well aware that two-pounder Bofors shells would simply bounce off the panzer’s armour, which was four inches thick. ‘We thought, “How can this thing

kill a Tiger?”” said Tom. ‘An officer, I think it was Lieutenant Coombs, said, “Just fire a couple of rounds and then get the hell out of there”. Luckily, a paratrooper up the road had a Piat anti-tank gun and he knocked a track off the Tiger. He saved our bacon.’

Near Colleville, 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. ‘I don’t know how they thought we were going to clear them out. 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 in stunned amazement 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.

Although the planes were obviously British, Lieutenant ‘Dizzy’ Marsh irritated the F Troop men by insisting on giving the alert, shouting: ‘Aircraft left!’ and making the guns swing round at them. ‘I think he said something like, “Well, you can’t assume they’re ours,”” said Jim Holder-Vale. ‘But it soon became apparent that they were ours.’

Minutes later, the gliders cast off from their towplanes and began sweeping in to 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 Suffolk Regiment men 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



Bill Husband

– to get out of the aircraft as quickly as possible, firing all the time, until they could take cover by the wheels. That might have been good training if you had landed in enemy territory, but not when you were landing among your own troops. Their arrival threw everything into confusion, creating chaos and havoc.’

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 the nearby hamlet of Le Port and when the F Troop convoy arrived, it came under fire from him, with Jim Holder-Vale having a narrow escape.

‘We had stopped in Le Port to await further instructions,’ Jim recalled. ‘I thought it might be a good idea to put the camouflage

nets over our truck. I went to the side of the truck and started unstrapping the nets when suddenly I heard this thump just by my head. I knew instantly that it was a bullet that had just missed me. I moved like greased lightning to the other side of the truck



**The church at Le Port, near Benouville:
A sniper in the tower targeted F Troop**

and the shout went up from somewhere, “Sniper in the church tower!” All hell broke loose.’

Jack Taylor took a Bren gun from the truck and carefully placed it in the road. He put his glasses on, got down behind the Bren and squeezed the trigger – but it failed to fire, probably because the magazine had been incorrectly loaded.

‘So he gave up and put the gun back in the truck,’ said Jim. ‘An officer from the Paras then suggested the simplest way of dealing with the situation was to use one of the Bofors guns. So Sergeant Clements with Number One Gun gave it a blast. This resulted in the taking prisoner of a young German soldier, who came out with his hands up.’ Snipers on both sides were sometimes 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.

Jim Holder-Vale and his comrades stopped alongside a large ditch on the corner of the road opposite Benouville town hall. As the light faded, they looked back in the direction of Sword Beach, where the sky was spectacularly lit by an anti-aircraft barrage from hundreds of Allied ships. ‘We just sat and watched the fireworks,’ said Jim. ‘I subsequently learned that a German plane had flown the whole length of the beach and had survived. That pilot was a brave man.’

As they tried to settle into the ditch to sleep, the men were disturbed by a strange tapping noise. Was it the timer mechanism of a delayed-action bomb? A quick search revealed the culprit – an Airborne carrier pigeon inside a cardboard container, pecking away at its food. Huddled in their makeshift shelters, the soldiers kept a tense vigil until dawn, around 4am.

As the skies lightened, 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. Near the junction of the road

down to the bridges was a burned-out German truck with a dead German nearby. ‘On the doors of the truck still remained an insignia of a palm tree,’ said Jim. ‘I believe this belonged to the unit that was to be our long-term enemy, the 21st Panzer. Near Pegasus Bridge on the left-hand side, propped up against a wall, was a dead Frenchman, dressed all in black.

‘Cables had to be laid to the guns and I hated having to climb up to take them across roads to avoid damage by traffic, as snipers were much in evidence.’

Len Harvey and his comrades were among those assigned to protect the river bridge – an ornate swing bridge built in 1871 by Gustave Eiffel, who went on to build the Eiffel Tower in Paris. At one time, the bridge had carried a light railway across the River Orne. Len recalled how every member of the gun crew mucked in to dig frantically, excavating a pit for Gun F3 and slit trenches for the men to shelter in. By 7am, everything was ready for action. Half an hour later, the first enemy aircraft a squadron of 30 to 40 ME 109s – came roaring in and were engaged by the Bofors. ‘It was our first action and it was exciting,’ said Len.

So intense was the rate of fire that the loaders, who had to constantly unpack shells from boxes and insert them into clips before they could be fed into the gun, could hardly keep up with demand. ‘You would see smoke coming from planes and then see them go down,’ said Len. ‘But we didn’t know at that stage if our gun had been responsible for hitting them. It wasn’t until later that our tally was officially confirmed.’

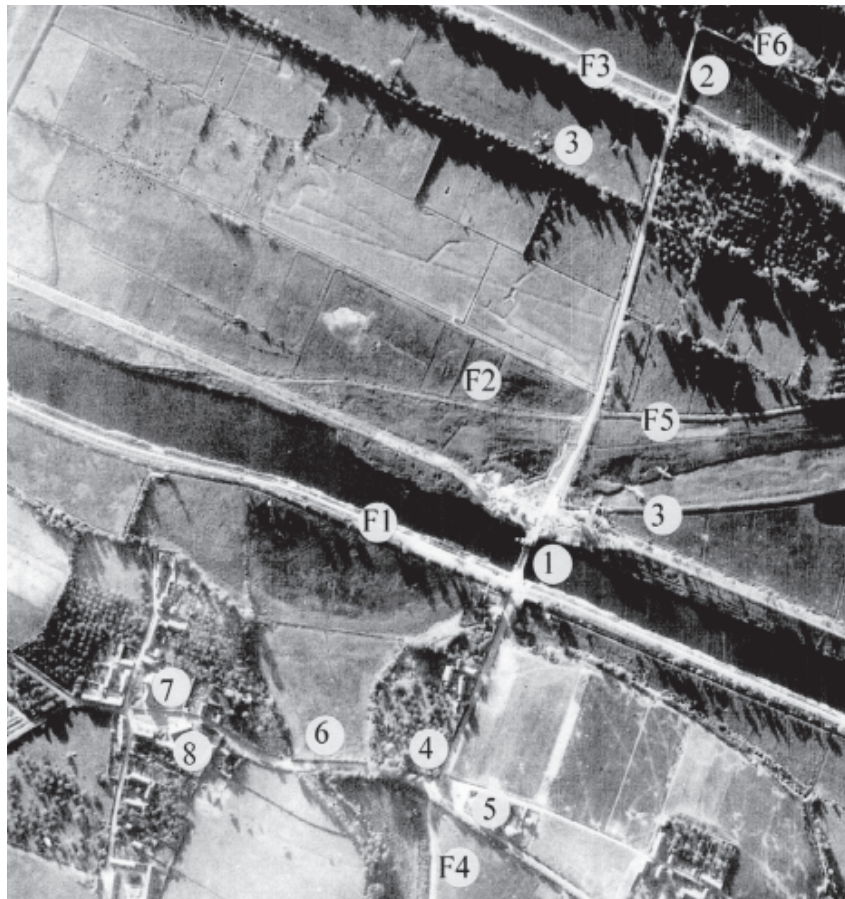
As the Bofors were deployed around the bridges, Jim Holder-Vale and Jack Taylor helped run phone cables between the gunsites and troop HQ and repaired lines that had been cut by shelling. He and his comrades moved out of their ditch and took over slit trenches that had been vacated by the Airborne,



Pegasus Bridge on the Caen Canal: Its capture and defence was vital to the invasion *Imperial War Museum*



Horsa Bridge over the River Orne: It was equally important to the success of Overlord *Imperial War Museum*



This aerial photo shows the dispositions of F Troop around Benouville from D-Day onwards. The positions of the troop's six Bofors Guns are marked with the guns' numbers (F1, F2, etc).

(1) Pegasus Bridge (Caen Canal) (2) Horsa Bridge (River Orne) (3) Horsa gliders from Major Howard's coup de main force (4) Ditch along roadside in which most of F Troop slept on night of June 6, 1944 (5) Le Mairie (town hall) (6) Troop HQ in two trenches previously occupied by Airborne (7) Le Port Church tower, from which sniper surrendered after Gun F4 opened fire (8) A large stone barn was built end-on to the road and faced a large house – a track ran between them. Adjacent to the barn was a walled garden in which a revetted dug-out had been built, in which the owner had placed his vaulables during the occupation. When emptied, it was occupied by Bombardier Jack Taylor and Jim Holder-Vale.

Compiled by Jim Holder-Vale

who were now collecting their dead. Next day, Jim accompanied Jack as the bombardier drove Captain Reid down to 3rd Division HQ, which had been established near the beach. ‘While they went into the building, I sat on the verge outside. Then down the road marched the pilots of the gliders we had seen land on our way to Benouville. They were taking with them a number of German prisoners. They were just as I imagined them to be – tall, arrogant and blond, many with cowhide packs and “Hermann Goering” embroidered on their sleeve.

‘One of the pilots asked if I would like his primed Mills grenades, as he had no further use for them. I have no idea why I agreed to take them. Others followed and I soon had quite a number of grenades. On the drive back, Jack put his foot down to avoid the snipers who now infested the orchards at the side of the road.

‘The road was badly shell-pocked and the grenades were bounced all over the place, so I had to lie on top of as many as I could to keep them still. I was terrified that sooner or later a pin was going to drop out. I don’t recall what happened to all the grenades, but we certainly had one in the box which contained our codes so they could be destroyed should the necessity arise.’

Throughout the next nine days, as the Germans tried to retake the narrow 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.

‘We soon learned to tell the difference between incoming and outgoing shellfire and to respect the infamous German 88mm all-purpose field gun,’ said Jim. ‘Mortars made no noise until they arrived, except, of course, the much-hated nebelwerfer, or Moaning Minnie – which told you a very unhealthy stonk was on the way with its sobbing scream. At times, it was not

easy to tell if you were the target of a sniper or they were just stray rounds hitting the hedge behind. For the first couple of nights or so, Spandau machine guns could be heard firing from behind us from German troops still holding out in a nearby strongpoint.’ As the first day at the bridges 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.

During lulls in the fighting, the gunners tried to get what rest they could, or to find some diversion to take their minds off the battle. Len Harvey and Leo McCarthy broke off pieces of shattered Perspex from the windscreens of Major Howard’s gliders – which lay nearby – and did a bit of carving to keep themselves occupied. Len whittled a swastika, while Leo produced a cross of Lorraine.

Over near Pegasus Bridge, Tom Mason had a novel experience in the Gondree Café – drinking wine for the first time in his life. ‘I was from Liverpool – we didn’t drink wine, we drank beer,’ he recalled with a smile. ‘But this old Frenchman gave me a glass of wine and I enjoyed it.’

Jim Holder-Vale and Jack Taylor also enjoyed a drink, courtesy of a French family living in a house opposite their trench. The family had buried their valuables in the garden during the German occupation and when they dug them up, they asked the 92nd LAA men over. ‘A bottle of wine was produced

and we were invited to drink to General De Gaulle, Winston Churchill, King George and the British liberators,’ Jim recalled. ‘The father of the family told me he had been wounded in the First World War and nursed by English nurses, so he was very pleased to see us.’ Despite such diverting interludes, the war was never far away. On June 10, more enemy aircraft were engaged and at midday the river bridge came under a ferocious mortar barrage, lasting half an hour. ‘I am sure that this attack was aimed personally at us and not at the bridge – no shells landed on the bridge,’ said Len Harvey. ‘We could see the mortar blasts starting on the opposite bank of the river and they began to get closer. Sergeant Fletcher ordered us to take cover.’

Len dived into a slit trench with his comrades Sammy Davies and Eric Sheriff, while Leo McCarthy took cover with two other gunners in a second slit trench. ‘The screams of the mortars and the explosions went on and on,’ said Len. ‘Then a mortar shell landed right on the lip of our trench. We should have died.’

But all three survived, with Eric unhurt, Len getting a shell splinter in his arm and Sammy only stunned by the blast. Barely able to believe their escape, Eric said to Len: ‘Len, that one had our name on it. We’re going to come through this war.’

But in the second trench, Leo had not been so lucky. Len hurried across and found his comrade crawling around, bleeding and in pain. ‘Are you all right, mate?’ he asked. ‘No,’ came the reply. ‘I’ve got a lump of shrapnel in my arse.’

Len got hold of the medics, who sent over a Jeep fitted with stretchers. Leo was placed face down on a stretcher and driven down to the beach to be evacuated back to England. He would not return to action until September. Leo’s fellow gunlayer Joe Lavender was also a casualty and he too was evacuated.

During the mortar bombardment, the breech of Gun F3 was

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information
WANSTEAD PLATS (CAMP TY)	1	1800	Waterproofing for Exercise "OVERLORD" completed.
	3	0900	Embarkation of Assault Scale - (1) "F" Troop at Pointe-aux-Chenes in L.C.T.s 405 and 408. (2) Marching Party of 2 Officers and 58 Men at Tilly in L.S.T. 3203. (3) Equipments of "D" and "E" Troops and remaining personnel, and B.H.Q. Assault Scale at Victoria on M.T.2.
	6	1210	"D" Day - M.T.2 hit by 2 shells from enemy coastal batteries in the Straits of Dover.
		1245	Ship abandoned and subsequently sunk by Navy. Casualties suffered were 1 Sgt. killed, 4 missing and 12 injured. Survivors landed at lower.
BLA.	6/9		"F" Troop land on heavily wooded hills with assault force to defend the bridges on the Canal and River (One at BENOUILLE at H+6). During first 4 days, 14 enemy aircraft were destroyed by "F" Troop on the Bridges. Approx. 5000 lbs Ammunition was fired.

Chronicle of courage: The 318 Battery war diary for the D-Day period

Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information
6/9		One or two of the guns were used in a ground role during the first 2 days against buildings and houses, occupied by enemy snipers, with much success. It was done in co-operation with the Airborne Div troops.
6/15		During this period the Troop was subjected to heavy shelling and mortaring, and, in the early days, to M.G. firing. The gun sited nearest to the River Bridge was knocked out on D+2 by enemy mortar fire.
15		"F" Troop relieved on the Bridges by troops LAA. Moved to defend ALG, Plumetot.
15/30		Area around ^{ALG.} ALG. itself shelled on several occasions. Sgt. Fletcher sustained severe abdominal injuries during one of these shelling periods. 4 guns of Troop on Night Barrage with 102 L.A.A. Regt, w.e.f. D+11. Proved quite successful.

set on fire when its oil ignited and Sergeant Clements risked his life by leaving his slit trench and courageously unloading the high-explosive shells from the Bofors, earning a Mention in Dispatches. Over on Gun F5, George Baker and his comrades also found themselves regularly trapped by the constant bombardments. ‘The shelling and mortaring was terrible – it was really hell,’ he said. There were some bizarre moments. During one particularly fierce mortar attack near Pegasus Bridge, when most men were huddled in slit trenches, George glanced across from the gulley 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. ‘The German planes would come in at such low level that they were like sitting ducks,’ said George. ‘Finally, they got wise to it.’

Having found their treetop tactics too costly, enemy aircraft continued their attacks over the next two days, but at higher level. As Len Harvey recalled one Airborne corporal remarking



Len Harvey (left) and his comrade Eric Sheriff

to the weary F Troop men: 'It looks like your guns have won Round One.'

Because the Sambut reinforcements had failed to arrive, there was no regimental wireless net for Jim Holder-Vale to join, so for a while he found himself a virtual spectator. He looked on in growing admiration as the F Troop gunners steadfastly defended the bridges against attack after attack. 'It was marvellous to watch,' he recalled. 'I had a ringside seat. You could see the shells from the F Troop guns hitting the planes as they flew over – sometimes more than one shell would hit a plane. The gunners were brilliant, they were red-hot. Not one plane was able to peel off to make a dive and drop a bomb on the bridges – they never got near enough.'

Seeing one aircraft downed near the bridges, the colourful Lieutenant 'Dizzy' Marsh of F Troop could not resist getting a memento and recovered a piece of its tailplane, complete with swastika, from the wreckage. Reluctantly, Jim and Jack Taylor agreed to keep it for him aboard their truck. But later, when they heard rumours that the Germans were shooting British troops found with German souvenirs, they dumped it. However, 'Dizzy' found it again and took it away with him.

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, west 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 Sambut tragedy from the CO, Colonel Bazeley, who made



Opening fire: A 92nd LAA self-propelled Bofors dug into a gun pit to protect it against enemy planes *Imperial War Museum*



On the move: A self-propelled Bofors Gun of 92nd LAA advances through La Delivrande on June 8, 1944 *Imperial War Museum*

his way into the bridgehead. Those who died from 92nd LAA on the liberty ship 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 reported to be imminent, and the F Troop men were ordered by an Airborne officer to take their guns on to the bridges and load them with armour-piercing solid shot ready to meet the assault.

‘It was a stupid order really, as 2lb Bofors shells would not even make a dent in a Tiger tank – it would be like a peashooter hitting a wall,’ said Len Harvey. ‘But we were instructed to defend those bridges to the last. We took up position on the west end of the river bridge and I unloaded the high explosive shells from the gun and loaded it with armour-piercing shot.

‘Then we waited. Sergeant Fletcher brought over a bottle of whisky and gave each one of us a tot. In those days, I was not a drinking man. But, believe me, when I drank my tot I felt a lot better and more settled. I was still in a shaky state from the mortar shell that had landed on our slit trench.’

Meanwhile, Jim Holder-Vale and Jack Taylor set up their Bren Gun on a knoll near their slit trench. ‘We waited and prayed,’ Jim recalled.

For more than an hour, the 92nd LAA men kept a nerve-racking vigil, listening out for the rumbling of advancing German tanks. But, mercifully, the counter-attack never materialised. ‘The officer then came and told Sergeant Fletcher that the danger was now over and we could stand down,’ said

Len. ‘I think a sigh of relief went through us all. The more I think of that occasion, the more I am sure that a couple of men with Piat guns firing their bombs at the side of the Tigers’ tracks would have been more likely to stop the tank than the 2lb shells of a Bofors.’ The same officer noticed that Gun F3 was badly damaged following the mortar attack a few days earlier and ordered the crew to take it down to Pegasus Bridge and arrange for a replacement to be brought up.

At Pegasus Bridge, the F3 men were given a temporary site opposite the Gondree Café. They waited there a further two days, during which they got off one shot at an FW 190 which came roaring south along the canal from the direction of Ouistreham and plunged into the water further down towards Caen. Finally, on June 15, F Troop was relieved by 123 (City of London Rifles) LAA Regiment – part of the 1st Corps forces – and sent to defend the airstrip at Plumetot, five miles west of Benouville. Captain Reid was later awarded the Military Cross for leading the defence of the bridges.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DISASTER ON THE SAMBUT

Tuesday, June 6, 1944

‘As we climbed over the side, we could see where the shell had landed in the middle of them. The worst part, I remember to this day, was the terrible screaming.’

THE Sambut had sailed from Southend in convoy early on D-Day, with D and E Troops of 318 and RHQ – 120 officers and men – aboard.

In all, the liberty ship was carrying 562 troops from 28 different units as well as 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, some 20 miles away. 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



The Sambut ablaze in the Channel: It was struck by two long-range shells

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, Oregon, 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 within ten minutes the blaze had really taken hold.

A few minutes later, a consignment of gelignite in a lorry stowed on No2 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 officer commanding 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. Motor launches 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.’

Bill Wills, a young 92nd LAA driver-op, was among the survivors – but only after a narrow brush with death. Along with some comrades, the 20-year-old Londoner had been posted to

keep a watch on the Sambut's aft gun during the voyage to Normandy. He recalled that as the liberty ship left Southend, it was a fine day, with some men relaxing by lying on the deck.

'Then, just as we passed Dover, there was an enormous explosion just before the bridge and a lot of people thought we had been torpedoed. We saw a fire near the bridge. The ship had large fire extinguishers on wheels, but they apparently didn't work. There were quite a lot of further explosions, with lots of nasty bit and pieces flying about. We were told to put our ammunition over the side to stop any further explosions.'

Bill and his comrades were standing inside the steel housing of the aft gun, which provided some shelter from the blasts. 'Suddenly, just in front of me a chap called Billy Oakes dropped to the floor and said he couldn't walk. He had been hit by shrapnel which had come through the steel housing and gone into his back.

'It was fortunate for me, because the shrapnel would have hit me. We got him out on to the deck and laid him down and put some of our leather jerkins over him to keep him warm. Then the order came to abandon ship.

'There was an immediate rush to the rail and it upset me because they were going to leave him. I said to the others, "Come on, we've got to get him over." They came back and we got him under the arms and lowered him over the sides. But there was so much blood about that I didn't know if we were going to help him at all.'

Bill and his comrades found themselves floating in the water below the burning Sambut. 'I tried to get on one of the Naval vessels that had been escorting us, but we were so weak. They tried to get us to climb up netting at the side of the boat, but my fingers just would not grip. Then they said, "We're sorry, but we've got to keep up in convoy" – and they just sailed on. I found that I was floating away from the Sambut, because I



ALL ENTRIES IN BLOCK LETTERS.				
LYING	SITTING	ABLE TO WALK	SLIGHT	SEVERE
Regt. No.	1st Bn 8th		Rank	C.P.R.
A.S.N.				
Name	WILLS, WILLIAM.			
Expt. or Comp.	1st Lt. 2nd Bn 8th FA			
Organization				
Diagnosis				
Examining Unit	1st Bn 8th		Ship	
Date	6-4-44		Signature	

As I saw it: Painting by Bill Wills of the Sambut

Above: Ticket attached to Bill after rescue

Below: Bill's pay book records the disaster

PARTICULARS OF TRAINING.		
Course and Schools, Specialized Qualifications, Showing result.	Date.	Initials of Officer.
1st Bn 8th FA	2-6-44	Wills
2nd Bn 8th FA	6-6-44	Wills
3rd Bn 8th FA	29-6-44	Wills



Survivor: Bill Wills

could see it completely. I started to think, “Well, this is it.” It was very, very peaceful. I could have gone then. It was only a little while later that I thought it would upset everyone. So I started looking around and waving my arms about.

‘Then a rowing boat came alongside and a man said, “Hang on a minute and I’ll pull you in.” A tugboat had come out, lowered its rowing boat and was picking up people. And the funny thing was that the next fellow they picked up after me was the driver of my wireless truck, Ginger Vaughan.

‘He’d always said to me, “We’ve got to stick together.” I’d last seen him sitting on the rudder and he told me afterwards that when the ship got hit he’d climbed up the mast, because that was the last bit that would sink! Anyway, he and I got taken on to this tugboat, wrapped up in blankets and they took us into Dover, where we had to climb up those damned iron railings with no shoes on.

‘We were taken to a Naval first aid station and they just sort of laid us out there, looked at us, and said, “There’s nothing wrong with you – get up”. We were still wrapped up in our blankets and they took us over to Dover Castle. As you go in, there’s a huge gateway and the rest of the regiment were there and everyone who walked through was cheered, which was quite something.’

Tom Cribb, a 92nd LAA bombardier, was manning his Bofors Gun with a comrade in the fore part of the *Sambut* while the rest of their unit went astern to get some food. He recalled: ‘Suddenly I heard this terrific noise which sounded like an express train coming. I jumped off the gun and looked over the side and immediately there was a large geyser of seawater coming up where a shell had gone in. There were two more explosions as two more shells landed on the ship, one amidships and one on the stern where all the rest of the men were having

something to eat. Immediately the petrol and stuff and jerricans exploded and everything caught fire, including the gun, which started sending shells up into the breech because of the heat from it. The Medical Officer's truck, which was next to us, caught fire, which was unfortunate because we probably needed the stuff off it.'

The 25-year-old Cornishman and his comrade grabbed some of the jerricans and ran to the side and pitched them over. 'But in the end it was hopeless, because they were getting hot. There was a fire hydrant there, so we ran this out, but it wasn't working. I found out later in a report that it had been damaged by one of the shells.

'So there really wasn't much else to do except get back to the stern and find out what was happening. But flames had now spread right across the ship and the only way to get back would be to go hand over hand over the rail, which we did.

'Coming up to the stern as we climbed over the side, we could see where the shell had landed in the middle of them. The worst part, I remember to this day, was the terrible screaming and seeing this poor chap with a long white bone sticking out of his leg. He was screaming and screaming.

'We tried to put out some of the fires, but without the hydrants working, it was pretty hopeless. While they were sorting out the wounded and giving them first aid, we should have ... they wanted to rig some of the Carley floats (*small lightweight liferafts which could be thrown overboard*).

'But someone had cut them adrift without tying the ropes, so they had drifted hundreds of yards already away from the ship. It wouldn't be much use trying to get to them, so in the end we were told to abandon ship. I decided to go down by one of the ropes, because it was quite a long drop from the side of the ship down. Some of the men had done that and what they

had forgotten was that with your steel helmet on and the strap coming up under your chin, if you hit the water with any force, it could come up and break your neck. There were already one or two bodies floating around. So we threw our helmets away.

‘I went down this rope and there was a chap below me screaming and shouting that he couldn’t swim. But we had all inflated our Mae Wests (*lifejackets*). Another thing was, you had to make sure you kept them well up to your chest, because if they were too low when you hit the water, they could turn the wrong way up and you would be feet up and head down. We had all been trained on these and all been to different rivers and ponds testing them out.

‘So I went down the rope and the chap below wouldn’t move – he was frozen on the rope, I suppose. So I stood on his head – there was already somebody standing on mine, telling me to get a move on. So I just jumped and cleared him and landed in the sea and just swam away from the ship.

‘You didn’t quite know ... there were explosions taking place and the ship was turning all the time. There were no engines going, it was just drifting now, I suppose. I wondered afterwards if perhaps I should have stayed and tried to give a hand. But you don’t really think about it at the time, you just swim away.

‘I suppose I was swimming around for about 20 minutes. I knew I could never swim to the shore, because it was too far off. But there was a motor torpedo boat creeping around picking up survivors. I knew if I swam off ahead of him in a certain direction, he would eventually pick me up, which he did, of course.

‘They grabbed me and yanked me out and said, “Get below, we’re going back to Dover”. The first thing I saw when I went below was that it was crammed tightly, you just couldn’t move.

So we turned round and shot off towards Dover. Quite a few of the chaps were being sick unfortunately, I suppose because of the salt water they'd swallowed.

'We got to Dover and got picked up by a lorry and taken up to Dover Castle. It's quite a primitive castle, that one, at least the first part is. I think they were stables or something where they used to keep horses and it was all cobbles. They swung open these two big iron gates and said, "You can sleep there for the night – we'll find you some straw", which they did eventually, for us to sleep on.'

Another 92nd LAA driver-op, 19-year-old David (Dai) Jones, was lining up in the meal queue on the Sambut when the first shell struck. 'A couple of fellows standing two or three places behind me were hit by shrapnel,' he recalled. 'We all scattered then – many of us went down to the hold on the other side of the ship, where I had a bunk.'

'Then there was one hell of a bang and some explosions in the middle of the ship. This blew some decking out and set fire to the stepladders that went up to the deck. But we went up the ladders anyway. That's where we stood and waited and wondered what to do. Some men were already jumping overboard. I should have followed, but I didn't fancy that!'

Dai then found Major Peter Crane of 92nd LAA standing next to him. The officer was working heroically to save lives. 'He said to me, "Are you going to jump?" As I looked over, there was a rope alongside the ship, a little way down and parallel with the deck. I said, "No, I'm going to get hold of that rope and work my way along to a ladder" – which is what I did.'

'Then I got to a rope with two or three people hanging on the end of it in the water, and that's where we were for a while.'



**Survivor: David
(Dai) Jones**

One of our own lifeboats came along – it was half-full of our chaps – and I swam across to that and got into it.

‘Then a Naval craft came along and a ladder dropped down from it. A lot of those in our boat made a move towards the side where the ladder was and I realised what might happen next, so I jumped back into the water.’

As Dai feared, the lifeboat capsized. He tried to swim back towards the upturned hull, but a fortuitous wave washed him directly up the side of the Naval craft. ‘I was able to get an arm into a stanchion on the deck. A sailor was standing there and I remember saying, “Excuse me, can you give me a hand?” He pulled me up and I was taken below, given a blanket and stripped off.

‘I’ll never forget when we got to Dover, walking up the slipway, there was a Church Army canteen at the top, offering us a cup of tea and a few cigarettes. I remember reaching out with both hands, one for the tea and one for the cigarettes, and my blanket fell off and I was standing naked on Dover quay. As I looked round, a car pulled up – I don’t know whose it was – and it had a Wren driver! But I wasn’t bothered at all – I made sure I got the tea and cigarettes!’

The survivors stayed overnight in the castle, at one stage sheltering in its tunnels from German shelling, and were issued with bundles of clothing, one bundle between two men. Then they were taken to Cowley, Oxford, to re-equip and then on to Aldershot, prior to being sent back over to Normandy at the end of the month.

Author Peter Elphick gives the death toll on the Sambut as 136 – 130 soldiers, plus six of the Sambut crew. 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. Among the wounded was Regimental Sergeant Major Len

Nott, who was hit by a shell splinter and spent several hours in the water before he was rescued. Among other 92nd LAA men who survived the disaster was Lieutenant Cowper Pratt. 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.



Survivor: Cowper Pratt

One question that remains after more than 60 years is whether the ship was deliberately targeted by the German long-range guns, which somehow got a bearing on it, or whether it was struck by a salvo of lucky shots. Bill Wills recalls how, just as they were off Dover, a Naval escorting vessel came alongside and an officer using a megaphone ordered the master to lower the *Sambut's* barrage balloon. 'I don't know if the master had time to comply, as shortly afterwards the shells struck. It is very likely the Germans used the balloon to lay their guns.'

Tom Cribb recalled that the balloon was ordered to be lowered because 'it was obviously too high because the Germans could see it against the cliffs'.

Whatever the reasons for the *Sambut* disaster, it was a tragedy of terrible proportions. But there were to be two happier sequels.

Four months later, Major Crane was awarded the Military Cross for the outstanding courage and leadership he had shown on board.

His citation read: 'He set a magnificent example of fortitude and initiative, organising chains of men to remove ammunition from the burning fore part of the ship, himself standing exposed to exploding ammunition from neighbouring blazing vehicles.'

He was then blown the length of the promenade deck by the explosion of 1,200lb of gelignite, which rendered the fore parts of the ship untenable.

‘He then searched all cabins and troops’ accommodation, moving wounded men aft, and at the last superintended to final abandoning of the ship, helping the wounded and cheering and encouraging all ranks. Throughout he set a magnificent example of leadership with complete disregard for his own safety, refusing to leave the ship until all ranks were off. By his conduct he quite definitely prevented a greater loss of life than actually occurred.’

And, after the war, Bill Wills was waiting for a bus home from work one evening in Deptford, South East London, when he was amazed to see a familiar face – Billy Oakes, the wounded comrade he had helped rescue from the Sambut and whom he feared may not have survived. ‘He told me he was now all right, but I couldn’t question him further as my bus came along and we had to part. Perhaps his wound was not as bad as it appeared at the time.’

CHAPTER NINE

BATTLE OF THE BRIDGEHEAD

June to August 1944

'After that raid, I went over about ten yards away to the next gun because I couldn't see anything moving and there were my mates on the bottom of the trench. They had been cannon-shelled, mostly through the head.'

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, the F Troop men were allowed a little respite after their nine days of action around the bridges and troop headquarters was set up in a series of slit trenches under a big hedge on the outskirts of the village. Nearby was a stone-built, shed-like building littered with red-tipped German blank cartridges, possibly left by troops on an exercise.

While there, F Troop was to receive replacement guns which had been fitted with drum rangefinders to help when taking part in the now-frequent ground shoots.

The 92nd LAA men were also assigned to protect the little Auster planes which were sent into the air each day from Plumetot to spot targets for the battleship Rodney. The huge warship lay off the coast near Sword Beach, waiting to receive information radioed by the Austers. Its 16in guns would then open fire – sending one-ton shells up to 20 miles inland to break up German troop and tank formations.

Jim Holder-Vale recalled: ‘Most mornings Jack Taylor and I would be off with the gun protecting the Austers. What with that and line maintenance, it was a busy place for us.’

It could also be a hazardous place. ‘At one time, we were having our evening meal there when a large gun at Le Havre

fired a shell which went over with the noise of an express train. The shell was said to have landed in Plumetot village – it made one hell of an explosion.’

But, thanks to some impressive improvisation, Jim got the chance of something most of the men were by now longing for ... a good wash. ‘Soon after we arrived there, someone turned up with a German field kitchen, which was very efficient at heating water. So I filled it and lit the fire and then took a large canvas bag, which was issued to waterproof our wireless sets, and put it into a shell hole supported by four upright stakes. I then poured the hot water into this.

‘As it was my idea and my bag, I had the first bath. By this time I had quite an audience, which included Lieutenant Dizzy Marsh. Jack Taylor followed me. I can’t recall if anyone else did, but Dizzy wanted a bag if there was one spare. I gave him one, but I believe someone pinched it before he left.’

As men and vehicles poured into the still-narrow beachhead, space was at a premium and tanks regularly broke the telephone cables laid by the driver-ops. ‘So Jack Taylor and I were out most days doing repairs,’ Jim recalled. ‘It was not easy, as sometimes there would be a whole bundle of cables mangled together, and there were only a limited number of colours.’

To ensure they joined the correct ends of each cable, the driver-ops resorted to old-fashioned but trusted technology – the safety pin.

‘We used a pin in a length of cable attached to a field telephone,’ said Jim. ‘The pin was inserted into a damaged cable and the phone handle turned to ring the phone at the other end. By discreet questioning, we soon found which unit the cable belonged to and the necessary join was made.

‘It was time-consuming, as the cable was made up of a number of steel wires and one copper conductor. These were

joined with a reef knot and taped. It could be a very scary job at night, particularly as we never knew the password if challenged.’

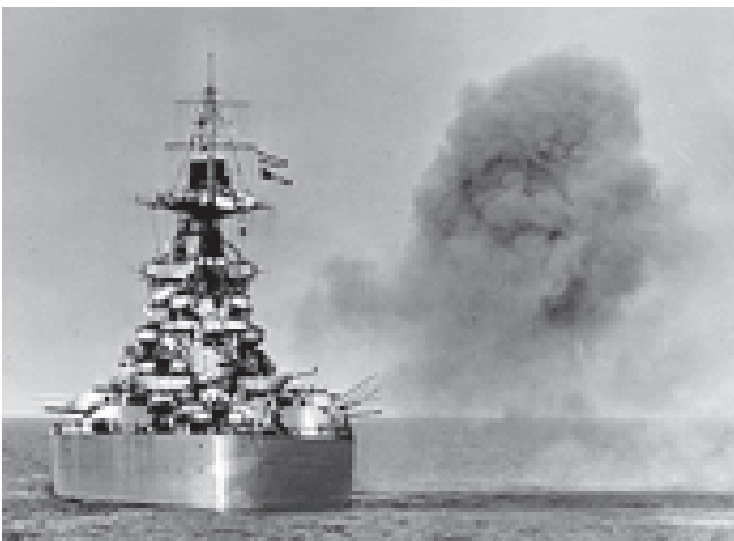
It was doing cable repairs that led to Jim’s fellow driver-op Ken Nash smashing his ankle while riding his motorcycle and being sent back to the UK.

Despite being temporarily out of the front line, nerves still jangled. ‘There was a sergeant there who had nightmares,’ said Jim. ‘It was quite spooky to hear him shouting in the night!’

‘Captain Reid used to join us most evenings for a meal when we would sit round and chat. He told us the latest intelligence, which was mainly concerned with the build-up of the German forces facing us. He had a young infantry officer join him one evening. Afterwards Captain Reid told us the poor man was shattered at the fierce fighting and didn’t expect to live much longer.’

‘Because of the mounting opposition we had 100 per cent stand-to every evening and morning with me on the Piat!’

Tragically, it was at Plumetot that the gunners lost one of their most valued comrades. Len Harvey recalled: ‘Sergeant Fletcher called the F3 gun team together with Harry Pryer and Johnny Thompson, the two layer replacements for the men



**The battleship Rodney off Normandy:
It fired shells 20 miles inland**

we had lost on Horsa Bridge. There was a shout from the far end of the field. It was our driver, Ike Parry, to tell us he had arrived with our new gun. Sergeant Fletcher set off across the field.

‘Eric Sheriff and I followed about six to

eight feet behind when, suddenly, there was a shush and a very loud bang. An 88mm shell had landed in the field about 25 yards to the side of us. Sergeant Fletcher hit the ground, Eric and I hit the ground, and we lay there while more shells landed



An Auster: 92nd LAA defended their target-spotting flights

close by. An 88mm gun fires at very high velocity and the shell travels faster than sound. So if you hear 88mm shells coming, they will land to your right or left, or have already passed over your head. The 88mm shell that is aimed for you, you will not hear until it explodes. When the shelling stopped, Eric and I stood up, but Sergeant Fletcher lay motionless. We looked at the path of shrapnel through the grass and saw it went straight towards him.'

Eric shook the sergeant by the shoulder, saying, 'Are you OK, sarge?' But he only groaned with pain. Len said: 'We called Arthur Greaves, our troop medic, and he came running with Sergeant Connor. They rolled Sergeant Fletcher over and loosened his jacket and trousers. He was seriously wounded in his stomach and we did not think he would make it. He was taken away on a stretcher and we never saw him again.'

Philip Parks was preparing breakfast for himself and his fellow gunners when the shell struck. 'Dad knew it would only

be eight seconds before the next shell landed and he managed to get to Sergeant Fletcher, applying first aid and getting him away to a field dressing station,' said Gunner Parks's son, Philip.

Thanks to the quick action of his comrades, Sergeant Fletcher survived his terrible injuries. 'Years later, our family met the Fletcher family by chance in Carlisle Station and Sergeant Fletcher told us how Dad had saved his life in Normandy and how grateful he was,' said Philip Parks.

Len and Eric realised they had had another narrow escape. Len recalled: 'For the second time, Eric said to me, "We're going to come through this war." The first time was when we should have died in that slit trench during the mortar attack on the bridge. They'd missed us again.'

Sergeant Fletcher's replacement was Sergeant Billy Hewitt – promoted from bombardier – who would remain with F3 to the end of the war.

Protecting the Auster spotter planes was an important task for F Troop, because the small Air Observation Post light aircraft were unarmed and had a maximum speed of only around 130mph. To guard them from shellfire while on the airfield, they were dug into trenches with only their wings exposed.

Once in the air, they were extremely vulnerable. So F Troop would send out one of its Bofors and a radio truck to where an Auster was flying and site the gun so that it could open fire on any enemy aircraft that might try to shoot down the Auster. It was a job close to the heart of the 92nd's CO, Colonel Bazeley – who had put his gunners up for the task because he had earned his DSO while serving with Austers in North Africa.

Jim Holder-Vale particularly enjoyed being the F Troop wireless operator on these assignments. Enthralled, he would listen in on the radio net to the precise, clinical exchange of messages between the Rodney and the observer in the Auster, which brought death raining down from afar on the Germans.

‘It was really interesting,’ said Jim. ‘The observer would say something like, “Target One” and the Rodney would acknowledge and say, “One gun ranging.” Then you could hear the whoomph of the shell being fired.

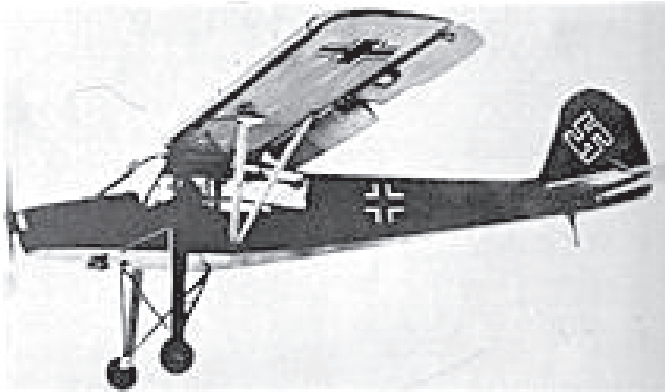
‘The observer would then say something like, “500-12.” I think that meant the shot was at 12 o’clock and 500 yards too far. So they would fire another ranging shot. They never said, “Fire,” they always said “Shot.” Then the observer would say, “On target,” and the Rodney would say, “All guns shoot.”

‘Next minute, the observer would say, “Hit ... hit ... hit ... hit. Target destroyed.” Then there would be a pause and the observer would say, “Target Two ... one gun ranging.” And it would start all over again. This would go on and on for hours. I never knew what the targets were, but I know from reading books subsequently that the Germans hated it, particularly the armour.’ However, one such assignment ended with Jim and Jack Taylor becoming targets of the Germans. As they drove one morning to rendezvous with their gun, their lorry came under small arms fire.

‘Somebody had spotted us,’ said Jim. ‘We got out of the truck and jumped into a slit trench. I don’t know how they knew we were there, but every time we stuck our head up, they had another go. It went on for ages. Then some Dakotas flew over dropping supplies by parachute for the Airborne. But Jack, being so short-sighted, thought at first they were German paratroopers. We were in a panic there for a moment!’

It was on an Auster protection assignment that Lieutenant Dizzy Marsh lost one of his most prized possessions – an American Colt automatic pistol, which he wore in a holster slung low on his right thigh. ‘He was the officer in charge and occupied a slit trench in front of mine where I had the wireless,’ Jim recalled. ‘I saw him take off his belt and lay it at the side of his trench. But what I didn’t see was the going of his gun.

We were with an infantry mob who were constantly passing our position. Our lads were on the gun, so when Dizzy found his prized weapon had gone, he gave vent to his feelings which I thought was directed at me. After all, I had also been there when his waterproof bag disappeared!’ June 24 saw tragedy



A Fiesler Storch: Confusion in the skies

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 Prior 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 had 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. The Channel crossing in the Samark was mercifully uneventful following the tragedy of the Sambut. However, there was a moment of high drama when explosions reverberated around the ship as depth charges were dropped after a submarine was reported in the vicinity. On July 2, the Samark berthed near Courseulles-sur-Mer on Juno Beach – close to the constantly firing guns of the battleship Warspite – and the Coombe Hill arrived in the same vicinity. Once the troops, guns and vehicles were unloaded from both ships, they set off to join up with their comrades inland in Normandy. At last, the whole of 92nd LAA was reunited.

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 German short take-off and landing light plane similar to the British Lysander. '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,' Bombardier Prince frantically told the gun crews.

But they did not 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. Bill Wills at one stage found himself near a dressing station that was being shelled and dived



**Crew of Gun F3, based in a ruined farm at Sannerville,
watch as soldiers herd cattle to safety** *Imperial War Museum*

into what he thought was the safety of a trench – only to realise to his horror when he finally emerged that he had taken refuge in a pit full of explosives, which were being stored there.

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 92nd’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 was wounded when a shell exploded nearby and buried him along with two other officers. The three men were dug out and the two other officers were found to be unhurt, but suffering from shock.

However, Captain Reid was badly wounded in both hands and was evacuated back to England the following day. 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 terrible danger from the air was graphically illustrated in an incident recalled by Tom Cribb in an interview in 1994. He told how he and his comrades would fill empty ammunition boxes with earth and pull them across the top of their slit trenches as extra anti-aircraft protection.

‘One night, Jerry came over and was machine-gunning and cannon-shelling up and down the field. We could feel all these shells and things coming though the wheat and spattering across the top of the slit trench into the boxes filled with earth and stuff. It holed them, but it saved us.

‘After that raid, I went over about ten yards away to the next gun because I couldn’t see anything moving and there were my mates on the bottom of the trench. They had been cannon-shelled, mostly through the head. If only they had been told to pull the ammo boxes across and fill them with earth, they would probably have been all right.’

It was bombing and shelling by an unseen enemy that ground away at many men’s nerves. Bill Wills recalled: ‘Going over to Normandy, I had no apprehension at all. What I had expected was that it would be something like we had learned about the First World War – sitting about in shell holes. I didn’t start to feel apprehensive until we started getting shelled and mortared. It was terrifying.’

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 and four men wounded when four 500lb bombs were dropped on F Troop area, collapsing their dugout on top of them. Among the wounded were Gunner Gerry Connor – the sergeant’s brother – Gunners Hardwick and Furniss and Corporal Wright. Gerry Connor was buried in the blast, but managed to get out. The bombs also destroyed all F Troop stores and several vehicles, including a water carrier.

Sergeant Connor, aged 32, died shortly after being promoted to Warrant Officer Class II, becoming Battery Sergeant Major. A regular soldier, he had joined the Cheshire Regiment in 1933 and was one of eight brothers from the same Liverpool family



A self-propelled Bofors fires though ruined houses in Caumont *Imperial War Museum*



Killed: BSM Francis Connor



Wounded: Gerry Connor

who saw service during the Second World War.

He had originally been away from front line service, training officer cadets. But after the death of his wife, he asked his brother to 'claim' him into 92nd LAA. Another Connor brother, 24-year-old Anthony, serving with the East Lancashire Regiment, would die two months later near Eindhoven in Holland.

After the July 25 deaths, tragedy continued to strike 92nd LAA. Just 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,’ the captain recalled. ‘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 a 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,



**Road to battle: A 92nd LAA convoy in
St Martin des Besaces *Imperial War Museum***

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.’ A

hazard which bedevilled the driver-ops was tanks tearing up the phone lines they had carefully laid. Bill Wills and his colleagues had been dismayed to find themselves laying numerous phone cables when they got to Normandy, because their training had been focused on wireless communication. But, shortly before the invasion, the top brass apparently decided that radio links were not needed between individual troops and batteries, and phones would suffice. 'I often used to chase tanks in a Jeep trying to untangle my phone lines,' said Bill. 'It got so bad I decided I would go out at night and repair them. It meant I was able to sleep during the day.'

However, the phone lines brought a bonus for the 92nd LAA men. 'I used to get the BBC news on a radio and I found a way of connecting it to the phone circuit,' said Bill. 'I would put the news on every night and a battery could pick up the phone and listen to it.'

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 was on the move, with 318 based 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 towed 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



**Tragedy: Major
George Williams**



Out of the line: Crew of Gun F3 near Rouen in 1944. Back row, from left: Sergeant Bill Hewett, Harry Pryer, Sam Davies, Ike Parry, Bill Bowman. Front row: Sammy Cohen, Len Harvey, Eric Sheriff, John Townsend



Douglas Davies and comrades with SP Bofors in France, prior to moving into the Low Countries *Picture: Cameron Robb*

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.

One of those transferred out of the regiment was Tom Mason, who was sent back to England for six weeks of infantry training. However, he was dismayed to find that tactics had been slow to adapt to the realities of modern warfare. The emphasis was still on rifle drill and bayonet practice, whereas on the battlefield most soldiers preferred to be armed with sub-machine guns. Tom ended the war serving with the Highland Light Infantry.

Another old hand who left 92nd LAA was Peter Connelly, who was transferred to 1st Battalion, the East Lancashire Regiment. In January 1945, the 34-year-old Liverpudlian was killed in action in Belgium, leaving a widow and a three-month-old son.

The regimental reorganisation was barely sinking in when there was fresh drama. On August 9, the gunners nearly became victims of their 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 takes 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.

However, when the enemy were caught in a bombardment, the impact of concentrated 40mm fire was awesome. 'A Bofors could fire 120 shells a minute and with six guns in a troop, that

meant more than 700 shells a minute landing on a target,’ said Len Harvey. ‘It must have been terrible to be on the end of that. The infantry told us that prisoners they took after a shoot were bomb-happy, immobile with shock.’

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.

The regiment was strung out along the edge of the ‘great dark’ Halouze Forest. 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, where they were relentlessly bombed, strafed and shelled, 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. ‘It was a terrible thing to see,’ recalled George Baker. ‘There were bodies everywhere, men and animals. It was slaughter, sickening. We were glad when we left that place.’

Jim Holder-Vale and a comrade passed through the Falaise

area in the aftermath of the German rout and were shocked into silence. ‘It was one of the most breathtaking scenes we ever saw,’ Jim recalled. ‘It was beautiful sunny day, but we never said a word to one another – we just drove. The sides of the road and the fields were just littered for mile after mile with burned-out vehicles and equipment.

‘I even saw a massive steam engine red with rust, lying on its side like a child’s toy, as well as tanks and dead horses. I think most of the dead soldiers had been removed, but it was a very hot day and the smell was still terrible.’ After capturing Flers, 3rd Division was ordered to halt for ten days of rest and refitting. This started for the 92nd around La Chapelle Biche, where on August 24 a gymkhana and sports day was held in ‘perfect’ weather. Recreation was interspersed with training, including a



At Etrepagny: From left, an unidentified officer, Lieutenant Cowper Pratt, and possibly Major Peter Crane

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.

F Troop practised indirect firing at Les Andelys and A and B troops practised 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, built by Richard the Lionheart, 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.’

Sightseeing trips were arranged to Paris, which – since its liberation – had seen few British troops. Ten men from each 3rd Division regiment were chosen to enjoy this wonderful bonus



**Sightseeing: Len Harvey
at the Eiffel Tower**

after their Army numbers were pulled at random out of a bucket. To his delight, Len Harvey's ticket came up. 'We arrived at the Arc de Triomphe at about 9am,' he recalled. 'Word must have gone round very fast that British troops had arrived. The people came out in hundreds. We were kissed, cuddled, photographed and cheered every step we took. It was liberation all over again and they really showed their gratitude.'

'We were given a tour of the city in troop carriers. At Notre Dame, a nun pinned a St Christopher on my uniform. "It will bring you luck, Tommy," she said. Paris was a beautiful city. We stopped at the Eiffel Tower, but were not allowed to go up because the French police thought the Germans might have booby-trapped it and it was yet to be checked for explosives. What a beautiful tower – I vowed that one day I would return and go to the top. I have since kept that promise.'

Another 92nd LAA man who went to Paris was Philip Parks. However, he and Len were among the lucky few. Further trips were cancelled as the war moved on.

CHAPTER TEN

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, the Ruhr, 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 and sombre cemeteries 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,' wrote Captain Almond. '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.'

Jim Holder-Vale recalled how, because of the supply difficulties around this time, the regiment was issued with captured German rations. 'We had to get used to mainly tinned pork, which was quite tasty, and fresh vegetables in the shape of French beans which came in small, open-topped waxed cartons.

'These were always a mystery to us, as we had nothing like them. Nobody wanted a large drum of honey, so I took it and enjoyed it over many weeks on Army biscuits. In place of our usual free issue of seven cigarettes a day we had German cigars, which were not very popular. But those of us that did smoke them began to smell like the German prisoners.'

The regiment next 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 a German raider 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 attacking planes. 'These were the first rounds fired by the regiment in over six weeks and success gave a great lift to morale,' said the war diary.

The kill earned a special signal from the 3rd Division 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,' he said. 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 Oefellt-Gennep area. On the 12th, as ME 262s and a JU 88 raided the regimental area, 92nd LAA added its firepower to a massive artillery barrage in support of 3rd Division troops who were battling to capture Overloon in Operation Aintree.

Jim Holder-Vale was the radio operator for six of the regiment's guns, which were sited in front of a nunnery as

part of the huge operation. ‘We knew there was going to be an enormous barrage put down, with all 3rd Division artillery and a lot more besides and we were rather concerned for an elderly nun we saw on the roof, replacing tiles,’ Jim recalled.

‘When it was suggested that we should tell her to come down, the officer in charge said No. But he was ignored and the nun was persuaded to get off the roof. Soon after, the barrage erupted with an enormous crash.

‘Unfortunately, the Auster spotter plane in front of us was hit by a shell fired by our heavy artillery further back. The plane disintegrated and fell to earth – a very sad thing to watch.’

During the Overloon operation, the 92nd LAA guns unleashed 1,800 rounds. ‘Afterwards, we moved into what remained of the place,’ said Jim. ‘It was an absolute shambles, littered with vast amounts of unexploded artillery shells and anti-personnel bombs. There were also a number of shell-shocked chickens which were rounded up and eaten.

‘My wireless was set up in a small cellar and the remains of a building which contained the corpses of two pigs. This didn’t bother us, as it was a safe haven from the shelling and rocket mortars – nebelwerfers, or moaning minnies. It rained a lot and was very cold. There was a poor horse wandering around which was eventually killed during the shelling. As the corpse lay near our HQ, we were detailed to bury it. Fortunately, the ground was very soft – like black sand – so we just piled it up over the body, leaving the four hooves exposed. After a while, the hooves fell off.’

Four days later, amid very bad weather, the Bofors of 92nd LAA 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 Philip Gregg was wounded when two 108mm shells hit I Troop billet area. The ‘calmness and initiative’ of Gunner J Smith while attending the wounded bombardier 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 granddad – started to complain to my granddad that Captain Chubb’s head and upper body were too heavy to carry and asked my granddad



John Rowland

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,



**Soldiers of 92nd LAA at Oploo,
Holland, the regiment's base
during the autumn and winter of
1944-1945** *Pictures courtesy of
Bill Wills*





D Troop, 318 Battery headquarters at Oploo: Leaning by the Jeep's front wheel, pipe in hand, is Lance-Bombardier Joe 'Doc' Donovan, the troop's medical orderly. His first aid bag, marked 'Doc' hangs from the front of the Jeep next to the young girl. Joe, described by his comrade Bill Wills as 'unflappable and very popular', was awarded the Croix de Guerre with Bronze Star by the French, but said he would wear it for the whole battery.



as Captain Chubb received an 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

Joe Donovan: Honoured

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.’ The 92nd’s time in Holland brought a brush with death for George Baker, who was now driving a truck with one of the regimental counter-mortar units. Although only lightly armed, these six-man outfits often had the unenviable task of venturing into No Man’s Land – ahead even of the infantry – to try to get a fix on enemy artillery positions.

On this occasion, the soldiers were on standby in the cellar of a ruined house a few hundred yards from the German front line and George was upstairs keeping watch on the enemy positions through a hole in the wall.

As dawn was breaking, he got a call from his comrades to



Guarding the skies: A 92nd LAA Bofors crew in bitter winter weather near Oploo on December 10, 1944 *Imperial War Museum*

come downstairs for a welcome cup of tea. ‘As I turned and started walking down the steps – whoosh! A shell came right through the opening in the wall where I had been standing a second or two earlier,’ said George. ‘The opening had been shelled earlier on and the Germans must have had their field glasses on it. I was very lucky.’

Another drama came when George was on counter-mortar duty with Lieutenant ‘Dizzy’ Marsh. The Jeep in which they and two others were travelling down a German country lane came under fire and they scrambled out to take cover. George found refuge under a hedge and the two others squeezed between the deep furrows of a field.

The lieutenant dived head-first into what looked like a slit trench. Some time later, when all was clear, they emerged from their hiding places. But when Lieutenant Marsh crawled out of his ‘slit trench’ it was immediately obvious that he had in fact plunged into a well-used German latrine. ‘He was covered head to toe,’ said George. ‘He had a trench coat on, but he never even took it off. We got back in the Jeep and drove off. The smell was terrible.’

When Jim Holder-Vale became wireless operator to Jack Prior, the regimental Intelligence Officer, he also found venturing out on the roads could be more than a little hazardous. ‘Jack always drove our wireless truck and I travelled in the passenger seat,’ Jim recalled. ‘One evening we were driving back from visiting another unit when I noticed there were no longer unit signs at the side of the road.

‘Such signs indicated a unit’s location day or night and were made from Army biscuit tins. Those for the 92nd had the upper section of the four sides painted red and the lower blue, indicating artillery with the number 47 superimposed in white. The figures were outlined with punched holes so that at night they could be seen when a lighted paraffin lamp was put inside

the upturned tin.

‘I think by now Jack realised we were lost and drove very slowly. Then I saw in the ditch beside us a group of blacked-up



**Badge of courage: Major Peter Crane receives his
Military Cross from Montgomery** *Imperial War Museum*

soldiers who were obviously a patrol about to enter the German positions. We stopped and were told in whispers to “bugger off”, as the Germans were only minutes away along the road!’ 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.

‘It was scary, but I enjoyed this challenge,’ said Len Harvey.

‘Night patrols were a bit nervy, but after a while, we took them in our stride. Having the river between us and the Germans was a good line of defence. If the river had not been there, it might have been a different experience.’ Bill Wills also recalled that this period of holding the Maas line was nerve-racking. ‘We were mortared every night. The Germans knew where we were, but they never attacked directly.’

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,’ wrote Captain Almond. ‘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.’

For the 92nd LAA men, it was now a case of waiting through the winter until the war started in earnest again. And, as they settled into their vigil along the Maas, they could turn some of their energies to the ever-important matter of food.

Gunner Henry Woodall of D Troop, one of the original Liverpool recruits who joined up with 7th Loyals in 1940, described how he and his comrades enjoyed a real bonus in this respect.

On November 19, he wrote home to his wife: ‘Just to make your teeth water, Hon, we’re having pork and chicken tomorrow for dinner. One of the lads killed one of the pigs that were running around the village here and Ginger Smith knicked a couple of hens, so I can see us having a few slap-up Xmas dinners while we’re here. So here’s hoping the cook makes a good job of it, so cheerio for now ...’

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 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.

The troops also laid on a party for Dutch children in the Venraij area. ‘That went down well,’ said Len Harvey. ‘We used our corned beef, sardines, coffee, sweets and chocolate. They went home happy. They had never experienced anything like it. In the evening, we got together with the mums and dads and had a good Christmas drink. For them, it was fantastic because the Germans didn’t look after the Dutch very well. In fact, in northern Holland, the people were starving,’

Further south in the Ardennes, it was the height of the

dramatic German counter-offensive, aiming to split the Allied armies in two. Traditionally at Christmas, British officers act as servants to their men during the festive meal. Leo McCarthy used to tell how on Christmas Day 1944 he was brought a drink by an officer – but, uncharacteristically, he refused it. With all that was going on in the Ardennes, he explained, he wanted to stay alert.

Jim Holder-Vale did accept a drink on Christmas Eve and regretted it. ‘For the first time in my life I got drunk,’ he recalled. ‘Someone gave me a mug full of Calvados, but I wasn’t a drinker. However, I drank it – and I had to be helped to bed.’

But it didn’t end there. Next morning, Jim woke to find Jack Prior had turned up with a bottle of champagne. ‘Jack wasn’t a drinker and I don’t know where he got the champagne from. He even had glasses. We all had a glass of champagne, then later I had to go to the MO to get something for my head!’

On Boxing Day, 340 enemy aircraft were spotted approaching the corps area from the north-east, but there was no attack. 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, firing 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.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FOURTEEN RAIDERS DOWNED

Monday, January 1, 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 New Year's Day 1945, Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Henderson RA, of the 97th Anti-Tank Regiment, took command of 92nd LAA 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 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.’

Jack Prior said: ‘We were beginning to believe our anti-aircraft role was over, but we were proved dramatically wrong.’ Knowing that his men – without time to aim properly – had mainly been firing over open sights, 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’.

21 ARMY GROUP

**PERSONAL MESSAGE
FROM THE C-IN-C**

(To be read out to all Troops)

1. On the 7th February I told you we were going into the ring for the final and last round: there would be no time limit: we would continue fighting until our opponent was knocked out. The last round is going very well on both sides of the ring - and overhead.
2. In the WEST, the enemy has lost the Rhineland and with it the flower of at least four armies - the Parachute Army, Fifth Panzer Army, Fifteenth Army and Seventh Army; the First Army, further to the south, is now being added to the list. In the Rhineland battles, the enemy has lost about 150,000 prisoners and there are many more to come; his total casualties amount to about 250,000 since 8th February.
3. In the EAST, the enemy has lost all POMERANIA east of the ODER, an area as large as the Rhineland; and three more German armies have been routed. The Russian armies are within about 35 miles of BERLIN.
4. Overhead, the Allied Air Forces are pounding Germany day and night. It will be interesting to see how much longer the Germans can stand it.
5. The enemy has in fact been driven into a corner, and he cannot escape. Events are moving rapidly. The complete and decisive defeat of the Germans is certain; there is no possibility of doubt on this matter.
6. 21 ARMY GROUP WILL NOW CROSS THE RHINE. The enemy possibly thinks he is safe behind this great river obstacle. We all agree that it is a great river obstacle; but we will show the enemy that he is far from safe behind it. This great Allied fighting machine, composed of integrated land and air forces, will deal with the problem in no uncertain manner.
7. And having crossed the Rhine, we will crack about in the plains of Northern Germany, chasing the enemy from pillar to post. The swifter and the more energetic our action, the sooner the war will be over, and that is what we all desire: to get on with the job and finish off the German war as soon as possible.
8. Over the RHINE then, let us go. And good hunting to you all on the other side.
9. May "The Lord mighty in battle" give us the victory in this our latest undertaking, as He has done in all our battles since we landed in Normandy on D-day.

B. L. Montgomery

Germany,
March, 1945

Field-Marshal
C-in-C,
21 Army Group.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ACROSS THE RHINE TO VICTORY

January to May 1945

‘Through the early hours of the April 25th, the regiment’s batteries used up 36,000 rounds. By that evening, organised resistance in Bremen was collapsing.’

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, an RAF 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 on the east bank of the Maas.

There was a brief respite for some of the men, who were given 72-hour passes and sent to Brussels to rest and recuperate. ‘I was billeted with a Belgian family in a large house,’ said

Len Harvey. 'They certainly made me feel welcome. My underclothes were washed clean and ironed and a hot bath was prepared. I was reluctant to get out of the bath tub because the hot water felt so good on my body. Now, over 60 years later, I cannot forget the kindness shown to me by this family during that short break from the front line.'

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-Bonninghardt 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. Five days



Firepower: Massed Bofors Guns in action near the Reichswald Forest in February 1945 *Imperial War Museum*



Bombardment: Gun F4 of F Troop targets enemy-held woods near Goch, March 1, 1945 *Imperial War Museum*

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,' wrote 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 Vrasselt area – also the target for 317. 319 was based in a disused factory near Wissel.

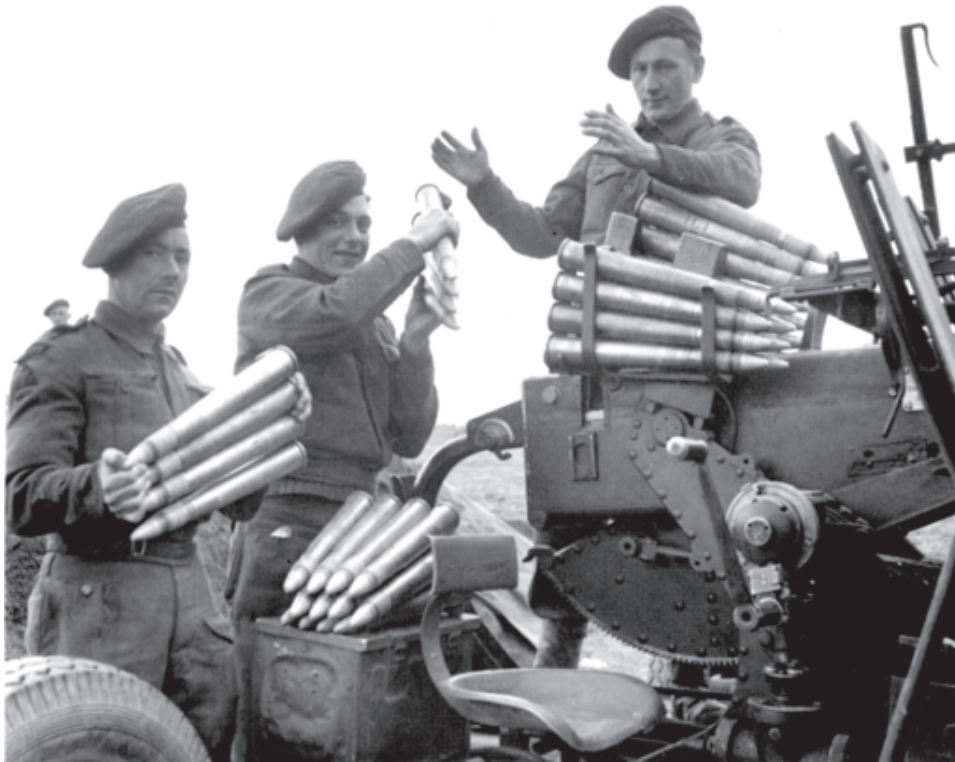
Between 7pm and 8.55pm that night, the skies erupted in flame as each 92nd battery fired between 4,500 and 6,500 rounds across the river, helping pave the way for the assault troops. As the Bofors pounded away remorselessly, several overheated and suffered damage to recoil mechanisms and barrel wear. 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. ‘Everything that could fire was fired during that barrage,’ recalled Len Harvey. ‘The only time we stopped was when the gun barrels became red hot and had to be replaced.’

As the Bofors of the 92nd blasted the Germans, Bill Wills and a comrade were out in front of the guns trying to repair



The Rhine Crossing bombardment: From left, Sergeant T Muirhead, Gunner W Short, Gunner E Davies, Gunner J Alldis – all of Liverpool – and Gunner Whittaker of Bury load their Bofors Gun *Imperial War Museum*



More scenes from the Rhine bombardment: Gunner W Greenhaugh of Manchester, Gunner W Phillips of Brighton and Gunner D Ainsworth of Liverpool *Imperial War Museum*



A Bofors of 319 sends out hail of shells across the Rhine
Imperial War Museum



Massed Bofors guns of 319 Battery giving harassing fire on the right flank of the 51st Highland Division *Imperial War Museum*



Essential maintenance: Men of 319 Battery cleaning out a Bofors gun barrel after a shoot. From left: Gunner H Topping, of Warrington; Sergeant W Green of Salisbury, Gunner T Billingsley of Liverpool, Gunner A Risley, of Warrington *Imperial War Museum*

phone cables, some of which had been severed by ‘prematures’ – shells which exploded too early on leaving the barrel. It produced a hair-raising moment for the two driver-ops ‘We came crawling back only to see all the gun crews with their weapons at the ready and aiming at us,’ said Bill. ‘They thought it was a German counter-attack – by two of us!’

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 Haltern, 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.

For the most part, German resistance was collapsing. ‘It was now one advance after another,’ said Len Harvey. ‘We knew we were winning. The Germans had no more fight left in them – they were just giving themselves up. Their Home Guard, the Volkssturm, threw their weapons down and surrendered.’

On April 4, troops of 185 Brigade in assault boats crossed the Dortmund-Ems canal under fire and started moving on Lingen.

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, Lingen. The following day, after moving through Rheine to Haldem, 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 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. As well as using its Bofors, the regiment also brought its captured German 88mm gun to bear. In addition, a Bofors was sited on heights outside the city and ranged across at the Weser, in case the Germans tried to send in submarines from further up the estuary.

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. Bill Wills, whose ability to speak German had led to him going out regularly on reconnaissance missions, heard news of the capitulation while liaising outside Bremen with American troops whose positions the 92nd was due to take over. The U.S. soldiers gave their British comrades a barrel of sherry with which to celebrate.

George Baker, who by now had transferred to the 20th Anti-Tank Regiment, heard that the end was near while his unit was camped in a field near Osnabruck. ‘Somebody came round our tents in the early hours of the morning and said, “The war’s going to be over at such and such a time.” We didn’t believe him. But in the morning, we got it officially. We had made it – we had made it.’

The men of Guns F3 and F4 were relaxing when Lieutenant Coombs suddenly appeared and to their surprise sharply asked Sergeant Bill Hewitt of F3 why they were not manning their

gun. He was told: 'There's nobody fighting, Sir. The Germans are surrendering everywhere. There's no opposition any more.'

But the officer sternly insisted: 'Sergeant, man the gun.' The men obeyed.

Then next second, Lieutenant Coombs started laughing and said: 'Now you can stand down. The war is officially over. The Germans are signing their defeat this morning. Well done, lads.'

A cheer went up – and it was time to celebrate. 'We went over to a big house nearby, turned out all the civilians and put them in the cellar,' said Len Harvey. 'We took over the house for our own use. Johnny Chadwick went to his kit bag and took out a small accordion. Nobody knew he had it, or could even play it. He started with all the war songs – Dolly Gray, Tipperary, etc – and out came bottles of wine and the two sergeants brought in bottles of whisky.'

Then, 11 months after the men of F3 had saved their rum issue on the landing craft taking them to Normandy, resolving to use it to toast the end of the war, it was time to drink it. Driver Ike Parry had kept it safe in a flask. 'We drank and sang most of the night,' said Len. 'We really enjoyed ourselves. The civilians down in the cellar must have been terrified at what they were hearing.'

Absent comrades were never far from their thoughts. 'We diluted the rum and wished that Sergeant Fletcher, Joe Lavender, Lance Sergeant Benn and Gunner Leo McCarthy were there to drink with us. This was the happier time that Sergeant Fletcher said we should keep the rum issue for.'

The 92nd moved to Gesmold, south-east of Osnabruck, where it took control of the district around Melle. VE Day was marked with a service of thanksgiving and a day's holiday.

From Sword Beach, the regiment had travelled some 600 miles, firing 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 ammunition and 8,687 rounds of 20mm ammunition.

The 92nd's final tally of enemy aircraft destroyed in North West Europe was 48, and probably 21 others. Along with the single confirmed kill in England, that made possibly 70 German planes in all – no mean total. During the campaign, two officers and 18 men were killed and four officers and 42 men wounded.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**OCCUPATION ARMY AND THE
FINAL DAYS**

May 1945 to February 1946

'You looked after the division, protecting it from air attacks almost constantly from the moment you landed on D-Day until VE-Day. Whenever there was an attack, you never failed to get your men.'

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 prisoners of war. On May 10, Lieutenant-Colonel Henderson stepped down as the 92nd's CO and Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Maynard Adderley took command.

That same day, Lieutenant Coombs mustered as many drivers as possible for a special operation. Len Harvey was among them. 'We were taken to the 3rd Division HQ, where two drivers each were assigned to a three-ton Bedford lorry and the whole convoy of trucks set off for Hanover, where they were loaded with Red Cross packages. From there we progressed to Belsen concentration camp.

'The packages were unloaded at a temporary hospital. By this time, the dead had all been buried into large pits. I saw one sign which read, "Approximately 5,000 bodies were interred

here” and there were very many such pits. The smell of dead flesh was still heavy in the atmosphere. Back with F Troop, we had to answer dozens of questions from comrades who had wanted to be with us. Personally, I found being in the camp very distressing and too difficult to talk about.’

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, Romanian and Serbian displaced persons. After a week here, the regiment moved on June 5 to Sennelager Camp, near Dortmund – 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 assembled at Sennelager for a farewell parade before the 3rd Division commander, Major-General Whistler. In a special Order of the Day, ‘Bolo’ paid an elegant and emotional tribute to the regiment. He told the gunners: ‘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

**Saying farewell:
Major-General Whistler
addresses the assembled
92nd LAA troops
at Sennelager**
Imperial War Museum



**Goodbye and Godspeed:
General Whistler takes the
salute as the regiment marches
past for the final time**
Imperial War Museum

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



Relaxing: Leo McCarthy (right) and comrade, Germany, summer of 1945

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 put aboard a plane for Maryland in the U.S., where they were due to start training. But the flight was cancelled. 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 F (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 Rowland J (319 Bty)
2343775 W/Cpl Chalinor G (R Sigs att RHQ)
14233428 Sigmn 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 Bty)

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 Bty)

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 Risley 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 have been 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 Leo McCarthy a few days after D-Day is 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

3863796 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.
North Sheen 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

In Memoriam: Peter James Connelly

3863697 Lance Corporal Peter James Connelly, aged 34 (1st Battalion, The East Lancashire Regiment). Died January 7, 1945. Son of William and Mary Connelly, of Liverpool; husband of Catherine Connelly, of Liverpool.

Hotton War Cemetery, Belgium, II. B. 12.

(Lance Corporal Connelly, one of the original 7th Loyals, was transferred to the East Lancashire Regiment from 92nd LAA in August 1944. His memory is honoured here alongside his fallen comrades of his old regiment).

Their Name Liveth For Evermore

THE 'UNKNOWN' CASUALTIES

In 2009, a further 12 fatalities from 7th Loyals / 92nd LAA were made known to me – and they they have thrown up many questions. I had found no record of them during my original research, which included extensive study of the war diaries, so I am at a loss to explain the circumstances of the men's deaths. Of the 12 dead, all of whom are buried in Britain, 11 were almost certainly part of the original contingent which was called up at Caernarvon in 1940 to form 7th Loyals. This is because their Army number is prefixed with 38, indicating the Loyal Regiment.

Only one of the soldiers, Bombardier John Leslie Knight, appears definitely to have died of wounds, more than two years after the end of the war. He is named on the official casualty list, issued in May 1945.

Private John Hogan, of Warrington, died in hospital of peritonitis just six weeks after joining up at Caernarvon in 1940 – he was due to marry his fiancée on his first leave. According to the newspaper report of his funeral, he had been ill for most of the time he was in the Army.

Gunner Dennis Rattigan died of tuberculosis two years after being invalided out of the Army.

However, as of April 2012 – when this edition was updated – I have still not managed to determine how the rest of the casualties died. But I think it is probable they were victims of illness or possibly accidents.

The addition of the 12 'unknown' casualties means that

a total of 38 men from the battalion / regiment died from the formation of 7th Loyals in 1940 to the end of the war. I have listed the 12 men here, with notes on the regiment's location at the time of their deaths.

3862209 Private John Hogan, 7th Battalion, The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire), aged 28. Died September 1, 1940 (*Battalion in Caernarvon*). Son of Private John Hogan, South Lancashire Regt. (Died on active service, 17th February, 1919), and Beatrice Hogan, of Warrington.

Sec. W. Grave 66, Warrington Cemetery

3863712 Private Walter Lea, 7th Battalion, The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) aged 29. Died April 3, 1941 (*Battalion on Yorkshire coast*). Son of Thomas Palentine Lea and Caroline Lea, of Kirkdale, Liverpool.

Sec. 1, C of E. Coll, grave 366, Liverpool (Kirkdale) Cemetery

3862090 Private Joseph Hilton, 7th Battalion, The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) aged 27 Died April 30, 1941 (*Battalion on Yorkshire coast*). Son of John and Alice Hilton, of St. Helens; husband of Freda Hilton, of Sutton, St. Helens.

Sec. 48, Grave 460, St Helens Cemetery

3862768 Private John Colin Lomax Ramsdale Johnson, 7th Battalion, The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire), aged 30. Died May 21, 1941 (*Battalion on Yorkshire coast*). Son of Samuel and Florence Edith Johnson, of Higher Tranmere, Birkenhead.

West Extn, Sec. 12, Row 6, Grave 4, Heswall (St Peter) Churchyard

3863794 Private William Edward Lovett, 7th Battalion, The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire), aged 33. Died September

23, 1941 (*Battalion in Redcar*). Son of James and Harriet Lovett, of Seaforth, Liverpool.

Sec. 6. C. of E. Grave 595, Bootle Cemetery

3862057 Gunner Joseph Hobson, 317 Battery 92nd LAA, aged 22. Died April 10, 1943 (*Regiment in Castle Douglas*). Son of Ernest and Betty Hobson, of Little Lever; husband of Elsie Hobson, of Little Lever.

Grave E, 203, Little Lever (St Matthew) Churchyard

3856779 Private William Greenhalgh, aged 20, The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire) attd 7th Battalion. Secondary Regiment: Border Regiment. Died May 22, 1943 (*Regiment in Castle Douglas*). Son of Harry and Beatrice Greenhalgh, of Bolton.

Div. 2, Sec. X, Nonconformist, Grave 41, Bolton (Heaton) Cemetery

14618137 Private Richard Edward Pugh, attached 7th Battalion The Loyal Regiment (North Lancashire). Died March 9, 1944 (*Regiment in Castle Douglas*). Secondary Regiment, Border Regiment.

West of Church, Llanfihangel-y-Pennant (St Michael) Churchyard, Merionethshire (Private Pugh was possibly in the General Service Corps, attached to the regiment)

3862793 Serjeant Alfred Cyril Phillips, 317 Battery, 92nd LAA, aged 29. Died May 20, 1944 (*Regiment in Horndean, Hampshire*). Son of William A Phillips and Louise Phillips, of Liverpool; husband of Marianne Cynthia Phillips, of Liverpool.
Sec. C, Gen. Grave 223, Liverpool (Toxteth Park) Cemetery

3863657 Gunner Dennis Rattigan, 317 Battery, 92nd LAA, aged 32. Died March 6, 1945 (*Regiment in Kervenheim,*

Germany). Son of Thomas and Sarah Rattigan; husband of Irene Rattigan, of Widnes.

Farnworth (St Luke) Churchyard

3863738 Gunner Frank Lysaght, 92nd LAA, aged 34. Died April 16, 1945 (*Regiment in Apelstadt, Germany*). Son of William James Lysaght and Agnes Lysaght, of Liverpool.

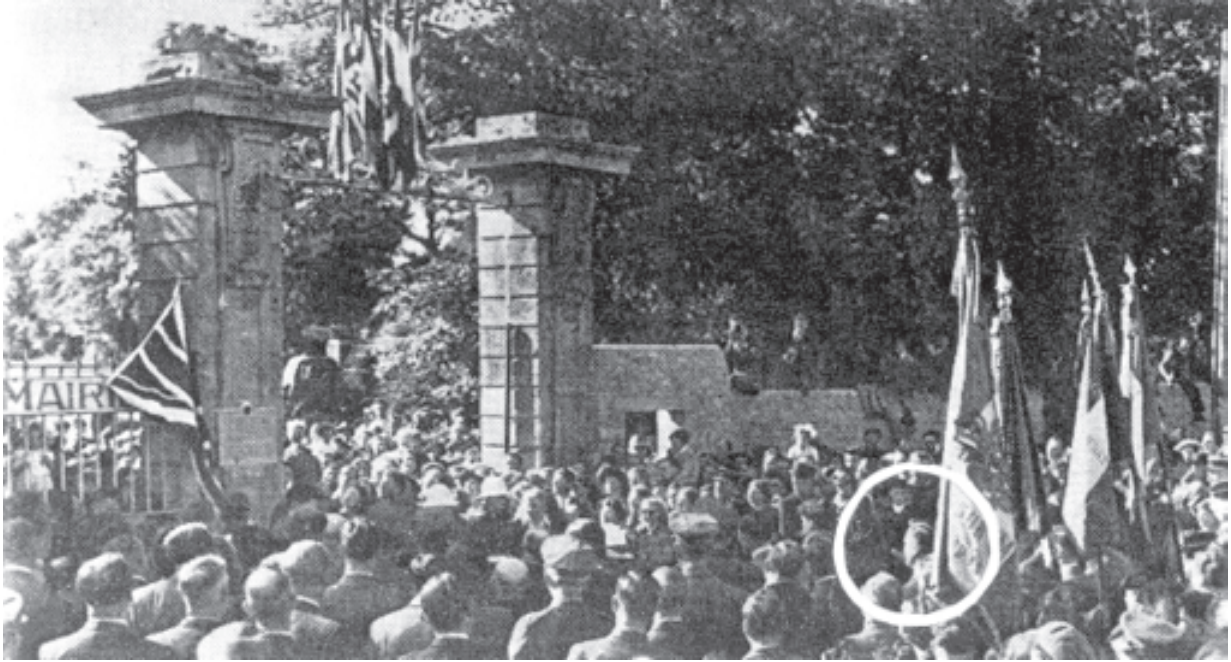
Sec. 11, Nonconformist, Grave 410, Liverpool (Anfield) Cemetery

3863710 Bombardier John Leslie Knight, 92nd LAA, aged 37. Died November 7, 1947 (*Post-war*). Son of Samuel and Elizabeth Ann Knight, of Runcorn.

Sec. 12. Grave 1209. Runcorn Cemetery

Their Name Liveth For Evermore

Afterwards...



Tribute: Jack Prior (circled) at the unveiling of the 3rd Division memorial in Hermanville on June 5, 1949



Granddad fought here: Leo McCarthy's grandsons, John and Michael, at Pegasus Bridge in November 1987



**The memorial to the Royal Artillery of 3rd Division
on the Sword Beach seafront at La Breche**



92nd LAA is among the units commemorated



**Comrades: 92nd LAA veterans
Jim Holder-Vale, Len Harvey
and George Baker at the RA
memorial, June 6, 2008**

**A toast: During the crossing to
Normandy on D-Day in 1944,
some of the 92nd LAA men did not
drink their rum ration. At Sword
Beach on June 6, 2008,
that situation was finally
remedied as Len, George and Jim
were treated to a warming glass.
Sixty-four years on, the
circle was complete**



Epilogue

Ronald Prince was demobbed in December 1945 and eventually returned to his trade as a printer.

George Baker was kept on in the Army until 1947, serving in Palestine.

Len Harvey also did not leave the Army until 1947, marrying a Polish girl he met in Germany.

Tom Mason was transferred to the Highland Light Infantry until the end of the war and later served in Palestine.

Bill Wills stayed on as a sergeant in the Intelligence Corps until 1947, tracking down Nazi war criminals in Germany.

Arthur Walters saw LCT 627 handed over to the French after the war, but managed to save its ensign and log.

Philip Parks was transferred to the 6th Cameronian (Scottish Rifles) until the end of the war, coming home in 1946.

Dai Jones in his later years made his home in North Wales.

Bill Fletcher, despite his serious wounds, survived and made his home in Scotland.

Len Nott was commissioned in October 1945 before finally leaving the Army in the autumn of 1947 to join HM Customs and Excise.

Jack Prior was promoted to brigade staff captain and back in civilian life was awarded the MBE.

Jim Holder-Vale left 92nd LAA in March 1945 to attend OCTU and was commissioned into the Royal Fusiliers.

Leo McCarthy returned to Birkenhead in December 1945, working as a labourer on the docks, at the Cammell Laird shipyard and on the roads.

When these men – and millions like them – were demobbed, all they wanted to do was get back to their homes and families and try to pick up the threads of normality. Most were still only in their early twenties. But, for better or worse, the war had shaped them. It was the defining moment of their lives.

Until recent years, when they reached their 70s and 80s, few were willing to talk in detail about their experiences, even to families and friends. However, when they did speak, there was no bragging or boasting – ‘shooting a line’ as they put it. They shared their memories with modesty and reticence. And the last thing any of them would call himself was a hero.

But these were the citizen soldiers who, as young men, went to war to defend the freedom we enjoy today. Their generation led the crusade that saved the world from the scourge of Nazism, rescuing civilisation from what Churchill called ‘the abyss of a new Dark Age’.

However, when the war was over, few were inclined to philosophise deeply about it. Most were simply grateful to have survived when so many of their comrades never came home. And, for many, a battle of a different sort now had to be faced – the struggle to make a living back in Civvy Street.

But the veterans could forever be heartened by the knowledge that the Second World War, unlike so many wars before and since, had not been in vain. They had fought the good fight. It was their finest hour.

Perhaps Jim Holder-Vale of 92nd LAA summed it up for them all when he said: ‘Faced with the Third Reich under Hitler, with what the Nazis did – the Final Solution – it was a war that had to be fought, a justified war. We did very well considering the state we were in after Dunkirk.’

‘One of the things I still marvel at is the attitude, the way people just got on with it. In the early days of the war, I used

to go to work by bus. There used to be a man on that bus in a beautiful business suit, overcoat and homburg hat, a very refined-looking man. He would be knitting socks! That's the sort of thing that happened – everybody just got on with it. The comradeship, the way people behaved, it was really marvellous. I was proud of that. I'm proud to have lived through that period. I remember listening to Churchill on the radio and what effect that had. It was a great time to be alive, to live through the greatest time in our recent history.'

Let us salute them.



Lest we forget: Some of the 1,003 graves – most of them British – at Hermanville War Cemetery, near Sword Beach, Normandy