**Recollections Of**

 **Active Service, Tunisia, Sicily & Arnhem**

 **World War II 1942-1945**

 Robert Arthur Allen

 **North Africa November 1942 – May 1943**

On 12 November, 1942 the 1st Parachute Brigade was committed to Operation Torch – the landings in Algeria and Tunisia.

The 1st and 2nd Parachute Battalions travelled to Algiers by sea. The 3rd Parachute Battalion was flown by aircraft of the United States Army Air Corp to Gibraltar and then on to the airfield at Maison Blanche to the East of Algiers. After a few hours rest the battalion became airborne again. Object: To capture the airfield at Bone. A model of the airfield had been studied. No reconnaissance had been made. No intelligence was available. The attitude of the French troops defending the airfield was not known.

The Battalion’s CO Lt Col Pine-Coffin picked out a dropping zone while flying over the area in the leading aircraft. The drop was some 400 feet. Some Parachutists landed right alongside French defensive positions. The former shouted “Vive la France”. The latter replied “Vive L’Angleterre, come and have some bacon and eggs”. The heavy weapons platoon led the advance to the airport building. There was no opposition. Some of our containers landed about a mile away. We were very lucky with the friendly reception.

German parachutists making for the same objective, saw the landing and turned away.

The 3rd Battalion achieved its task by securing the airfield and preventing its occupation by the Germans. The battalion held the airfield for several days and was constantly attacked by the Luftwaffe. The action showed that capturing an airfield in itself was not sufficient. Anti-aircraft weapons were necessary for defense.

While this was going on, the troopship ‘Cythia’ which had the 1st and 2nd Parachute Battalions onboard, was hit by an aerial torpedo while at anchor outside Algiers. There were no airborne casualties.

On 16 November the 1st Parachute Battalion received orders to undertake a parachute landing on the Souk-el-Arba plain so that the RAF could use the airfield there. The operation was delayed for one day due to bad weather. (Information on 1st Para from Pte Maddock)

On 17 November the battalion was flown into action by aircraft of the 64th Group, AAAF with orders as far East as the weather permitted. It circumstances were such that the weather necessitated the battalion being dropped short, then it would march East until contact was made with the Germens. In any case, they were not to return to base. Just before take off the area of the drop zone was changed from Souk-el-Arba to Beja. The dropping zone had to be chosen by the CO Lt Col Hill who would be in the leading aircraft.

In the event the battalion dropped nearly forty miles from Beja, indeed much nearer to its original objective Souk-el-Arba and secured some cross roads.

The 2nd Parachute Battalion held in reserve at Maison Blanche had to wait until 29 November before it was committed to battle. On that day it was briefed to attack enemy airfields at Pont du Fahs and Depienne. These airfields were situated South of Tunis and well in advance of the front line of the Allies. (Information on 2nd Para from Pte Blackman)

The object was to destroy aircraft and stores and then to go North to Ouda and carry out a similar task. When these tasks were completed the battalion would then makes its way, through forty miles of enemy territory to the Allied front line and link up with Allied armor advancing towards Tunis.

Yet again the CO Lt Col Frost had to make the decision when to drop whilst flying over the area. On reaching the objective the battalion found no aircraft or stores. The whole purpose of the operation had evaporated. Meanwhile the thrust by 6th Armor and 78th Division had been postponed.

The fact that the 2nd Parachute Battalion survived numerous counter attacks by German armor and made its way back to Medjez-el-Bab, through enemy territory swarming with armored vehicles and infantry was little short of a miracle. The casualties speak for themselves. 266 failed to return. A dreadful price to pay for an abortive and ill-conceived action.

These operations exemplified the great fighting qualities of the 1st Parachute Brigade, but it cannot be doubted that the advantages gained by 1st and 2nd Battalions were negligible. Although they did stake out claims to territory and the Germans must have wondered where exactly the Allies were.

The planning of the operations was bad. The objectives of 1st and 2nd Battalions were vague with the result nothing was achieved except casualties, experience and a legend of bravery.

Although gallantry and determination had been displayed in the three Parachute operations, the magnificent reputation which the 1st Parachute Brigade eventually earned for itself was made whilst fighting as infantry in the Tunisian hills. They were used as shock troops. They attacked when features had to be captured. They plugged holes when the line broke.

The 1st Parachute Brigade could look back on the Tunisian Campaign with satisfaction. In spite of the heavy casualties it had suffered and regardless of the fact that its potential in an airborne role had not been exploited.

The honors and awards won produced a record never surpassed by any formation in the British Army committed to action for the first time. They had taken part in more battles than any other formation in the 1st Army and had captured 3,500 prisoners.

Perhaps this was not surprising in view of the high quality of the men who had volunteered and been selected to serve in the Brigade, but the price paid in casualties, 1,700 killed and wounded, left some grave doubts as to whether parachute troops, not used in their proper role, were a luxury which could not be afforded.

 **The Tunisian Campaign 1942 - 1943**



I look at the Regimental Colors and see sixteen battle honors earned by the First Parachute Brigade. I took part in all these actions except Bruneval and Oudna. Looking back to that time from now, 1986, I find it impossible to separate many of the battles fought in Tunisia, so I will record memories of that period not necessarily in chronological order.

After the capture of the airfield at Bone there was a lot of movement. It seems as though the Army Command did not know what it was doing.

My Company set out to capture one hill in daylight. It was a rocky feature with plenty of cover for attackers and defenders. We moved upwards. Then when we came under fire, went to ground. At the Section level, the Bren group gave covering fire while the rifle group crawled forward. Then the rife group would give covering fire while the Bren group came up and moved into a suitable position so it again could give covering fire while the rifle group worked its way upwards. In this manner we went up, knocked brother “Boche” off the top and then prepared for an inevitable counter-attack. When it came with such violence I have never before experienced, it was our turn to retreat. And then our turn to counter-attack. There was lots of noise from machine gun and rifle fire, explosions from grenades and a little bayonet fighting.

The crest changed hands a few times and we were on top, just about out of ammunition, no grenades. I had just one round in the breach of my rifle. We saw a line of Germans walking slowly up the hill towards us. There was no covering fire. We guessed their ammunition state was similar to ours.

An order came down for us to fix bayonets: Unnecessary because those of us with rifles already had their bayonets fixed. Next: Advance. We all came out of our holes and from behind rocks to form a line, similar in length to that of the Germans.

We walked slowly towards each other, our rifles in the high port position. Still no shots were fired. I was on the extreme left of our line. Next to me was Jim Newton, he had no ammunition.

As the two lines drew closer, I began to wish very hard that the enemy would break ranks and run away. I’ve no doubt everyone else was having like thoughts.

Then when both lines were about twenty yards apart they both stopped. At this point someone on our side shouted “Waho Mohamed” and we all took up the cry and ran at the Germans who seemed to freeze.

Jim and I picked out the flanking German. I shot him. Then we turned inwards, clubbing and jabbing at the enemy. We were always at least two to one against the German. They did not stand much of a chance. Some stood their ground and died. Some ran away. We were left with the hill.

Another hill. We captured this one without much trouble. The Germans retreated in panic leaving most of their weapons behind. We consolidated and prepared for a counter-attack. We shared out the German machine guns and ammunition. In my platoon we had about fifteen machine guns between about thirty men. The rest of the company was just as well off.

Down came the mortar bombs on the abandoned German position. As we were in front, the bombardment did not worry us. I saw the German soldiers form up in a line at the bottom of the hill. We had no mortars so they were safe. They were one hundred, one hundred and fifty strong. They began to march up the hill in parade ground style. I watched in amazement, scarcely believing my eyes. It was how I imagined a World War I battle.

A hundred yards from us, another order must have been given for the Germans lowered their rifles, broke into a charge and began shouting “UUU RRR AAA”.

When they were about thirty yards away we were given the order to open fire. Our fire was overwhelming. It lasted for less then ten seconds, but during that brief time the German line was completely destroyed.

Another place, heavy rain, mud, heavy shelling. I am cold, wet and hungry. Someone throws me a tin of something to eat. It is a tin of meat and vegetable stew. Edible when warmed up. Revolting when cold. It is impossible to light a fire under existing conditions, so I eat it cold – horrible!

4th January 1943 – Green Hill. I remember this date because its my birthday. The “Buffs” have attempted to capture this hill and fail. We move up to have a go. We reach our start line and wait. In front of us the ground slopes upwards. About two hundred yards away on the crest are very many German machine gun nests. This fairly open space is littered with bodies of the “Buffs”. One of these casualties keeps calling for help. As we are going forward in a short time, I think he can wait. Jim Newton thinks otherwise and asks for covering fire while he goes forward to recover the casualty. I oblige.

Jim crawls forward making good use of any dead ground, but whenever he is exposed, German fire comes down around him. He reached his man and paused for a time, giving first aid and I guess resting. German machine gun fire was continually playing over the area. Our counter fire interrupted them a little. Jim tried to drag his casualty back but couldn’t. So he stood up and hoisted the wounded man over his shoulder. He walked back to our lines with a hail of bullets around him. Jim was unharmed. Unfortunately, the casualty who turned out to be a “Buffs’” officer, died of his wounds.

We took Green Hill. A ferocious counter-attack knocked us off and we were then withdrawn.

We were taken right the way back to St Charles, a little place outside Algiers. Our billets were right on top of wine vats. The buildings were in groves of tangerines. The sun shone. We were warm, dry and well fed. It was heaven.

All too soon it was back on the move to Algiers where we boarded HMS Roberts. This gunboat took me on my first Mediterranean cruise, up the coast I think to Bone.

From there we found ourselves in the hills around Djebel Mansour [Djebel Alliliga]. There was plenty of patrol activity and shelling.

One time I was with a four–man reconnaissance patrol when we came across a German fighting patrol. We scrambled/fell down a steep cliff to avoid them!

Then came a position between Bou Arada and Port du Faks. It was a wonderful defensive position on top of an escarpment. Behind us was a gentle, wooded slope where we could move about freely in the day. In front the ground fell away steeply and was covered in scrub. At the bottom of this slope was undulating ground broken by a wadi, which ran at irregular distances right across our front.

In our two man foxholes at the top we had a commanding view of the country. We manned our foxholes from one hour before sunset until one hour after sunrise when we would move back to the reverse slope, leaving sentries to watch our front.

Every afternoon, about 1500 hours, three RAF Hurricanes would fly over our position. Otherwise the Luftwaffe ruled the skies. RAF came to stand for “Rare As Fairies”.

Pretty well every night four of us went out on recce patrols: Watson, Grundle, Newton and self. Opposite us were troops from the Austrian Mountain Division. We worried them a lot and very soon they even ceased to put out listening posts. We plotted their positions pretty thoroughly.

One night my platoon was given orders to cover a party of sappers while they lay some mines in the wadi. I am with a squad covering one top of the wadi. Watson is down in the wadi. Another squad is on the other side. We have been in our position for sometime. It is very peaceful. The stillness is broken from time to time by the sound of digging.

I hear a lot of cursing and swearing from down in the wadi. I crawl to the edge and look down. Nothing. Time passes. Task completed and we return to our lines. I tell Watson what I heard. He laughs and tells me what happened. He got tired of doing nothing while the sappers worked, so he went forward on his own following the bottom of the wadi. We both knew this ground well. Coming round a bend he almost bumped into a German soldier. Watson pressed the trigger of his tommy gun and nothing happened. He guessed the German’s reaction was the same. So they stood facing each other, each shouting to the other to surrender. Stalemate. Then seemingly by mutual consent they both turned and ran back from whence they came. Watson had forgotten to release his safety catch! We all had a good laugh at this.

One patrol from the Bou Arada position was to go out to see what damage we could do to some Stuka aircraft which dived bombed us at will. We guessed they came from an airfield near Port du Faks, now called El Faks. The patrol was made up of Sgt Watson, Cpl Newton, Pte Grundle and Pte Allen [self]. In addition to our personal weapons and rations, we carried explosives and time fuses.

We set out one night on foot from our position. I’ve forgotten how far our objective was and the time it took to cover the distance. Sufficient to say we reached the airfield late one afternoon without difficulty.

We counted twenty-seven Stukas on the airfield. We studied the lay out, watched the sentries and observed the lay of the land. We planned our attack and line of retreat.

That night we slipped by guards and reached the Stukas. In the engines of these aircraft we planted our explosives, timed to go off about dawn. It was so easy. Task completed, we moved out cautiously and from a vantage point some distance away, stopped and waited to see the result of our action.

About dawn the first explosive went off. Twenty-six other explosives went off in the space of fifteen minutes. The Germans panicked and started shooting their flak guns up into the empty sky. We had seriously damaged twenty-seven Stukas and were well pleased.

We holed up in a suitable position and slept. There was always one man on guard. After dusk we began our return journey. It again took us through the enemy front line. We were well aware of the enemy dispositions so it was no problem. In the course of time we returned to our own lines after an uneventful journey. Strange how these little actions paid bigger dividends than larger battles.

On one of the rare nights when I did not go out on patrol, I was awakened by Denis Mole, he thought he had heard movement in front of our foxhole. It was still dark. We alerted the next foxhole by pulling a connecting cord and listened.

We both heard movement and the low mutter of voices somewhere out in front and below our position. Whoever it was should not be there and was coming closer.

Mole and I lined up grenades on our parapet and waited. It was just beginning to get light when we judged the intruders to be near enough and we started tossing “36 Grenades” with four second fuses. As they started to explode, men began screaming and generally making a lot of noise. We fired blindly in the general direction. Then stopped as the front became quiet.

As it became light, I could see in the distance, a long line of German soldiers advancing towards our position. We shot the odd German soldier who exposed himself and who was within range.

I slithered out of the foxhole to inspect the ground in front. Between ten and fifteen yards away I found several dead bodies, soldiers from the Austrian Mountain Division. The ground was soaked in blood. It was clear many wounded men had been dragged away or had crawled away. There was a lot of abandoned equipment. I collected a German machine gun together with four boxes of ammunition and took them back to my foxhole.

We felt very secure. More German soldiers were coming within range, so we started sniping. We became so engrossed in what we were doing, that we forgot to change our position.

Mole suddenly shouted “Hooray, I’ve been hit”. It was a flesh wound. A bullet had creased his left shoulder. I applied a field dressing. Mole was happy with his passport to the rear and a comfortable bed in hospital. I told him it wasn’t that serious and he wouldn’t get by our first aid post.

After this incident I moved out of the foxhole and continued sniping from different positions. The return fire was inaccurate. The Germans went down into the wadi. Next our mortars came into play and began dropping bombs into the wadi. At this I returned to the M/G in the foxhole and to Mole.

The Germans in the wadi popped out into the open to avoid the mortar fire. They were then exposed to murderous machine gun fire, so they went back into the wadi, only to come out again. They simply just did not know what to do. It was sheer murder.

The German artillery came to the rescue of their infantry by opening up on our positions. I kept my head well down while this bombardment lasted. After a while it stopped.

It was suddenly very quiet and then the birds began to sing as if nothing had happened.

My platoon was ordered to go down and clear the wadi. Down we went. The bottom of the wadi was wide enough to take a section in line, eight or nine men. Our sections took it in turn to leap frog forward. We killed more enemy soldiers.

By the time we had gone through our piece of the wadi, only dead or wounded enemy soldiers remained. We then set about burying the dead and taking the wounded to our first aid post. I was with a party collecting wounded. It was back breaking work carrying the stretchers up the wadi, then up the escarpment and down to our first aid post. We were at this for the rest of the day and continued all through the night. It was daylight before the last wounded man was brought in.

My platoon had been very lucky. Mole was our only casualty. His wound was more serious than I thought. It prevented him from carrying equipment. So he was downgraded and did not return to the fray.

Very soon after this action we were relieved by an American division. They arrived at night in lorries which came right up to the base of our position. They walked up the hill in noisy unorganized groups, shouting and talking like people going to a football match. They were very boastful and wanted to buy souvenirs – any German equipment that we had. Before we handed our position over, they had erected pup tents and had generators running providing electric light in the tents. They certainly did not behave like soldiers. They were very green.

We boarded the lorries and started moving. The stars told me we were moving in a Northerly direction. Daylight and we were still travelling. Then came some enemy fighters. Our lorries screeched to a halt, we baled out and after running a few yards away from the road, lay on our backs and began firing our weapons at the attacking Messerschmitts. We did not shoot any down. They flew away and we continued our journey.

After a time we debussed probably somewhere in the Tamera Valley, perhaps near Sejanane. Here the actions were thick and fast.

I recall in one attack, my platoon was clearing the enemy from a miserable collection of huts. The Germans were stubbornly defending each building as a strongpoint. From one building came a repeated cry “Leave us alone, we are wounded British soldiers”. Two or three Germans were shot down as they tried to escape from this building. I thought they had been trying to fool us with the “Leave us alone” routine. They had tried similar ruses before. I lobbed a grenade through a window. After it exploded, there were more shouts from inside, “We’re British soldiers”. I shouted back “If so come out”. One man crawled out through the door. He was wounded. He and others inside the building were soldiers from the Hampshire Regiment. They were not pleased to see me. They said they preferred German company to mine.

We left them for our medics and carried on clearing the area.

After this battle we advanced along the edge of a road with a railway line on one side and a steep wood covered slope on the other. Three Churchill tanks came up and started firing their machine guns at the top of the wooded slope. I could see no point in this. It was criminal to waste ammunition in such a manner.

While this was going on, I went with others to attend an “O” group. Our CO Lt Colonel Pine Coffin asked me to put my squad on to the three tanks and ride with them up the road. I replied there was probably an anti-tank gun around the bend in the road and asked to take my squad there on foot, without the aid of tanks. My suggestion was turned down. Another squad mounted the tanks and rode forward. As the tanks reached the bend in the road, three shots punctured the air in quick succession, which resulted in the three Churchill tanks being wrecked. The troops riding them jumped off, but there must have been some casualties. Pine Coffin sent for me and without any preamble to me to go my way. I took my squad forward through the trees. We located one 88 gun and one machine gun nest. It was an isolated position. We destroyed it without loss.

After consolidating this position, I attended another “O” group given by our company commander Major Terrell. He told us that at first light next morning we, A Coy, were to put in a diversionary attack on Djebel “Bel Harch”. [?] After making as much ground as possible and drawing German troops in, we were to withdraw. A battalion of Sherwood Foresters would deliver the main assault from another point. The defending Germans were reported to be very hungry and poorly equipped as they had been cut off for several days.

I returned to 3 Platoon, briefed the men, had something to eat and drink then went to sleep. I was awakened by “Bullfrog” Jones our cook. Breakfast was ready. We ate and moved off. My platoon was on the right of A Company’s line. It was still dark.

We moved upwards through the trees. Suddenly I found myself falling into a small trench. I landed right on top of an enemy soldier who was well wrapped up in blankets. This restricted movement of his arms and legs. In any case there was little room at the bottom of the trench. I put my hands around the man’s throat and squeezed. He didn’t make any noise but wriggled and squirmed under the blankets. After a short while he suddenly went limp. He was dead.

While this was going on, grenades were exploding and small arms were being fired in the area. I recovered my weapon, clambered out of the trench and caught up with my comrades who had crashed through an enemy position.

It was getting light. We broke through two more enemy lines. Then we were though the tree line. In front of us a scrub covered slope went on upwards so on we went. I had hopes of reaching the crest.

Mortar bombs started to land amongst us. So we went to ground crawling and creeping upwards through the scrub. The enemy lost sight of us and their bombs began falling well away.

Eventually we reached the edge of the scrub. Between us and the crest was a grassy slope, well swept by fire from many machine gun nests situated on the crest. No way we were going to get across that open ground.

We took stock of our situation. There were eight or nine of us left. It was passed the time when we should have withdrawn. We considered we had played our part and decided to go back. The rest of A Company was missing.

I was last to leave and as I turned to go down something hit the back of my head, I blacked out. When I came to, there was no sign of my comrades. The firing had stopped. It was very peaceful. I was a little dizzy. I examined the back of my helmet and saw it had been dented by a passing bullet. I was OK. I picked up my rifle and had just started moving down when I saw Jack Withers from our mortar platoon. I’ve no idea what he was doing there. As far as I knew this was just an A Company show.

Anyway Jack wanted help to get a wounded man down. This was Pte Tynsdale, he was in a bad state and certainly could not walk. We made a litter with the aid of two rifles and a smock. After binding Tynsdales wounds as best as we could and giving him a shot of morphia, we began our downward journey.

No sooner had we started when we saw, in the distance a long line of enemy infantry stretching from the crest of the hill down through the scrub to the tree line. They were doing a sweep in front of their positions and we were right in their path. With Tynsdale we could not avoid them, we would have to hide. We pushed Tynsdale right under a thick bush and told him to be silent. Jack and I then crawled in like but separate positions.

The Germans came on quickly. They were immaculate, uniforms spotless, leatherwork well polished. So much for our intelligence. One passed so close to me, I could have touched his jackboot.

When they were out of sight, we picked up Tynsdale and started downhill once more. Our man was heavy and the litter was awkward to carry. We had many rests.

About halfway down through the tree belt, we came across the Sherwood Foresters. They wee all laying about on the ground resting. They had not put in their attack. I asked a captain for a stretcher. He refused my request. They did not offer any assistance to us. Jack, I and Tynsdale carried on downhill. By excellent navigation on our part or by sheer good luck, we hit the road just a few yards away from our first aid post. We left Tynsdale there in the capable hands of George Thompson and Bannerman. Jack Withers went on to his position and I returned to A Company lines. There were seventeen members in A Company when I returned.

Soon after I returned, rations including rum, came up for a Company of one hundred and twenty. The seventeen of us tucked in. I drank rum and water for the first time. I must have drunk myself into a stupor. My last memory that day is of the sun going down.

I woke up with a splitting headache. The sun was going down. I had been asleep for twenty-four hours. My comrades were all asleep. Like me they had been drinking.

I switched on the radio and an anxious operator at HQ asked where I had been all day. He then said we were being relieved that night and were to be at a pick up point at 2200 hrs. With difficulty I aroused my comrades and we prepared to move out. After a short march we made our rendezvous with the lorries on the road. We were driven back for a few miles and debussed at what I think was a school.

I felt very tired. I had never known such tiredness. It caused hallucinations and a peculiar sense of non-being. I craved for sleep. Our cooks had prepared a hot meal. It was too much of an effort to eat it. Hungry though I was I just lay on the ground and slept.

When I awoke it was still dark. I found I had slept through the day. Reinforcements had arrived. The four of us in 3 Platoon had been allocated twenty-five new men. This almost brought our platoon up to strength. The action on Djebel-el-Harch already seemed a long, long time ago. I noted the tensions one forgets in the line had come back.

3 Platoon was once again made up by three section and could for a while anyway act as a normal fighting unit. The company also was more or less up to strength. We drew ammunition, grenades and rations etc and made sure all our new boys were properly kitted out. Then we heard the sound of small arms fire, not too far away.

Off we went back up the road, towards the front. After about a mile we saw a large crowd of soldiers running towards us, without weapons or equipment. We fired over their heads and stopped them. They were men of the Leicestershire regiment. They said the Germans were right behind them. A false rumor. Some of our people stayed behind to reorganize the Leicesters.

A Company moved off to the North of the road and advanced in extended order. There was no opposition. It became light. During the morning we made contact with two small groups of Leicesters. They all had their weapons and equipment. They were falling back in good order, looking for friendly forces. They said their battalion had mostly broken and ran when the Germans attacked on the previous day. They wanted to go forward with us, but we directed them back to their own unit. We continued advancing against light opposition. At one point our medics came up and painted our feet with permanganate of potash.

Then an extraordinary event. Some new weapons were sent up – Sten guns. They were to be tested in battle and reports submitted as to their effectiveness. I was one of the unfortunates who had to do the testing.

We made a make shift range and tested the guns at twenty-five yards. We found a few sheets of cardboard would stop the 9mm bullet. Therefore its stopping power was nil. Worst the gun kept jamming. With luck it would fire two or three rounds before it jammed. Often it would fire only one round or not at all. We thought whoever was responsible for sending this apology for a weapon up to the front should be shot. We suggested the guns be returned there and then with our comments. Major Terrill insisted we try them in battle. We experimented and put an extra half spring into the weapon. This made a slight improvement, but it was still unreliable.

Late that afternoon we did a march along a railway track in order to reach a start line for a night attack on some hill. It was a most uncomfortable march. It was very difficult to walk on the ballast. The sleepers were so placed that it was difficult to step from sleeper to sleeper as one marched. All things come to an end.

We reached our start line on time. In the darkness we spread out in line to go up the hill. My platoon was on the right of the line. It was to be the first battle for the reinforcements. We moved upwards silently. Newton and Grundle were on either side of me. Near the top a German stood up about twenty yards from me and threw a grenade in our direction. It went well over our heads and exploded harmlessly to our rear. At the same time I pressed the trigger of my Sten. The bolt banged forward but it did not fire. In disgust, I threw my weapon at the German. In the meantime Grundle and Newton had fired and the German was killed.

We bombed our way into the enemy trench. I picked up a Schmeisser and a bandolier of loaded magazines for it. We found ourselves under fire from three sides. My platoon was isolated. There was no sight or sound from the rest of A Company. A counter-attack was repelled. Then as it was getting light and still no action from the remainder of A Company, we pulled back down the hill.

We made rendezvous with the rest of A Company. We learned that 1 and 2 Platoons had not pressed home the attack. The recruits in 3 Platoon had quitted themselves well. I submitted an adverse report on the Sten gun. I never used that weapon again, although later, improved models were issued – Patchetts and Sterlings.

The following night we attacked another hill. We reached the crest and were amongst the enemy strongpoints before they realized what was happening. It was the usual story of bursting grenades, short burst of fire from our side. The enemy fired their machine guns wildly in long bursts, so revealing their positions. The fight was over quickly. Consolidation was a problem. This hill was solid rock. Dynamite was needed to blast holes. We had none. So we had to gather loose stones and rock to build sangers – walls. We could not use the enemy positions because they would certainly be bombed and shelled before the inevitable counter-attack came.

About daybreak the shelling started and mortar bombs began dropping on our crest. We lay behind our very low and seemingly inadequate stone walls, hoping for the best. The shells mostly ricocheted off the rocks with a ghastly screaming sound. Others exploded about twenty feet in the air and scattered shrapnel over a wide area. The mortar bombs just whined and exploded on impact. It was extremely noisy. Pte Mosenchek went crazy. We tied him down, but after a while he freed himself and went charging down the hill towards the enemy. He was killed before he had gone many yards.

The shelling suddenly ceased. We put our machine guns into position and almost immediately opened up on attacking enemy who had been creeping up. They were all killed. I do not remember any wounded enemy being brought in.

We held this position for two or three nights. Each night I went out on a recce patrol with three others to locate the enemy. We did not find their lines. Next came word that we were to be relieved by the Durham Light Infantry and then were to go forward to assault another hill. I was one of three guides. We had to go back to meet the Durhams and guide them back to our positions. We found the Durhams at the right place, at the right time. They were all laying on the ground – apparently lifeless. It was of course night time.

With the help of some of their NCOs, we got the men on their feet, after a lot of kicking prostrate bodies and shouting. One of their officers told me that they had been travelling all day from a rest area and they were very tired. I was not sympathetic. It occurred to me these fresh troops should be doing the attacking at dawn, not us. The DLI finally got moving at a snail’s pace. We guides tried and tried to get them to move faster – in vain.

We reached the base of our hill. We were very late. Our company had gone. Instead of guiding the DLI into our old positions, we merely told them to go up the hill. Their officers were a useless lot. We doubled off to rejoin our company. We found them at a rendezvous. For some reason the attack had been postponed. This was good, it would enable us to recce the ground and get to know the opposition.

The following night four of us went out on a recce patrol. We were to explore a hill two or three miles ahead. Near the base of this hill we heard a noise as if a crowd of people were having a party. We crept nearer and saw several field kitchens serving hot meals to several hundred Italian soldiers. We went up the hill. The slope was wooded. Near the crest some partly dug trenches, no wire, no strongpoints. This was going to be an easy attack. Back in our lines we reported our news to our OC, Major Terrill.

Less than an hour later we were briefed to attack, not the hill held by the Italians, but another held by unidentified troops. It was light when we were moving up through the woods at the base of our hill. There had been no preliminary bombardment. Some way on my upward journey, I looked back to the rear and to the flanks. I saw two large groups of Italians streaming down two hills. I guess they must have numbered nearly one thousand. Some were carrying suitcases. The enemy who had been dropping mortar bombs amongst us, saw the Italians and gave them some salvos of bombs. This diversion gave us a little respite and we were able to gain some ground.

Then we came out of the trees and under heavy fire made our way across some open ground, so gaining what we thought was the crest. Unfortunately it was a false crest. Our objective was maybe two hundred yards away, up an open slope which had little dead ground.

In our HQ party was a naval gunner, the forward observation officer from HMS Roberts. Against his wishes, he asked for a barrage to be put down on the crest. The barrage came over and crashed on the crest. Immediately it ceased we charged forward. I was with Grundle. I have no idea what happened on my flanks. We found two dead German parachutists near a trench. Machine guns were chattering all around. Near to us was a strongpoint with I think eight apertures. Its barbed wire shield had been knocked away. Grundle and I crawled up to this position, lobbed gammon bombs and grenades through the apertures. The explosions ended the opposition from this point.

Very soon after this the shooting ceased. We were in possession of the crest. The German parachutists had all died defending this ground. There were no prisoners. We dug in and waited for the usual counter-attack. It never came. The next day we buried many bodies.

That night I went out on the usual recce patrol to locate enemy positions. We drew blank. Because it was beginning to get light, we took a short cut back and went through B Company lines. Their 2nd I\C Capt Waddy was most displeased at our choice of route and gave us a “roasting”.

The next night the four of us – Newton, Grundle, Walker and self – went out early and located two columns of Germans marching away from the front. They were retreating in good order. They were singing marching songs. I heard Lilli Marlene for the first time. I liked what I heard and was sorry when the sounds faded in the distance. It was daylight when we returned to our lines and reported.

After a few hours sleep we were off to check another area. We located another column of retreating Germans. We followed it, waiting for a chance to snatch a prisoner. It came when the last man, a “feldwebel”, was just a little too far behind. We picked him up without any difficulty and returned to our lines.

More orders. This time it was to capture a hill named Bowler hat. My platoon was to take up position at the rear of the hill and shoot down any Germans who retreated from that position. It was to be a night attack. We took up our positions and waited. Nothing happened. Maybe the enemy was not defending it and our side had occupied it without opposition. At first light we went up to the top. No enemy. No sign of our men. Maybe it was the wrong hill. There were other hills around, but it had been a quiet night. We retraced our steps, along the top of a river bank, then a clamber over a badly damaged railway bridge, back to our lines. We reported to Major Terrill. The attack had not gone in. We had been in the right place. We told him the hill was empty and we could occupy it. He told us to get some sleep.

Next came an order for the whole 1st Parachute Brigade to assemble down on a road, where lorries would be waiting to take us forward to yet another position. It was said that the 2nd Parachute Battalion was on the verge of mutiny and many of them had said they were not going forward again. We were to mix and talk them out of this nonsense. At the rendezvous we had food and drink. We mixed with men of the 2nd Battalion. Those I spoke to were a “Bolshie” lot. I told them 3rd Battalion was going forward because it was the quickest way home. They replied they had had enough, but if we were stupid enough to go on, they would have to come along to see we got through. In the event the 2nd Battalion went forward.

The lorries took us some miles forward in broad daylight. There were no air attacks or opposition of any sort. Had the German front collapsed? We eventually debussed, walked up and occupied a bush covered hill. It was a good position. That night and most of the next day was spent digging in.

On the second night Paddy Grundle, Jim Newton, Tom Smith and I went out on an extended patrol. Our instructions were to locate enemy positions and identify units. We were to return after three days. At the end of the first day we had found no trace of the enemy, but we did find a very frightened RAF fighter pilot who had been shot down. When he discovered we were “other ranks”, he announced that he, as an officer, would take over the patrol and be taken, at once, back to our lines. He was told to go to blazes. When he simmered down, he was told he could wait for our return or go back on his own. He chose to stay put and wait for us. He said he would see we were all court martialed for refusing to obey his orders!

We carried on with our mission. We were within sight of either Ferryville or Bizerta and still no trace of any enemy defensive positions or troops. From out view point we watched Flying Forts bombing which ever place it was. I think it was Bizerta, but I am not sure. Flak hit one of the Flying Forts and as it fell from the sky the crew baled out, six or seven parachuted opened. When the parachutes were a few hundred feet above the ground the German gunners opened up at them with machine guns. We could see tracer bullets crisscross the parachutes. The Germans were deliberately shooting at defenseless airmen. They were too far away for us to see any results of the shooting.

We made our way back, picked up our bumptious RAF man. We left him at our Company HQ still threatening us. We reported the results of our patrol to Major Terrill. We heard nothing more of the RAF man.

It was now about the middle of April. Orders had come that we were to be relieved by an American Division. We were to go to the rear. I should have been delighted at this news, but I was not. I was disappointed. The end was in sight. Just one more push and it would be over. We should be in at the kill.

Then I reflected on the state of A Company. It was well under strength. Our clothing and equipment was in tatters. Our Bren gun barrels were almost smooth. The soles of my boots were parting from the uppers. I had bound them with sacking, the ties needed continual renewing. We were without bedding or groundsheets. We were in a sorry state. Our move to the rear made sense. We had to be re-equipped and reinforced.

A fresh, well equipped American battalion came up to relieve what was left of A Company. The Americans were shocked at the state we were in. They gave us food, clothing and I had a pair of new boots.

The lorries took us back some distance to a camp site by a stream with grassy banks and shady trees. There were wild flowers in the grass, butterflies and singing birds. There were cooks with hot food. It was warm and sunny. It was heavenly.

A few days at this idyllic place passed all too quickly. Then it was on to a railway station. From there a train took us Westwards. I remember German prisoners cheered us as the train took us along the perimeter of their camp. I remember the beautiful area called Constantine. Then we reached Algiers where lorries were waiting to take us back to St Charles.

Back at St Charles the same billets we had left in January, a lifetime ago. The faces of A Company had mostly changed, once, twice, three times. Instead of 120 men were were about forty strong. General Eisenhower came to talk to us. He was more like a very friendly businessman than an army commander. He was very flattering. His talk embarrassed us. Maybe it was the American way of doing things.

In quiet moments in St Charles my mind went over events of the last six or seven months. I remember watching the stars at night. They were bright and clear in the sky, it seemed as though one had only to reach out to touch them. I watched the Plough and Cassieopia make their nightly journeys around the Pole Star. I reflected countless other soldiers must have watched them in ages past. I thought of the song “Die Sterne”:

A rough translation from the German:

How clearly the stars shine through the night,

I am often awakened by them from sleep,

Yet I do not blame those bright creations for that.

For in the still night they perform many a kindly duty,

They move on high in the [form] of angels,

They light the pilgrim through [xyz]

Xyz

And often carry kisses far across the sea.

Mildly they look on the sufferer’s face

And frame his tears in silver light,

And comfortingly and sweetly direct us from the grave,

Beyond the blue of heaven with their fingers of gold,

Xyz

Xyz

 and how Leitner had described them as messengers of love and how they carried kisses across the sea. I hoped Muriel would look at the same stars and think of me. Muriel, my mother and father, were all dreamlike figures. I tried to picture their faces, to imagine their voices, but I could not remember them clearly. Peace and home were a distant dream. The violence of war was the present reality.

Letters from home reached us in the front line, five days after being posted in England. Writing paper was unobtainable. We had to reply on Field Post Cards which had primitive sentences. We just crossed out sentences not required. The Army Post Office was well organized.

I remember the callousness of an Italian soldier. After a battle I approached a wounded Italian soldier who was laying on a stretcher. My intention was to take him on the stretcher to our first aid post. As I neared him he started screaming Italian words which I did not understand. He was very agitated. I paused and looked down at him. He then shouted “Minen”. This word I understood. I examined the stretcher and found a wire tied to one of the poles leading into the sandy ground. I carefully removed the sand with my hands and exposed a Teller Mine. If that stretcher had been picked up, the wounded soldier and the two stretcher bearers would have been blown to kingdom come. I disarmed the mine and the wounded man was safely moved. It turned out his “comrades” had set this booby trap up when they thought he was unconscious.

Then there was a fighting patrol, about twenty of us. We located a German position. Instead of attacking, one section went to a cut off position at its rear. The rest of us shouted “Waho Mohamed” from safe positions. The Germans ran away without firing a shot, only to be cut down by our section at the rear.

I thought of the expression on the face of a German “Leutnant” as I shot him on the wire just in front of my foxhole. I remember how easily the stock of my rifle broke when I used it as a club and cracked the skull of a German sniper.

I thought of my many comrades who had been killed. I reasoned that my chances of surviving the war were slim and that I was soon to be among their number. I was not afraid of being killed. I was afraid of being badly wounded and crippled. Most of us regarded death as a friend. I felt very much as one with the anonymous Egyptian who centuries ago had written:

“Death is before me today, like recovering from an illness and going into a garden.

Death like a quick and cool stream, a soldier going home.

Death like a break in the clouds, a bird’s flight into the unknown.

Death like homesickness, a homecoming after an absence”.

I had absolutely no qualms about killing enemy soldiers. I regarded Nazi Germany as something evil which had to be destroyed. This meant all German soldiers were fair game.

My senses were very much more acute. I marveled at the ability to hear, feel, touch, taste and see. I saw beauty and wonder where I had not noticed it before. Now I fully appreciated the miracle of life. I had been right down to the bottom of the abyss and sampled the very worst of human experiences. This baseline was not a firm foundation on which to build. Always make the best of circumstances that surround you. Treasure the things that are of real value. Place the baubles of this materialistic world in their proper place.

About this time Major Terrill , our company commander, returned to England as escort for General von Arnin. I was glad to see him go. He was a poor soldier who did his utmost to avoid action. His favorite saying when briefing us for an attack was “ I’ll be away guarding the left or right flank”. I never once saw him in such a position. I suspect he put in false reports to battalion and brigade HQ. I later learned our Brigadier learned of his conduct, hence the posting to UK. Major Dennison, a first class soldier from 1st Parachute Battalion took over A Company.

A Company had captured a wood covered hill. We had gone through the German position making sure all enemy soldiers were dead and were busily digging new positions to prepare for the inevitable counter-attack. Major Terrill who had been absent when the fighting was going on, came up from the rear and stood by a German bunker. He shouted for all to hear that this bunker would be his command post and then trotted off down the hill. This was a foolish choice, because the Germans always put shells and bombs down on any position they had lost, prior to counter-attacking. Within minutes of Terrill’s departure, a salvo of shells landed on top of the command post. It was destroyed. Fortunately no one was inside. The salvo heralded the start of a bombardment which lasted for maybe one hour. When it ceased, German infantry were within yards of our positions. After some hard fighting they were driven off. They did not return.

 The Primosole Bridge, Sicily

Marston tonight. It’s on! It’s off! The 8th Army is held up! Marston was the code name for our operation to capture the Primosole Bridge. Next day, it’s on.

And so at about 2200hrs on 13 July 1943 the First Parachute Brigade took off in Dakota aircraft from airfields in the Sousse – Kairouan area Tunisia. There was a three hour flight ahead of us, then we were to drop, capture and hold the bridge over the river Simento for about six hours, when an armored column form the 8th Army would relieve us.

Everyone was enthusiastic and eagerly looking forward to this action. The standard of morale and excellence of the troops was, and had to be far beyond that required by ordinary military units; for we were being taken from a peaceful camp and were to be plunged straight into close combat with the enemy, without reconnaissance and with no contact with friendly forces. We were going into unknown territory to fight, not on a single front but on all sides. We were about to start a battle in a situation which infantrymen would regard as hopeless, by going into total encirclement. But then we were volunteers. Most of us were, I suppose, fanatics.

The American aircrews who were flying us into battle were completely different. Many of the pilots had just been called up from civilian airlines in America. They had no experience dropping parachute troops, no combat experience and worst of all only one aircraft in three had a navigator.

First Parachute Brigade was commanded by our old well known battalion commander, now Brigadier Lathbury. My battalion, the 3rd, was commanded by a new untried stranger Lt Col Yeldham. He had never even spoken to us. A Company, my company was commanded by Major Dennison, who in training exercise, had proved to be energetic and resourceful.

I was with 9 Section, 3 Platoon, A Company. Probably more than half the members of the platoon were going into action for the first time. They had joined us as reinforcements after the Tunisian campaign was over. Some of these men were war substantive NCOs and they took positions away from battle proven men who had been holding temporary rank.

The first leg of the journey was uneventful. I played chess with my friend Ron Walker, while our formation flew in close order towards Malta, where a cone of searchlights marked a turning point.

At this point our carriers turned Northeast and headed for Sicily. The plan then was, on sighting the coastline we would head Northwards until the river Simento was sighted. Then our pilots would turn inland and drop us on the South side of the river, close to the bridge. It was a simple flight plan.

However, as the saying goes, the best laid plans of mice and men can go wrong. In this case our operation had been postponed for twenty-four hours and it seems someone had forgotten to tell the Royal Navy of the deferment. Consequently as our tight formation of aircraft flew low over the sea towards the Sicilian coast in brilliant moonlight and with containers slung underneath the planes, the naval gunners over whose ships we had to fly, thought we were an enemy formation about to launch a torpedo attack. Naturally the navy opened up with their AA guns. The tracers and bursting shells made a pretty firework display around us. The situation was serious. As I put the chess game into my pocket, holes suddenly appeared in the fuselage of the aircraft. There was no panic amongst us passengers. Everyone seemed remarkably cool. Someone commented that we had forgotten to include the Royal Navy with the enemy forces. No one was hit.

Our pilot began violent evasion action as soon as the firing started. I guess other pilots did the same. This resulted in the scattering of our formation and a lot of aircraft, without navigators, became completely lost. I later learned that this little error caused 27 Dakotas to be shot down out of the 105 in the formation. Good shooting by the navy. They even chose to ignore flares fired by the aircraft as recognition signals.

Our Dakota soon escaped this whirlwind of fire, without further damage. We were lucky and we had a navigator. Northwards we flew in sight of the coastline and then turned Westwards as the pilot spotted the river Simento. During this part of the trip none of us saw any other aircraft,

As we crossed the coastline more flak came up. The tracers curved upwards to meet us in a slow leisurely manner , then suddenly their speed increased as they whizzed, like lightening, by us. At this time I saw the Primosole Bridge.

It was “Stand Up, Hook Up” as the pilot took more evasive action. “Action Stations” and we all shuffled along the fuselage to the door, clutching our kitbags in front of us. The red light was on over the door and while we were waiting for the green light to jump. Lt Ellis our platoon commander, who was number one in the stick and standing in the door of the aircraft went down on the floor in a hump. A tracer bullet had smashed his right elbow. He was quickly moved out of the way.

Green light on. Out we jumped. I was happy to leave. We must have set a record for a speedy departure. Outside, away from the noisy aircraft and the roaring slipstream, it was unbelievably peaceful. I felt my parachute open. Again I sighted the bridge as I released my kitbag which contained my rifle, ammunition, grenades and other equipment , about 80lbs in weight.

I was aware of swinging once under my parachute after it opened, then back again and on the third swing I crashed into a stack of dried vegetation. We must have jumped from a very low altitude, maybe 250 feet.

I was very lucky to be all in one piece. I had all my equipment and knew exactly where I was. The ground was warm, dry and dusty. The moonlight was so bright it was like daylight, although there were many dark shadows. As I had been in the middle of the stick, it was up to the others to rendezvous on me. I waited for a short time. No one arrived. The area was ablaze with small fires and then there was a little shooting.

I started walking North towards the river with the intention of crossing it and then heading east for the bridge which was, I guess, about 400 yards away. It was then I saw two soldiers emerge out of some smoke. As we approached each other, one of them called out to me in German and asked if I had found the weapon container. I replied “Ja” and shot them both. I discovered they were German parachutists and later learned they had dropped on our dropping zone with the intention of reinforcing the troops holding the bridge which was our objective.

Initially there was a little confusion on the dropping zone because we were mixed up with German parachutists. Luckily for us, we carried our weapons when we dropped. The Germans dropped their weapons in containers and so were at a disadvantage. It suddenly occurred to me how juvenile our password was. It was used by all invading forces in Sicily. The challenge was “Desert Rats”. The reply was “Kill Italians”. At the time it seemed very silly. Strange, of the scores of passwords I’ve used, it is the only one I remember.

I next saw two more soldiers. Their smock tails were hanging down. This identified them as friends. They turned out to be two new men in my platoon. They were shaken and more than pleased to see me. Together we plunged into some high grass and bushes. Suddenly the ground gave way under our feet and we all tumbled down a steep bank, landing on top of four enemy soldiers. We killed them and then found they were Italians and unarmed. They were probably hiding after deserting their posts. My two companions were now extremely nervous. This incident had been played out on a narrow strip of soil on the river’s edge. The water looked black, deep and sinister. It did not seem to be flowing. Across on the far side was another steep bank.

I told the others to follow me across the river. They objected saying they could not swim. I told them to remember their training and wrap their equipment in a groundsheet to make a float. Reluctantly they started too do this.

In the meantime, I have taken off my boots, strung them around my neck and stepped into the water. It was warm and inviting and after a few paces, still only ankle deep. I began to cross. The water was very shallow all the way to the other side. It never came above my ankles. Somehow this performance amused my two companions. They saw me paddling instead of swimming. It broke the tension they were experiencing and brought them back to normal behavior. They splashed over.

Across the river, we very soon linked up with a few more men from A Company, 3rd Battalion and from the 1st Battalion. The time was 0130 hrs. All told we numbered about 100. We were 900 men short. It was decided we would capture the bridge. Paddy Grundle and I led the way as pointsmen.

The enemy soldiers were well aroused by now. There was plenty of inaccurate small arms fire flying around. We reached the start line to attack the bridge defenders. I was given four men, not from my platoon, and told to knock out one particular gun emplacement and then deal with a pill box beside the road at the end of the bridge. We did not know how many of the enemy we would have to deal with and we had to get through barbed wire entanglements.

We left our small packs and equipment we did not immediately require at our start line and crawled forward under very heavy fire which was aimed in our general direction. There was a lot of shouting, some screams and explosions from grenades.

We reached the wire without difficulty, then blew a gap in it with an explosive charge. We crawled through the gap with heavy machine gun fire whistling a few inches above our heads. Near the edge of the emplacement we fanned out and tossed grenades into the pit. Immediately after they exploded, I jumped in. I saw three or four Italian soldiers. One had an automatic submachine gun. I shot him instantly. The others had rifles and bayonets. I shot them all in the order they presented a danger to me. The last one lunged at me with his bayonet and managed to inflict a minor wound on my upper arm before he died. A “Schmeisser” would have been a more suitable weapon than the rifle I had at this time. In the weapon pit was a small anti-aircraft gun, which had not been fired, and one machine gun.

There was a tremendous amount of noise all around and seemingly a lot of confusion. My four comrades had disappeared. I don’t know what became of them.

Now for the pill box. At a suitable moment I dashed towards it and jumped into a shell hole to avoid wild machine gun fire from one of its firing points. There were two other men in the hole, Brigadier Lathbury and, I think Pte Hardman. The machine gun was being fired aimlessly. Together we charged the pill box and knocked it out by tossing a couple of grenades through the apertures. We made sure all those inside were dead. I noticed then that Lathbury had a shoulder wound. I don’t know whether he received it before or while attacking the pill box.

The awful noise suddenly ceased. Debris was not flying through the air. The bridge was ours. Now to consolidate. I collected my spare equipment from the start line and found what remained of A Company, under Major Dennison, in the planned position. We were about 50 strong. I was detailed to take a squad and cover the road leading from Catania to the bridge. We had one Bren gun, rifles, Gammon bombs, grenades and Hawkins mines. We had no artillery, no anti-tank weapons and no mortars.

We strung Hawkins mines together on cords, prepared positions on either side of the road and waited. It was very peaceful and quiet and beginning to get light. More of our men were arriving at the bridge.

Instead of the bridge being held by 1st and 3rd Para Battalions, together in excess of 1,000 men with suitable weapons, I guess we defenders numbered about 200 men armed with rifles, Brens and grenades. The Royal Navy must be thanked for this situation. Never mind, it would soon be 0700 hrs, the time that 8th Army was due to link up with us.

I heard the sound of a motor vehicle coming towards us from the direction of Catania. It was a 5 ton lorry travelling at 15-20 mph. We decided to knock it out with a Gammon bomb instead of using our Hawkins mines. Someone, I’ve forgotten who, flung the bomb at the lorry. I watched the throw and immediately hugged the ground, face down at the bottom of a shallow ditch. I closed my eyes. I saw a vivid flash of light, felt my body lift up off the ground and crash down. At the same time there was a violent explosion. Next debris started to fall from the sky like rain. When the debris ceased falling, I lifted my head and looked to where I had last seen the lorry. It was not there. I saw one front wing belonging to the vehicle on the road. It was the largest piece of the lorry. Across the road was a man sitting with his back to a tree, absolutely naked except for an Africa Corp hat on his head. He had a pipe in his mouth. One of his legs was missing from the knee.

Amongst those with me in this position were Jim Newton, Paddy Grundle, Ron Walker, Tony Hughes, Jim Woodley, Tom Smith, Eddie Cutler and “Ivor” Bamsey.

I helped carry the wounded German back to our first aid post under the bridge. Later he told our medics that he was the driver of the lorry which contained other men and munitions destined for the Italians on the bridge. I guess the Gammon bomb must have hit the lorry’s fuel tank. It was a miracle that the driver survived.

Near the first aid post, I saw Lt Col Yeldham. He looked yellow and very ill. He might have been suffering from jaundice or malaria. Anyway he was out of the battle. As I said earlier Lathbury was wounded, not seriously. Lt Col Pearson, 1st Para Battalion was in charge of the troops defending the bridge.

Some anti-tank gunners arrived to take over our positions on the side of the road. I moved with A Company to man a line on the Northeastern section of the perimeter, from the road to the river. We were well spread out in single positions. Each man being 20 to 30 yards from his neighbor.

It was now after 0700 hrs. 8th Army had not arrived as planned. They had been held up. Various rumors put hem at various distances away. I took no notice of this unfounded gossip. We were on our own and had to hold out until help came. That was all there was to it.

I was trying to dig a hole in rock hard ground. The grape vines around me looked healthy so at least the ground was to their liking. My hole was only a few inches deep when some Messerschmitts came over. They circled firing machine guns and cannons into our area. The fire sounded deadly but I don’t think it caused damage or casualties. We did not fire at the attacking aircraft because our ammunition was limited and we did not know how long we would have to hold out. As the Messerschmitts flew away, an enemy counter-attack came in. Not against the sector I was helping to hold. It was repelled.

After this a pattern developed. A barrage of mortar bombs or shells – anti-personal shells which exploded about 20 feet above the ground and scattered shrapnel downwards – would be played on us for varying lengths of time. Then cease. Immediately an infantry attack would follow. The German infantry included their Parachute Regiment and the Herman Goering Jager regiment. They were all doughty fighters.

Our position was interesting – rather like that of a nut in a nutcracker. The river Simento was an ideal anti-tank barrier. The Primosole Bridge was the only way to cross it on the coastal plain. The German troops heading South hoping to stop the 8th Army, crashed into the Northern perimeter, while Germans retreating from the 8th Army collided with our South perimeter. We did not know if 2nd Para Battalion had secured the high ground to our South.

I recall one occasion when we had all crawled forward, well towards the German lines, to avoid a barrage which was falling on and around our positions. The grape vines about two feet high restricted the view at ground level. The barrage stopped and the Germans rose up from the ground about ten yards from where we lay. They had barely begun to charge forward and shout “UU RR AA” when we shot them down. The looked very surprised as they died.

During another bombardment, one man in a hole to my left, started sobbing and screaming “Stop, stop!”. He rose up and began running about. Flying shrapnel soon cut him down. He was killed.

My friend Ron Walker disappeared after one of the counter-attacks. His hole may have received a direct hit. We had been close comrades ever since we first joined the battalion and had been through many an ordeal together.

The day wore on with one attack following another. Casualties were mounting. Our ammunition was getting low. The area had the sickly sweet smell of death and of bodies beginning to rot. A Company was ordered to fall back and to assemble by some trees on the edge of the road. We were now about twenty string. The whole area was under shell fire.

I was lying on a bank, fairly close to Tom Smith. We were both sniping at Germans who were darting across open ground about 100 yards away. Then I felt a savage blow on my back, the left side. I had been hit. My left arm and shoulder were completely numb. I asked Tom to take a look and tell me how bad the wound was. He looked and said there was not a mark on me. We guessed that the flat side of a piece of shrapnel must have hit my back and bounced off. Luck was still with me. The back of my rib cage was black and blue for many days afterwards. It was about an hour before the numbness passed of and I regained the use of my left arm. I could breathe in comfort so my ribs were intact. I wasn’t much use during that time.

Next came orders. Because our ammunition was about spent and our casualties were mounting, we were to withdraw to the high ground South of the river and link up with 3rd Battalion, if they were there.

Different orders for me. I was detailed to take a patrol and do what damage we could to the airfield outside Catania. Jim Newton and Paddy Grundle were with me on this patrol. I have forgotten who the fourth man was. The airfield was about six miles North of our present position.

We gathered together explosives, detonators, fuses. Ammunition was so short that we each had only five rounds for our rifles.

After saying our farewells, our comrades began to slip away South, while we four headed North to filter through enemy lines. It was now getting dark. It was a pity we had to leave the bridge, but our numbers were now so small that we could no longer defend it. Even if ammunition had been plentiful, we would have been destroyed by enemy shellfire had we stayed. We reckoned on reaching the airfield in about two hours, one hour for causing damage and on two hours for the return trip. We should be back in our own lines by dawn or soon after.

We decided to move on to the main road when it was dark to speed our movement. As we walked by some buildings, we saw lots of bicycles. Undoubtedly the property of the German army. No one was guarding them. We slashed many tires and broke many spokes. Then we rode away up the road, each of us on a bicycle. This was a good way to travel. The moon was up again and it was almost like daylight. We had probably pedaled for two miles or more when, rounding a bend in the round, we saw a column of German infantry marching towards us. There was nothing we could do except brazen it out. I hoped we would be mistaken for German parachute troops. In the half light our uniforms were very similar in appearance. As we rode between the two ranks of German soldiers, we all said “Good night” to each other. Then it was all over. We were safe. We all collapsed into the ditch at the roadside, trembling at our narrow escape. I was perspiring to such an extent, my uniform was very wet. It was some minutes before we recovered our nerves and were able to carry on, on foot now.

We reached the airfield without any more disturbing moments, only to find that the installations had been destroyed by naval gunfire. There was nothing for us to do. Retracing our steps, we blew down telegraph pole, an electric pylon and made a crater in the main road over a culvert. Nothing much, but at least it would cause a little trouble to the enemy.

The return journey was uneventful, but It took a little longer than planned. We came across a Horsa or Hengist glider. On landing it had ploughed into a bank. Its wooden frame had splintered. Six or seven men inside were dead. They had been impaled on the broken spear like wooden struts. They were gunners who should have been part of out anti-tank team. The American WACO glider was very much better than these British one because it had a metal frame which of course did not splinter on impact.

On reaching our lines we found our comrades had departed, their places had been taken by men of the Durham Light Infantry. The stench of rotting bodies in the area had made most of them sick. In conversation they told me they had been with the 8th Army since August 1942 and that this was the first time they had been in the front line.

We reported to their CO and told him what we had seen of German units and positions North of the Simento. The bridge was now in no mans land, with our troops at one end and the Germans at the other. Anyway it had not been blown up.

On leaving the Durham’s position, the four of us hitch hiked down the coast road to Augusta, a small port near the Southeast corner of the island. We passed columns of infantry marching Northwards. It was very hot. The road was dusty.

We arrived at our destination a little after 1800 hrs that evening to find that our unit was onboard a tank landing craft waiting to return to Bizerta. It was at anchor out in the harbor. When asked, the duty naval officer refused to supply a boat to get us all there. I promptly decided to go and see the Naval Officer in charge of the port. A sentry told me I might find him in the nearby mess. Off we went. A mess steward delivered a request to see this august person. The man himself came to the mess entrance and invited us in. Weapons and all.

He was a very agreeable man. We sat down and four glasses of iced beer were placed down in front of us. In between sipping this deliciously refreshing drink, I told him what we had been doing and explained that we wanted a boat to take us out to our unit in the harbor. The naval man laughed, remarking that if he did not comply we would take one anyway. He was absolutely right although we did not say so. We had a pleasant conversation.

The outcome was that his naval officer drove us back to the harbor in a jeep. The duty naval officer colored up when he saw us arrive. His senior officer told him to get us out to our unit. And so we rejoined our battalion, or what remained of it. Casualties had been heavy.

That night there was an air raid on the harbor. I thought we might have been wiser to stay ashore that night. However the bombs fell harmlessly into the water and no damage was caused. The next morning we set sail for Bizerta. The sea was completely calm, as flat as a sheet of glass. I’ve never known it to be like that, before or since.

From Bizerta waiting lorries whipped us back to our camp in the olive groves just outside Sousse In the camp we found so many reinforcements waiting to join us, it was almost like joining a new unit. The powers that be had estimated our casualties well and made appropriate provisions. Good staff work.

We had fought a good battle and done more than was required of us, but the result was disappointing. First the American transports had been scattered by the Royal Navy’s anti-aircraft fire and failed miserably to drop Brigade Headquarters, 1st and 3rd para Battalions on the objective. Second the ground army had failed to link up with us at the planned time. Indeed they were more than twelve hours late. Never mind, the few of us that reached the objective had done all the planners had asked for and more.

A few days later a rumor filtered down saying that various service commanders wished to disband the parachute units on the grounds that they were an expensive luxury. If this rumor was true, those short sighted commanders did not get their way.

As the days went by odd soldiers who had been listed as missing returned to us. Their stories were similar. They spoke of landing in different parts of Sicily. One stick had even been dropped in Italy!

After landing they caused as much trouble as they could to the enemy before returning to base. While this random dropping had not been planned, it caused great confusion in the enemy camp. They must have had great difficulty deciding where the main attack was aimed.

One of these men landed among farm buildings that were occupied by German troops. He was scarcely out of his parachute harness when he saw Germans running towards him. He fled around the corner of a building and jumped into a pig sty. The pigs did not take much notice of him as he covered himself with filthy straw. He hid there until the Germans left, two or three days later. In spite of many baths and new clothing, his friends avoided his company for days.

Another soldier Pte Strelton, returned with all his equipment complete, even his parachute. He was commended for this.

I should have reported sick with my very minor bayonet wound. I didn’t. The scratch turned septic. One afternoon my arm seemed to suddenly swell up and to throb. My temperature shot up. I have a vague recollection of being helped to our MI tent. When I recovered my senses, I was in between clean white sheets on a bed in a very large marquee. I was in a field hospital, one of many that had been set up to receive casualties from Sicily. Fortunately casualties had been light. I was the only “battle casualty” in the hospital. The nurses made a fuss of me. Sad to relate I was only permitted to stay in this haven for a few days. My arm responded to treatment and so I was back with my unit in the olive groves in next to no time.

I rate the battle for the Primosole Bridge as one of my toughest battles.

July 1986

A great deal has been written about the Battle of Arnhem, so if you are interested there is plenty of material to read. I have found that a lot of the authors have done very little research, if any, and have based their accounts on the books or earlier writers. Thus compounding many inaccuracies.

I cast my mind back forty-one years, to a time when I was a Corporal in charge of Nine Section, Three Platoon, A Company, 3rd Parachute Battalion. I was a very small cog in the machine. Those of us who had survived the fighting of 1942 and 1943 were well blooded. We knew exactly what war meant. We had trained our untried reinforcements up to fever pitch and we were all straining at the leash to get back into the battle for Europe. The average age of my Company was between twenty-two and twenty –three years.

The Divisional Commander was Major General Urquhart, he took command, I think, in January 1944. It was not a popular appointment. In the First Parachute Brigade, we all thought the command should have gone to our Brigadier, Gerald Lathbury. Urquhart was unknown to us. We learned that he was an infantryman. We discovered he was unimaginative and that he did not understand parachute troops – the men and their tactics. Worst still he seemed to make no attempt to find out or to get to know the men. He remained aloof with the idea that once on the ground, we were just infantry units. How wrong he was. He never even visited us. In fact I never saw him. Eisenhower and Montgomery had spoken to us on several occasions, but not Urquhart. This was most unusual because up until this time airborne troops had been a very closely knit band of brothers.

The Brigade Commander, Lathbury, was well known. We all thought highly of him. He commanded 3rd Parachute Battalion when it was first formed until leaving on promotion in October 1942. He returned to take over the Brigade in June 1943. Actions in Sicily and Italy had shown him as brave, resolute and resourceful.

Lt Col John Fitch became commanding officer 3rd Parachute Battalion, I think, in January 1944. He seemed to be efficient and was popular. We were waiting to see how he reacted to battle conditions.

Our Company commander, Major Mervyn Dennison, had been with us since June 1943. He was a good man and had proved himself in Sicily and Italy. He came from 1st Parachute Battalion.

First Airborne Division was made up by 1st and 4th Parachute Brigades, 1st Air Landing Brigade, 1st Air Landing Light Regiment, Royal Artillery.

Air Landing meant traveling in gliders.

To come down to my level, if we were up to strength, a Section consisted of nine men, a Platoon thirty men and a Company one hundred and twenty. A battalion was made up by about five hundred men.

As for weapons, parachute troops were lightly armed. In a Section there was one Bren gun, two submachine guns and six rifles. The Platoon had on Piat Gun and in Battalion Headquarters Company there were two heavy weapon Platoons – Vickers Machine guns and three inch mortars. In addition to personal weapons we carried “36” grenades, phosphorous bombs, Gammon bomb, Hawkins mines, knives and throttling cords. In addition to the entrenching tool we carried either a spade or a pick axe.

Between June nad September 1944, we had been briefed for fifteen operations. They were all cancelled. The first I recall was to drop at Evrecy on D + 5 [11 June 1944]. This one was cancelled because enemy tanks were parked on and around the dropping zone. The last one was for 1st Parachute Brigade, on its own, to capture the Arnhem Bridge. This might have been successful because the Brigade would have dropped on the objective. Anyway it was cancelled almost at once and then came orders for “Market Garden”.

This was indeed good news, for 1st Airborne Division together with the Polish Parachute Brigade were to capture the Arnhem Bridge. It was a powerful force and should easily accomplish the task. 30 Corps would relieve us in forty-eight hours and we would ride on their tanks up to the Zuider Zee, where 2nd Army would face East and the North German plain. Ideal for tanks. The war might be over by the end of the year.

Then came the detailed Company briefing and some shocks. We learned that we were to drop some seven miles away from the objective the Arnhem Bridge. This was ridiculous and asking for trouble. It was throwing away that valuable element surprise. It meant we would probably have to fight our way in, taking casualties and expending ammunition, thus having a much weakened force with which to defend the Bridge.

A basic principle of airborne operations is that it is better to take casualties by dropping on the objective than to incur them on a long approach.

To make matters worse, 1st Airborne Division was to be put down in three groups over three days. Reason – shortage of aircraft and priority had to be given to the American 82nd and 101st Divisions further South. Fair enough.

But on D Day with about one third of his Division in action, Urquhart was inviting further dangers by splitting his force in two. One group was to defend the dropping zone. The other group, us, was to make for and capture the Bridge.

The Intelligence report was a laugh. It spoke of German armor refitting in the Arnhem area. It said the Germans were exhausted, had little equipment and were disorganized after their long retreat from Normandy. We did not believe this. We knew the German to be a first class soldier, a sturdy fighter who would do his work well. More serious was the information that 30 Corp, who were to relieve us in forty-eight hours, was short of petrol.

As was customary the plan was discussed, criticized and suggestions made. In past operations, we who had to do the fighting had been allowed a pretty free hand with operational detail, provided it fitted into the broad overall scheme.

We learned that Lathbury, whose ideas wee similar to ours, had made suggestions to Urquhart who had rejected them. The most important one, that we should drop immediatelt South of the Bridge was turned down because the RAF said it was dangerous, yet they proposed to drop the Polish Parachute Brigade there on D + 2 when all chance of surprise had gone. There simply was no logic in this thinking.

We were not disheartened by what we considered to be Urquhart’s inability to command an Airborne Division or by his lack of response to suggestions. On the contrary we were confident of success and eager to go. We expected a long hard fight and thought 30 Corp might link up with us in about a week. We regarded their planned arrival in forty-eight hours and the run up to the Zuider Zee as wishful thinking.

I thought over the briefing and of Urquhart’s attitudes. I found myself disliking the unknown General and his godlike manner, then I thought he must know things we didn’t and he must have done his best. I had some misgivings but I kept them to myself.

Accordingly 3 Platoon prepared for battle. I was acting as Platoon Sergeant. Instead of drawing supplies for a forty-eight hour battle as the briefing called for, we all, by general consent, drew sufficient to last a week. We put the extra gear into sandbags which we attached to the tops of our small packs. It was a weight.

While we were preparing our weapons and equipment, two reinforcements reported to me, Privates Lucena and Green. They had been detailed to join my Platoon. It was one heck of a time for new men to join us. Both were nineteen years old. They had completed the basic army training course and had just finished the parachute course. They had done no training that would help them to fight as parachutists. It would have to be on the job training. I told them what was going on. I saw they had all the necessary equipment, introduced them to the Platoon and detailed Lucena to a Section. Green was to be the Platoon runner. I wished I could have spent more time getting to know these two, but it was a busy time and the day passed quickly.

Just before lights out that day, Saturday, 16th September 1944 Lucena and Green came and asked if they could talk with me. I said of course. We sat down outside our hut. There was one year’s difference in our ages. To me they seemed as children while I felt like an old man with a life time’s experiences behind him. The new men were apprehensive about the forthcoming operation. They were going into battle for the first time with unknown comrades. They were worried as to how they would react and did not want to let the side down. I named others in the Platoon who were going into battle for the first time. I said that once the fighting started no one would have the time to feel afraid and that everyone would be concentrating on what had to be done. We talked on and when we separated, I hoped I had been able to give them reassurance and make them feel they belonged to our group.

Unexpectedly mail was delivered. In a letter, a happy Muriel, hoped she was pregnant. Her sister Violet was married in Leicester this day and I should have been at the wedding. With these thoughts from another world I turned in and slept like a top.

Sunday 17th September 1944. The dawn mist soon cleared and gave way to sunshine. It was a lovely day. After an early breakfast in our camp at Spalding, we were taken by lorries to the airfield at Saltby in Leicestershire. I half expected despatch riders to roar up, stop the convoy and say the operationwas cancelled. Not so.

At Saltby we drew parachutes and relaxed, basking in the warm sunshine by the Dakotas. WAAFs came along with urns of tea and great piles of delicious ham sandwiches. We all tucked in and commented on the comfortable existence of the RAF types. The wheels had started to turn, there was nothing else to do until we landed in Holland.

Take off was between 10.00 hrs and 11.00 hrs. As usual we all crowded as far forward as possible while the pilot roared the engines until the rivets looked as if they would pop out of the fuselage. After the heavily laden aircraft had clawed its way into the sky, we returned to our seats. I settled down to a game of chess. Others dozed or gazed out of the windows. Everyone appeared at ease. Our two new men seemed to have settled in quite well. In the event Lucena was killed outright a few hours later. Green received a minor shrapnel wound in his forearm, which we dressed and he carried on. Later he was taken prisoner. The wound turned gangrenous through lack of medical attention and he died.

A fighter escort of Typhoons and Spitfires picked us up over the Channel. A little flak came up soon after we crossed the Dutch coast. It looked rather like puffs of cotton wool hanging in the sky. Tracer bullets came up slowly and lazily from the ground: as they neared us their speed seemed to increase and they whizzed by us. No harm was caused. The fighters went down and silenced this opposition. There was no more flak. The rest of the flight was uneventful.

About 1300 hrs the order “Stand Up, Hook Up” was given.Then “Action Stations”. Number One stood in the doorway. Number Two immediately behind him, watched the lights over the door. The Red Light was on. The rest of us were close in line behind. When the Green Light came on, Number Two hit Number One’s shoulder and out he went, closely followed by the rest of the stick. We jumped from 800 feet which was rather higher than usual. The aircraft had throttled back to about 120 mph prior to the jump and was noisy.

Gentle tugs at my shoulders indicated my parachute was open. The noise of the aircraft and the slipstream had gone. All was peaceful and quiet. Plenty of time to look around. I saw other parachutists jumping from aircraft. I saw other parachutists below. I recognized features on the ground from aerial photographs. I knew exactly where I was – bang on target. I lowered my equipment which was in a valise and fastened to my harness by about 60 feet of cord. This hit the ground first and thus lessened the weight on the parachute. I landed like a feather.

Some small arms fire was directed at us from some trees at the edge of the dropping zone. This should have been cleared by glider troops which landed before us. Never mind. I assembled my Section. In next to no time we eliminated this opposition. I noticed that the eight or ten bodies were those of NCOs and all had Iron Cross ribbons on their tunics. I thought – Strange!

My Company assembled at its rendezvous without delay and without casualties. It was even better than most exercises. We were even on time when we set off for the Arnhem Bridge. An excellent start. My battalion had the middle route – Tiger. The 1st Battalion was on out left. The 2nd Battalion was on our right, near the river.

As we marched along the road, Dutch civilians came out waving orange colored flags. Buckets of apples and water were placed on the roadside. The Dutch were overjoyed to see us. Some said they were resistance fighters and would do anything to help us. Our experience with resistance fighters in Italy and France had been unfortunate. The offers of help were politely refused. With hindsight we should have listened and taken the offers of help, for the Dutch were exceptional people and did help immensely, in spite of our attitude.

Suddenly the festive atmosphere was shattered by bursts of machine gun fire, punctuated by sharp cracks of 88 guns. We scattered into cover by the roadside. The Dutch people disappeared. The silence. What we had feared had come about – opposition about thirty minutes into the approach march.

Odd cracks from sniper’s rifles continued while we looked around for Fritz. We had about six miles to go for our objective. At this time Bamsey, also known as “Ivor The Mouse”, who was kneeling by a tree a few feet away from me, was shot through the throat and killed. Our first casualty. The source of the shot was pinpointed. It came from a machine gun nest in a shrubbery on the far side of a lawn, maybe one hundred yards way. The Section crawled through cover and then we went out in extended order near the edge of the cover, unseen by Fritz. Next contrary to commonsense and training manuals, we sprang to our feet and charged, firing from the hip and shouting “Waho Mohomed” as we ran over the manicured lawn. The three Germans with the machine gun panicked. Their shots hit the ground in front of our feet or whistled over our heads. They all missed. The Germans were killed. One was a Sergeant, the other two were Corporals. All three had Iron Cross ribbons. This was the second group I had helped to kill, all NCOs. Were all German soldiers now NCOs? I did not understand.

The rest of my Platoon followed. The other two Platoons moved through our lines, under fire, and advanced. Then it was our turn to go forward again. And so the Company continued to advance leapfrog style.

The resistance to our advance was always in depth. In ditches, hedges, behind trees, up in trees, in houses and in gardens. Snipers and machine guns were in mutually supportive positions. The 88s were always behind this screen, well away from our reach. The Germans were defending their ground with great skill. We continued to advance, slowly, using ammunitions, grenades and bayonets. We were also losing men. The dead Germans were still NCOs. We took no prisoners.

There was an initial reluctance on our part to damage houses or carefully tended gardens. These scruples soon vanished.

It was early evening. The 88s were still. We were moving through a small wooded area against small arms fire when we heard screaming mortar bombs just before they burst over our heads scattering shrapnel in all directions. I recognized the sound of the “Sobbing Sisters”, a name we had given to a six barreled mortar which Fritz used with deadly accuracy. Then came a new sound to mingle with the familiar. We later learnt it was a rocket propelled mortar, a deadly weapon.

We moved forward and started digging in. The mortar bombs continued falling on the trees behind us. It was getting dark. By now we should have been at the Bridge. We had not even reached Arnhem and were well behind schedule. I hoped the other battalions were doing better.

Following orders, I took a patrol out to recce the ground in front of our position. We had two Bren guns. We worked our way along some house. No sight or sound of the enemy. Then the peace of the night was broken by the sound of lorries coming along the street towards us. There were three lorries. By good fortune they stopped in front of us. About eighty German got out of he lorries and began to form up between us and the vehicles. Sitting targets just a few feet away. We opened fire and flung grenades. The lorries must have been carrying extra ammunition or explosives because they all blew up. Most of the German must have died. We checked bodies and saw that they were SS troops, the usual mix of privates, NCOs and one Captain. The enemy did not repeat this mistake.

Further on we located a six barrelled mortar. We killed the crew and destroyed the weapon. We heard other sounds which indicated the Germans were retreating.

Returning to our lines we found other patrols had met with similar success. There were Germans to our front, on our flanks and at our rear. We were surrounded, not an unusual state. No one ws unduly alarmed.

Just before first light the Company moved forward again. It was the first night without sleep. I was not tired. I felt exhilarated and in common with all my comrades I wanted to reach the Bridge with all speed, even though the original plan was now awry.

Almost at once we came up against German resistance to our front while they made attacks on our flanks and rear. We advanced and beat off the attacks. I knew the 4th Parachute Brigade and some glider elements were due in today. I expected them to join us and then all would be well.

Unexpectedly we made contact with some men from 1st Parachute Battalion. I flopped down to the ground beside Jack Morris, a onetime Grenadier Guardsman. We had done our parachute training together and were good friends. He had gone to the 1st Battalion and was now a Sergeant. Our paths had crossed in Tunisia and Sicily. He was his usual cheerful self. We shook hands and swopped news. His experiences were like mine. We were both optimistic about the outcome of the battle. Orders came for my group to move. I shook hands again with Jack and as I was saying “Goodbye for now” he dropped dead with a bullet through his head. He had been shot by a sniper strapped up in a tree only about twenty yards away. The sniper in his turn was killed. He looked very, very young and was another NCO.

We continued to advance in short rushes against heavy machine gun fire which never slackened. Fortunately for us, there were no 88s or mortars to contend with. Snipers, up in high positions, bravely kept up their deadly fire until killed. Machine gun crews sometimes rang away leaving their weapons. Sometimes they stayed and had to be killed.

At about 1100 hrs on this second day of battle, I received my last order from Tony Ash, our Platoon Lieutenant. He asked me to take my Section and deal with a machine gun nest on our left front. This was the last time I saw an officer in the battle.

I took my Section and we crawled through an allotment covered with runner beans, towards a machine gun which was situated near a church. Bullets were flying in all directions, but by keeping low we were in dead ground. We tossed a grenade and charged the last yards to find that Fritz had fled, leaving his weapons.

Extremely heavy machine gun fire was directed into the area occupied by my Company. It was coming down from all sides. It was impossible for us to rejoin our lines. It was impossible for anyone from the Company to reach us. From this time, from my point of view, the battle became a shambles, because we were not operating as a coordinated battalion.

I took stock of the situation. We were close to St Elizabeth Hospital. From here all roads converged on the Bridge. If we pressed forward, we should make contact with others heading for the same objective. I decided to take my Section on towards the Bridge.

Slowly we fought our way by the hospital into Arnhem. As I anticipated, we were joined by other soldiers who had broken through the German lines. Our numbers fluctuated from eight to about eighty.

It was now house to house fighting. The SS troops defending the buildings backed up by machine guns and snipers in good tactical positions. We blasted our way forward, taking one position after another. Where possible, we entered a defended house via the roof or by blowing a hole in a wall. A grenade would be tossed into a room, immediately after it exploded, the attacker(s) would charge into the room firing Schmeissers, the German 9mm submachine gun. At this stage there was plenty of German weapons and ammunition laying about.

We had started to destroy Arnhem with this style of fighting. The enemy were not too determined. As yet there were no tanks, SP guns or 88s. The fighting in Arnhem was turning out to be easy as battles go. There was plenty of cover and no need to keep on digging in. We became quite efficient at street fighting. Morale was high.

Then came more serious opposition, loosely knit battle groups of infantry, tanks and SP guns. At first we had plenty of space to move about. We attacked them, always from different directions. We usually managed to isolate and knock out the infantry

The only weapon we had against the tanks, Tiger tanks and Panther V, were Gammon bombs. Armed with this bomb, which contained about two pounds of plastic explosive, the thrower had to lay beside a low garden wall, or whatever cover was available, and wait. The tank as it approached made the ground tremble like jelly. When the side of the tank was almost in touching distance, the attacker would throw the bomb, aiming at the tank tracks. A direct hit on the track immobilized the tank. It could then be destroyed. We dealt with two tanks in this manner. A third was knocked out when a phosphorus bomb exploded over the driver’s visor. The crew mistakenly thought their tank was on fire and bailed out.

The SP guns were always well back and strongly protected. We never did succeed in knocking out one of these weapons.

So ended day two. I was very, very tired. I just wanted to lay down anywhere and sleep, impossible therefore all the more desirable About this time I took a Benzedrine tablet which was supposed to keep one awake and alert. It worked.

Its from around this time, I find I cannot remember a chronological sequence of events. Time ceased to have any meaning. I have no recollection of what the weather was like. I had no wish to eat. I just took an occasional drink of water. The fighting was continuous and repetitious. In spite of earplugs there was always noise made up by small arms, bursting grenades, by bigger guns, mortars and by collapsing buildings.

Incidents which stick in my mind from this period.

Two Dutch children, a boy and a girl, ten – twelve years old. They came to us from nowhere in a newly captured house with a bucket of apples. We gave them chocolate. I directed them away from the fighting and watched them go to the rear and safety. To our utter horror they reappeared on the upward slope of the road between us and an SS position. We were not firing. The SS were. I held my breath. I think others might have prayed. Then a German machine gunner needlessly opened up and shot the two children. They collapsed on the road. The machine gunner was not satisfied. He kept pumping lead into the bodies so that they slowly turned over and rolled down the slope. The machine gunner kept firing. We watched this with disbelieving eyes. Nothing was said. No orders were given. My heart was full of hate and murder. We split into two groups, went round the flanks of the SS position and burst into their house from the rear. The SS men all threw down their weapons, put up their hands and screamed “Kamerad”. I think they knew what to expect. We ignored their cries and killed them all with bayonets I felt better after this.

Private Plumbley, 3rd Battalion, drove up to our position in a Bren gun carrier. He had supplies for the men on the Bridge. We attacked, punched a hole in the crust of the German defense line and Plumbley crashed through. I heard later that he reached the Bridge. We could not follow because of intense machinegun fire.

Individuals joining my group bring news of the battle. It is bad news. A, B and HQ Companies of the 3rd Parachute Battalion had been chopped up. Apart from us, the survivors are retreating towards the dropping zones. Men from 1st Parachute Battalion give a similar story. No news of our C Company. Men from the 4th Parachute Brigade say the Germans fired the dropping zone as their drop started. These men speak of a continuous fight to reach us and heavy casualties.

It seems obvious that 1st Airborne Division is no longer capable of attacking. The sound of battle comes from the direction of the Bridge. My small group is the only help they might get. We are on our own. Our best course of action is still to get to the Bridge and await there for 30 Corp.

The character of the battle changes. The SS battle groups tighten up and it becomes more difficult to see them off. Gradually we are being forced on the defensive.

A ball of fire from a flame thrower rolls through our position. No one is hurt but my whiskers are singed. The flame thrower crew is spotted. It consists of two men, one holds the nozzle, the other carries a fuel tank on his back. They do not know exactly where we are and, surprise, they seem to be on their own. Hughes and I fill two Bren magazines with tracer bullets. We creep around to the rear of this diabolical weapon. From a good position we fire a long burst into the fuel tank. There was an explosion and a ball of fire. The carrier must have died instantly from the bullets. The man with the nozzle was engulfed by fire. He screamed as he died. It was the only time I met a flame thrower in battle. I do not wish to repeat the experience.

One SS battle group takes a tighter grip on the battle. Its infantry , very closely supported by tanks searches houses, rubble and gardens. We have some minor successes at first but are gradually pressed into a smaller area. We run out of Gammon bombs and are now completely defenseless against armour. Walker found some petrol in a wrecked car and made some Molotov Cocktails, primitive but effective while they lasted.

At last we are confined to a small area. We turn a house into a strong point for a last stand, but remain outside and defend the surrounding ground.

The shelling and bombing is incessant, only stopping when the SS infantry come in to attack. They are repulsed but are persistent and keep coming again and again. Both sides have taken heavy casualties and have been subjected to a lot of noise. No one is intimidated. This defensive fighting is easier for we do not take so many casualties as when attacking, but ammunition is getting low and we are out of grenades. Hurry up 30 Corps.

Finally we are forced into the house, our last position. The SS gunners think we are still in the area around it and pound it unceasingly. Their shells all explode harmlessly. We watch and wait. We do not fire.

It becomes dark. The shelling continues and machine guns play over the area. We take stock of our situation. It looks hopeless. Maybe thirty men capable of fighting. Most of us out of ammunition. In addition we have about thirty badly wounded men all dosed with morphia.

The sensible thing to do would be to surrender. No one gives voice to this idea. I speak in favor of hanging on for so often battles have been won by stubborn soldiers holding out for just that little longer. 30 Corps must be getting close now. \*

Three men say they would like to try and slip through the German lines and escape over the river. The rest elect to stay. We shake hands with the three who have had the courage to say they wanted to go and wished them luck: One was named Cox. I do not know the names of the other two. After saying they would swim the river and head South, they disappeared into the night. I do not know what happened to them.

A noisy sleepless night passes. To me my situation seems normal. I have gone beyond feeling afraid. I feel serene, completely at peace. I think of Muriel and wonder what our child will be. I hope that they will be alright. I expect to die in the morning.

It becomes light. The general bombardment intensifies. The SS are not short of ammunition. Suddenly it stops. There is absolute silence. Bliss. We wait expecting an assault. Nothing happens. Then a voice over a loud hailer tells us we have fought a good fight, further resistance is useless, surrender or be killed. We do not reply. The shells start falling again.

The shelling stops, then we hear shouts from officers and NCOs urging their now reluctant men forward to attack our position. We watch. Those with ammunition hold their fire. The SS infantry move very slowly and cautiously towards us. We see their NCOs behind them and hear them shouting “Schnell, schnell”. We note the positions of a machine guns and see that when the infantry gets close to us, they will not be able to fire without hitting their own men. We hold our fire and wait.

The SS infantry close in, they are between us and their machine guns. We jump up and charge towards them shouting “Waho Mohamed”. The SS men drop their weapons, turn and run away. We go far enough forward to collect what weapons and ammunition we can. I pick up a Schmeisser with one magazine. A machine gun opens fire. My right leg goes numb. I hit the deck and know I have been hit.

I belly crawl back and get into the house. A lot of my companions don’t make it. I look at my leg and find a bullet has just creased my shin bone. Nothing serious. Use will return before long.

I take up a position under a table in a corner of a ground floor room. From here I have a limited field of fire through a hole in the wall. Fry takes up a position behind a barricade in another corner from where he can cover the door and the window. I do not know how the others are deployed. I realize this is the end.

Shells begin to crash into the roof of our house. The noise is tremendous. There’s lots of dust in the air. I guess the roof collapses. Shells then seem to be bursting in the rooms above us. I don’t know how long this lasted.

Next everything caved in. Rubble fell on top of my table, but it was strong enough to take the strain. I was buried. The air was so full of dust, I could scarcely breath. I tried to keep silent but started coughing and choking.

I became aware the shelling had ceased and of Germans calling out to us. I heard them moving debris. They uncovered my table and pulled me out. They rescued Fry, he had been under a door and was suffering from a neck wound.

The SS men were extremely kind and gentle. We did not deserve such treatment. Had the roles been reversed we would have behaved differently.

An SS Sergeant Major congratulated us on the way we had fought and said we had been well trained in street fighting. The Major in charge said he would surrender if we could led him to our tanks. I told him I had no idea where we could find them. I asked what day it was. The Major looked surprised and said it was Thursday. He added that if it was any consolation they (the Germans) had recaptured the Bridge on Wednesday. In answer to my question regarding the German casualties on Sunday all being NCOs, he replied he thought they were all from an officers training unit.

I was given may mugs of hot, sweet coffee with bread, sausage and biscuits. I was thirsty and ravenous. Fry had been put on a stretcher and given a shot of morphia – his own. While the Major, the Sergeant Major and I talked, the SS men continued to search through the rubble. From time to time they recovered bodies, German and British. It was a miracle that Fry and I were alive. After perhaps a couple of hours, my captors said it was time for us to part. They both shook my hand and wished me luck.

With an escort of three and two stretcher bearers carrying Fry, I limped along some streets lined with tanks and SP guns. I started counting, but soon gave up. There were so many. Why O why didn’t the RAF Typhoons shoot up these targets? RAF – Rare As Fairies. We never did see fighters when close ground support was required. On the sides of the streets I saw scores of dead Germans, the bodies were in clusters of five. Ready for collection and easy to count.

The first aid post was swamped with wounded. A German MO examined Fry and said he would be alright. I gave the German my shell and field dressings and my morphia capsules. He said they had no morphia and only paper bandages to dress wounds.

I waited at the first aid post with my escort for transport which was to take me somewhere. I had a massive bruise on my shin and it ached, but it felt very good to be alive.

 **Reflections On The Battle For Arnhem**

Montgomery was right. Urquhart was at fault in his planning and in the way he left his headquarters during the battle. The RAF failed to knock out enemy armor which moved around Arnhem freely during the battle. In general XXX Corps lacked the aggressive fighting spirit which was necessary to effect a link up with 1st Airborne.

In retrospect, the final analysis of Market Garden, particularly at Arnhem, shows it to have been a credit to the Allies, although in its immediate perspective it seemed a dismal failure.

The German High Command, striving for time by efforts on other fronts, hoped to establish on the Maas, the Waal and the Lower Rhine, three successive lines on which to stand and fight. They were in the full throes of preparing to do so when out of the skies, which Goering had once boasted would ever belong to the Luftwaffe, fell a blow with devastating suddenness.

In the space, not of days but of hours, their scheme of defense collapsed. At one bound the British 2nd Army leapt nearly sixty miles towards the German frontier and became deeply ensconced in what the enemy had fondly hoped would be his front throughout the winter.

Before a week had passed, the Allies had secure all the bridges over two of the three rivers and possessed that most valuable of all assets in war, a firm base for future operations.

The German reaction to the airborne attack, though immediate and violent, achieved no more than a limited success. He could claim the recapture of the Arnhem Bridge, the most Northerly and the thrusting back of the 1st Airborne Division with heavy casualties over the Lower Rhine.

This is a fact which must neither be minimized nor exaggerated. The loss of many gallant and highly trained men in an operation of great daring and much hazard, must be set against the gain to the general conduct of the campaign as a whole. That this gain was considerable, no one, not even the enemy who was constrained to praise the conduct of the Division, will deny.

The resolute seizure of the bridge at Arnhem, which was under British control for three days, the stubborn fighting in the town, combined with the maintenance of a defensive position North of the river for nine days, forced the enemy to devote large resources, among them two SS Panzer Divisions, to the task of ejecting the audacious 1st Airborne Division. Had the Germans not been under this necessity , their counter attacks further South against the 82nd and 101st American Airborne Divisions could have been pressed with much greater vigor and might possibly have succeeded, at least for a time.

That they failed must be written largely on the credit side of the ledger when calculating the profit and loss incurred by the operation.

A grievous wound had been inflicted on the enemy. To the British 6th and American 17th Airborne Divisions was reserved the honor of inflicting the mortal wounds on the Germans less than six months later, North of Wesel on the other side of the Rhine. There swift and overwhelming success would scarcely have been possible if the Battle of Arnhem had not been fought.

The overriding cause of the destruction of the 1st Airborne division at Oosterbeck and Arnhem was he failure of XXX Corp to advance to the Rhine and link up with the airborne forces according to its orders.

Arnhem was a land failure and not an airborne defeat. I would not have missed this battle for anything.

January 1986

 **A Tribute To Monty**

Early in July 1943 General Montgomery visited 3rd Parachute Battalion . We were camped in olive groves near Meaken (?) just outside Sousse.

The battalion was formed up in a hollow square and waiting with some curiosity to see our new General. We had heard a lot about him, some good, some bad. He had certainly made himself known. This was all to the good. Our minds were open.

He drove up in a jeep and stopped in the center of the square. He stood up in the back of the jeep and shouted to us to break ranks and close in around the jeep. We did.

He then told us we all had thirty seconds to cough and clear our throats. After that he would expect silence while he spoke. Not a sound was heard. We waited for him to continue. He surprised us by starting off with thanks to us for coming to listen to him and then welcomed us all to the 8th Army. He spoke in flattering terms of our achievements in Tunisia, then went on in general terms to talk about the forthcoming invasion of Sicily and more specifically the part we were to play. He said he would have some beer and cigarettes sent up to us after we captured the Primosole Bridge. He did – the cigarette packets were marked “From the Red Cross”.

He spoke fluently and without notes. He was absolutely brimming over with confidence which was infectious and conveyed to most of his audience. He had a slight tendency to pronounce “r” as “w”. Mannerisms: He would often say “I would say”. He would deliberately repeat words and sentences to give emphasis.

In appearance he was a small, slightly built man with piecing blue eyes.

He was popular with the fighting soldiers, although some made earthy comments about him. He was regarded as a man who knew his job well. We did not think of him as one of Sassoon’s blundering generals.

August 1942, when he took over the 8th Army, was the very worst period of the war. Montgomery’s technique was exactly what was required at that time. He appreciated that people needed heroes. He restored faith in British generals, which sadly Wavell and Auchinleck, though brilliant generals, had failed so to do. He was probably cynical and calculating and knew just how far to go in building up his public image.

In May 1944 I was one of the lucky ones who went to a Grantham cinema to hear Montgomery give a lecture on the forthcoming invasion of Europe. His opening remarks and style of delivery were the same as at Msaken (?) It was a pleasure to hear him talk. He briefed us a fully as possible bearing in mind the need for security. I recall he said we would have Paris by D + 90. We did. He also emphasized that he would dictate the battle. We believed him. I think everyone who heard this lecture came away feeling full of confidence.

 

 **Battle Honors Won By The Parachute Regiment 1942-45**

Bruneval\* Djebel Azzag 1943\*

Normandy Landings Djebel Alliliga\*

Pegasus Bridge El Hadjeba\*

Merville Battery Tamera\*

Breville Djebel Dahra\*

Dives Crossing Kef-el-Debna\*

La Tocques Crossing North Africa 1942-1943\*

Arnhem 1944\* Primosole Bridge\*

Ourthe Sicily 1943 \*

Rhine Taranto\*

Southern France Orsogna

NorthWest Europe 1942,44-45 Italy 1943-1944\*

Soudia\* Athens

Oudna\* Greece 1944-1945

* Earned by the 1st Parachute Brigade

During the Tunisian Campaign the Germans developed a healthy respect for the 1st Parachute Brigade who they called the “Red Devils”. Later this title was adopted by all who wore the maroon beret.

The 1st Parachute Brigade was unique. It died at Arnhem almost three years after its birth. It had crowded quite a bit into its short life and laid a solid reputation for a regiment to build on. The Army saw that it was immediately reformed after Arnhem, but the original Brigade could never be equaled.

 **Epilogue**

The fighting at Arnhem ends but the war is not over. Seven months as a prisoner of war in Germany follow. The facts are bare. A non-Ministry of Defense website records that Corporal Robert Arthur Allen of the 3rd Battalion, Parachute Regiment, Service Number. 2080592 was taken prisoner of war at Arnhem on 20th September 1944.

He was sent to Stalag XIIA, a processing center where POWs were sorted out and documented prior to being sent on to permanent camps. Stalag XIIA was located at Limburg An Der Lahn, in Germany some 140 miles Southeast of Arnhem. It was a relatively short stay. He was logged in on 27 September and out on 7 October 1944.

From Limburg he was dispatched by rail to Stalag IIA located some 314 miles to the Northeast at Neubrandenburg, Mecklenburg in East Prussia. Prisoners were transported in cattle trucks. Some died en route. He was logged in on 12 October 1944 and liberated on 29 April 1945.

Stalag IIA was a huge camp holding some 25,000 Russians mostly captured during Barbarossa in 1941. The majority of the Russians were farmed out to some 40-50 satellite labor camps. Conditions were grim. The food ration was initially one loaf of bread for thirty men. They survived by boiling the leather soles of their boots and killing the dogs the Germans released into the compound at night. Conditions were to ease with the arrival of Red Cross food parcels. According to German records the camp held two hundred British prisoners of war in December 1944.

With Soviet forces advancing from the East, many camps across Germany were evacuated and the prisoners marched Westwards to be finally liberated by advancing British units. The Neubrandenburg camp was liberated by a Soviet armored division on 28 April, 1945 and apparently place immediately under the jurisdiction of the Russian NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs), a fore-runner of the KGB. The Russians uncovered numerous mass graves in the woods surrounding the camp; one held as many as five hundred bodies.

He joined up with the Russian armored division as an interpreter working with a Russian who spoke English but no German. He was with them when he and “Smudger” Smith made a break for the British lines in a jeep. They landed up in a camp where freed POWs were being flown back to England. To his amazement the repatriation was run by German army NCOs. He did not see a single British officer in the short time there. The senior German NCO had a son who was also a paratrooper. The NCO was sympathetic and talked into putting him and “Smudger” aboard an early flight back to England.

According to Muriel, post-war he went to London and appeared before a Board (?) to give evidence about War Crimes. When asked by son Richard many years later he declined to speak about it.

Freedom for the Russian POWs was a mixed blessing with many being executed and most sentenced to long prison terms on their return to Mother Russia. (My note: Vide Nikolai Tolstoy’s Victims of Yalta which describes at great length the fate of returned Russian POWs)

A sharp contrast was noted between the conduct of fighting frontline German troops and those serving at the rear. The latter were decidedly brutal and harsh.

Russian prisoners were treated like animals. German guards would toss bread, over the fence and into their compound and watch with amusement as the Russian prisoners fought over it.

On Christmas 1944, he listened to German guards singing “Stille Nacht” and was moved to tears.

He celebrated his twenty first birthday in Stalag IIA on 4 January 1945. Those sharing his hut presented him with the daily ration of bread – a loaf that he shared with them.

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