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With The 12th Yorks Bn. Parachute Regt.
In Normandy, D. Day Onwards 1944

In 1944 I was stationed at LARK HILL Salisbury Plain, where we did intensive training for the invasion of Europe. I was a Lance Corporal in the Intelligence Section, Headquarters Company of the above Battalion.

At 9.30 pm on the evening of the 5th June 1944 along with 19 of my company I climbed into a 'Stirling' bomber converted for transport work; we took-off and joined hundreds of other aircraft including gliders and headed out, assembling with that massive armada making for France. About 3 hours later we reached the coast of Normandy, not far from Caen, we jumped from about 300 feet and surrounded by heavy anti-aircraft fire with streaks of ~~red~~ reds and yellows, I landed almost off our (D. Z.) dropping-zone, towards the high ground northwards.

Our battalion objective was the small town of RANVILLE about 1 mile from the Orne bridges, ~~however~~ however, at that time, we did not know how ~~far~~ we were scattered far and wide, I joined a few of my comrades and realizing we were far astray, we made straight for our objective, this took us across country, cutting out the battalion rendezvous near the river. As dawn approached and the noise of the seaborne landings increased, the big guns of the Royal Navy opened-up including the 16 inch ones onboard HMS Warspite; the shells zoomed overhead as they headed

for targets inland.

Maewest
life-jacket
jumping
jacket
discarded
on
landing

As well as my parachute I carried - a sten-gun, 58 rounds of ammunition, 2 Mills' hand-grenades, a small radio, damaged on landing and useless, \$-so abandoned, water bottle, water sterilizing tablets, shell & field dressings, (first aid), small pint of morphine, Light rations for 48 hours, mainly dehydrated, tea, milk powder, soups, porridge and of course the biscuits, which would later on be most welcome to keep us going whilst on the march; hidden in my clothing was a silk escape-map & compass.

It was broad daylight by the time we reached the little orchard in Ranville, where our Bn. H.Q. was set-up, we hurriedly somehow dug slit-trenches, not easy in the limestone rocks that abound in Northern France, soon we were attacked and shells & mortar bombs dropped close, fortunately with light casualties only, but I did notice the R.A.P. (regimental aid post) had already been established in a nearby chateau. We could see ~~also~~ Ranville church, very distinctive because of the tower separate from the body of the building. Had we landed in daylight, the church would have been a very obvious landmark.

It was now 12 hours since we had "taken off" in England and at opportune moments we went in twos to suitable places nearby to ('brew-up') make tea, a vital refreshment in stress, and of course everyone we ate some of the rations we carried and smoked - very eagerly too, cigarettes were a "must" also.

Then
everyone
smoked

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On the afternoon of 'D' Day we marched from Ranville north-eastwards for about 2½ miles to a wooded area on the ridge which ran from very near the coast at Franceville Plage southwards for several miles through various villages etc. such as Le Plein, Amfreville, Breville, Le Mesnil, to Troarn on the edge of the Dives Valley. The dominant feature on this ridge was the large wooded area named Bois de Bavent, we took up our positions and, as always, dug ourselves slit-trenches, the Germans soon mortared and shelled our positions. They knew that ^{these} exploding in the trees above & around us would spray shrapnel down on us causing extra casualties, which they did. Soon we were encouraged to build head-covers at one end of our trenches as some protection.

Patrolling was the order of the days and nights, mainly as reconnaissance in case the enemy began to withdraw.

Anyway we gained much experience in ^{rather than} this area, where we could rarely see the short distance across a small orchard or field. Later in that Day I we saw the very welcome arrival on our D.Z. nearby of our 6th Airborne Landing Brigade, much needed reinforcements gliders and some ^{with} parachute supplies, vital for us, who for a few days yet would not receive sea-borne supplies at all.

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The Battle of Breville 12/13 June 1944

The 6th Airborne Division held all of this very important high ground except for the gap at the village of Breville which was still held by the Germans giving them a commanding view of the low ground towards the 2 Orne bridges and beyond. Despite attempts to take this vital position, the enemy held on.

Late in afternoon of the 12th June 1944, General Gale Commander 6th A/B. Division decided that this position must be taken that evening. Included in our attacking force was my battalion the 12 (Yorks) Bn. The Parachute Regt. supported by 3 Sherman Tanks and others, including the 12th Bn. Devon Regt., my battalion sadly under-strength was withdrawn from the so-called rest area near the Orne River and marched about 2½-3 miles to the high ground at Amyreville, next to Breville. As the daylight faded and with little or no knowledge or the usual briefing, we were led into the little church at Amyreville where we sat in virtual silence, waiting and wondering, what next?

Adding to the ^{noise} of firing outside came the increasing explosions of shell-fire from our guns and the enemy mortars bursting on the approaches to Breville. We moved forward towards Breville with B. Coy. our shells were falling thick and fast some causing casualties amongst
(us), a man from my ^{section} fell wounded on the road,

As the shelling and mortaring increased we took some shelter crouching against the low banks beside the road leading to Breville, now suffering the full force of the bombardment. Our casualties increased and a man named Hewitson in my section was wounded quite badly on that road like many others. We were soon crawling across a grassy field on the outskirts of Breville, the evening daylight fading with ~~the~~ the fire from the blazing church in the background. I remember clearly the grotesque sight of the dead body of a cow killed by earlier gunfire lying nearby, its body bloated like a large balloon with legs stretching upwards. Sadly this would be quite a common sight in the countryside of Normandy throughout that summer. Along with a few of B Coy, ^{we} reached the walled orchard, against the wall were the enemy dug-outs and trenches containing the dead bodies of Germans. In the midst of all this was the body of Major Rogers C.O. of B Coy, not a sign of any injury, it seemed he had been killed by blast.

In this battle for Breville we were supported by 3 "Sherman" tanks and were amazed to see one of them leaving the main road we had left and starting to bash down the stone wall into our orchard, oblivious to the fact that a

6/
section of B. Coy. were trying to dig-in on that very spot. We rushed over to them just in time to stop the tank in its tracks as the debris from the demolished ^{wall} was ~~to~~ burying the luckless men of B. Coy. Frantically we managed to free them as they were nearly smothered in the mess. In the meantime the tank-commander reversed his tank and continued in the attack.

Poor Breville church was now a blazing inferno, lighting up the night sky, and added to all this was the eerie noise of the loud sound of what was possibly a note from the church organ, monotonously ~~piercing~~ ^{drawing} everything else. Later on, to our relief the entire roof of the blazing church crashed down, sending sparks and increased flames into the night sky. That loud note had stopped. In awe we all said a "silent prayer of thanks." We "stood to" in our positions all night, expecting the enemy counter-attack which, to our relief did not come. At day-break we found that our total casualties were very heavy but Breville was now ours. Later that day 13 June 1944, we moved out and after much needed rations and rest we returned to our old positions in and around Ranville. There were some of the parachutes left behind in the trees after our D. Day landings. We sorted ourselves out and ~~returned ourselves~~ and returned to that

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and around the Bois de Bavent where
I feel sure those "mossies," mosquitoes
were waiting for their "evening meals," from
our sweetly bodies, our shirts were no
protection, they bit right through them.
Our "medics" bless 'em, did what they
could to relieve the irritation caused
by the bites. The treatment was good
but the resultant violet-colored dye on
the skin was left to wear off in time.
Some bites did turn septic due to the
scratching, it was obvious that the lush
pastures & vegetations were ideal for
breeding such insects, but they were
not malaria carriers, thank heavens!
we spent a long period in and around
the forest, patrolling and probing the enemy
positions, he was expected to be preparing
to pull-back eastwards towards the River
Seine. He had been holding the high ground
ready for the allied advance to Caen and
onwards. About the end of July '44 the
the Germans on the paratrooper front
began to withdraw towards le Havre
and we were re-inforced by some Belgian
troops who pursued the enemy on our left
from ~~the~~ Cabourg ^{along the coast} eastwards. It was a
great relief for us to be on the move
after being static for so long, in that
close country, which was obviously ideal
for defense, now we were marching along
the main road across the River Dives
marshes, finding stubborn German resistance
in many places, very often we moved all day

and ~~the~~ ^{attacked} main objectives at night or early morning. Surprise was important of course. One of the German strong points was an attractive little place on a hill named Putot En Auge. Here the enemy defended stubbornly, and our brigade the 5th Para. Bde. suffered many casualties as we advanced ~~as we~~ ^{and} attacked out of the misty dawn. Unfortunately our section sergeant Arthur Watson was wounded here, not seriously though, but like most of our casualties at this time was taken by jeep back to our Divisional A.D.S. near Ranville. I was a Corporal in the Intelligence Section at this time and so took-over the vacancy. I had been ^{an} N.C.O for some time so had been used to responsibility. I and many other comrades & relatives of the fallen have for many years visited ~~their~~ graves, including those in the little churchyard at Putot-En-Auge which has a special place in our hearts. Well! on we went, mile on mile, we marched, heading towards Pont Leveque. It is worth mentioning here and I don't think it is generally known that Parachute Troops have very little motorised transport of their own, the commanding officers, medical officers and one or two key personnel only had jeeps or small vehicles. At certain times, ~~the~~ larger trucks were borrowed to convey us, usually when speed in attack was ~~essential~~ ^{vital} (VITAL)

On one occasion I remember my company was moved into attack on Sherman tanks and as we scrambled aboard, one poor fellow yelled out in pain as his arm touched the red-hot exhaust pipe. Just one other unpleasant reminder that transport can bring discomfort at times like that. Thankfully though our general training and physical fitness, with special attention given to our legs, for obvious reasons, stood us in good stead. Often, especially at night we had to move across country and some nasty little battles ensued. The enemy were using some very effective delaying tactics, especially in and around Pont l'Evêque which they set on fire, destroying the important bridges there. Enemy shellfire caused us many casualties. The bridges here were destroyed; and as very often enemy caused ~~us~~ many casualties. When he pulled back, he allowed ^{us} sufficient time to move on and reach our next objective, usually an important road junction or small group of buildings, houses etc. Then he would 'lob' over some shells, trying to catch us unawares, but most times we were there with 'under cover' and suffered light casualties only. It is said that "one can get used to anything in time," and I believe we were beginning to do just that, - at that time in Normandy.

At this juncture near Pont Audemer we were given orders to prepare to halt and allow another of our divisions to advance towards the River Seine. Speculation was rife, as always at such times and what a relief when we were told to march back towards the coast and transport would take us to Ostende and there we would board small craft to take us back to the U.K. "Brightly". I well remember our trip back across the Channel, my battalion was on tank-landing craft, I saw what is called a "land-lubber" ^{LUSAZER} and did not enjoy the rolling sea nor the wonderful breakfast that the Royal Navy had so kindly prepared for us. However despite the sea-sickness which many of us suffered on the ~~trip~~ ^{trip} we did reach our "friendly" base at Larkhill safely. An awful lot had happened to us and many of our pals who had left England that fateful day before D. Day 5 June 1944 with us ^{many} were missing, some unfortunately for ever to return, but some would recover and train again with us to take part in that infamous operation the following winter 1944, aptly named the "Battle of the Bulge" or the Ardennes as we came to know it; but that is yet another story, which I hope to tell of later. A very different experience it turned out to be in, very many ways.