



50th (Northumberland) Reconnaissance Regiment

Formed on the 30th April 1941, from the 4th Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers.

it was re-designated the 50th (Northumbrian) [Divisional] Regiment Reconnaissance Corps on 6 June 1942.

The Reconnaissance Regiment for the 50th Infantry Division from its formation to its disbandment.



The 50th was the first Regiment of the Corps to go into action, at the battle of Knightsbridge, North Africa in the summer of 1942 and annihilated in battles in the Gazala Line.

After this battle, the remnants of the Regiment were transferred back to the 4th R.N.F.

ADD INFORMATION AND PHOTOS AS THEY BECOME AVAILABLE.....



Image courtesy of the IWM F_003222

Description: A troop of Daimler scout cars of the 50th Northumbrian Division pass through Fontaine-Bonneleau, France.
Early 1940



My Bit in WW2 – The Reconnaissance Corps and D-Day

An Account Kindly provided by Don Aiken: born 6 June 1925

April 15th.

Having just turned 18 I was called up for the Army and reported to the Green Howards Barracks in Richmond (Yorkshire).

From there I was sent to begin Primary Training in Catterick Training Camp; near Richmond.

Almost all the recruits were of my age and some were even more raw than myself. On the first day we were given strict instructions to appear on parade, clean shaven, the next morning. No account was made to the fact that some young men had had little or no experience of shaving before and to the use of new army razors, cold water and semi-darkness. The result of this, next morning, was pitiful to see; especially with one young lad whose whole face was a bleeding, raw, mess.

The training consisted mainly of squad drill, marching up and down and learning how to handle a rifle. We were also given some target practice using small-bore .22 rifles. Some interest in this was created by an organised competition into which we all donated a small sum of money. One member of our squad was a gypsy who had finally been located in his encampment and called to arms. He proved to be a wonderful marksman and easily won the final of the competition; being then presented with the prize money. He promptly disappeared and was never seen by us again.

After 6 weeks Preliminary training, I was posted to 63 Reconnaissance Training Unit in Scarborough on 27th May 1943. We were housed in several totally empty (bare boards - no furniture) hotels near the sea front, and trained by a motley selection of instructors (Officers & NCOs) from a multitude of different Infantry regiments.

Each one was trying to prove that his Regiment was the best by being the biggest b of them all. There were so many 'Quarters' to guard and so many extra duties to do, because of the splintered nature of the unit, that life was almost an endless roundabout of training, guard duties and fatigues. As if that wasn't enough of a test, for green young lads, the physical training was extremely arduous. It typically would consist of, on reveille, a 6 mile run or else a charge into the sea. In the afternoon there would be a 2 hour session of Physical Training (usually culminating in another cross country run). As I was never any good at long distance running, and as the final few to return from a run were charged with 'malingering', and as the automatic sentence was extra physical training,; it became something of a nightmare.

Indeed what seemed to be the last straw was imposed on us at varying intervals, a real nightmare - Night route marches! Starting around 11 p.m. we would be marched off, in full 'field service marching order' to 10 mile route marches. These had the effect, largely due to the unyielding nature of new army boots, of creating huge blisters on large areas of both my feet and I was compelled to report to the Medical Officer for treatment.

The M.O. was an 'old sweat' of a Major who sported a curly black moustache. I was marched in front him and he asked what was wrong with me. His response to my complaint was - " You know what's the best treatment for blisters lad ? Bloody well walk on 'em!" So that's what I did.

Thankfully, after a few weeks of this, we were sent on home leave; which gave me chance to recover, under the concerned ministrations of my Mum; and shortly afterwards, on 12th August 1943, the unit was broken up and we were sent to the new No. 1 Reconnaissance Training Centre which consisted of an amalgamation of the other ex training unit from Scotland and ourselves.

This was situated in a large Camp in Catterick, near to where I had done my Primary training. Catterick had the reputation of being sheer Hell, as you might expect. But after our experiences in Scarborough I found it to be comparatively cushy. Apart from the occasional guard duty, the odd fatigue, and the unavoidable occasional 'Jankers', there was much more opportunity to enjoy the camaraderie of army life.

The training here was much more inclined to teaching, rather than physical punishment and, although general training as an all-round soldier still continued, my training as a 'Driver / Radio Operator' reached it's successful conclusion.

1944 January 6th



From Catterick I was posted to the 61st Reconnaissance Regt. who were encamped in Shornecliffe Camp, near Folkestone.

They had been doing duty in Northern Ireland for the previous part of the war, but had now been split from their Division (the 61st Infantry Div.) to become the Reconnaissance Regt for the 50th Infantry Division.

The 50th (Northumberland) Division was recently returned from North Africa and were renowned as 'The Desert Rats'. The sign (or flash) which was worn on the side of the shoulder was TT, which represented Tyne and Tees.

As my new regiment had been left undisturbed for a very unusual length of time, the troops had become very accustomed to each other and had grown into a close, even clannish, relationship.

This made it very difficult for newcomers to be an accepted part of their lives, especially if the interloper was a young 'new recruit'.

Although I was accepted quite readily as a member of the Troop to which I was assigned, and was never given any sort of hard time, it seemed a long time before I too became part of the clan.

We didn't stay in any location for very long. Just a few weeks at a time before we moved on from one Nissen hutted camp to another. Whittlesford, near Cambridge, and Brandon, Norfolk, came next.

1944 May

Finally we moved to a tented camp, in 'Nightingale Wood', close to a small village named Romsey, about 10 miles from Southampton.

It soon became obvious that everything was being assembled and prepared for the invasion of Europe; the long awaited Second Front.

All around us were similar camps containing troops of all persuasions. British, American, Canadian and smaller units of many other nations were all crowded into encampments that seemed to be everywhere in the fields and woods around the borders of the New Forest.

A news blackout was enforced on everyone and all leave was stopped. All mail was strictly censored.

I had received news from my brother Arthur that he had been stationed just on the outskirts of Southampton - his section of the Corps of Signals was engaged in running telephone lines between all the multitude of units which were moving in.

We both managed to get a few hours of compassionate leave, and we met in Southampton one afternoon. He took me back up to his section quarters where we had a cup of tea and a chat before we bade each other farewell.



After a few weeks of the total monotony of being incarcerated in the frugal surroundings of a tented camp, which had only briefly been relieved by separate 'pep-talk' visits by the King and Field Marshal Montgomery, and by the occasional false alarm; it was good news to be told that "This is it!"

June 1944 (my Army Records say "Embarked Southampton - LST- June 1st. 1944")

We packed up our gear and loaded up the armoured cars, and other means of transport, and rolled out of the camp. We snaked along down country roads which were lined on either side by other army vehicles waiting for their turn to move out.

Eventually we arrived in Southampton and I was surprised to see how many of the local people seemed to realise that this was for real, which was evidenced by the unusually warm waves we were given. The embarkation organisation was wonderfully efficient, and it didn't take very long for us to be installed on a U.S.A. Landing Ship Tank (LST).

The assault units of the invasion Army were in fact only at half their normal strength - the troops that were to land on 'D' Day were now being loaded, and the 'build-up' of the remainder would take place as soon as possible after the invasion. It was anticipated to be completed about 6 days afterwards. - In fact it took about 16 days because of the inclement weather that followed 'D' Day.

The entire docking facility as far as the eye could see was jam-packed with shipping of all shapes and sizes, and as most of them sported their own anti-aircraft barrage balloon, I foolishly felt a kind of festive air about it all.

We bedded down wherever we could find a convenient spot, our Troop elected for the open deck (we had been issued on board with a personal burial bag which helped to keep us warm) , and our ship slipped out of harbour to make way for more boats to load up. We threaded our way past the Needles rocks which skirt the western side of the Isle of Wight and headed out into the English Channel.

The LST which we had been assigned had, we were told, been on several previous landings at various stages of its history; and as a consequence the bottom of the ship was deemed to be too thin to attempt another crash landing. The plan was to drop anchor about half a mile from the shore and then transfer the vehicles onto flat decked ferry type rafts, called Rhinos, which would deliver us into the shallow waters.

Two of these Rhinos were being taken over with us, one being towed astern and the other being lashed alongside. The one being towed was manned by two Army Engineers.

The one alongside seemed to be intent on crashing its way through the side of the ship as we rolled about in the choppy seas.

'D' Day

6th. June 1944

When dawn broke we were met by the unforgettable sight of hundreds of ships spread out as far as the eye could see. All plodding on in the same direction, towards the Normandy coast. All of them, except for the few large supply ships, were pitching and rolling to an alarming degree. Many of our men were somewhat sea-sick but luckily I have a strong stomach for such things and wasn't troubled by it.

Halfway across the channel we were astonished to see the towed Rhino suddenly become untowed! The line with which it had been attached had somehow parted, and away it went.

Our ship never slackened itspace and we watched as the Rhino disappeared into the distance.

I don't know what its fate was - or whether its crew were pleased or sorry.

We arrived off the shore of Normandy in the late morning. 'Gold' Beach near the village of Arromanches, which was our first destination, had already been captured by the assault troops of the Hampshire Regiment, and it was now possible for vehicles to be disembarked on to the beach and directed to designated areas for the purpose of de-waterproofing the vehicles and preparing to advance into the bridgehead.

The LST dropped anchor and the remaining Rhino was untied from the side of the ship and made its way round the bows, ready to be attached to the gangway which projected forwards when the bow doors opened.



It was then discovered that the coupling gear had been smashed and this sparked off a frenzied burst of activity to try to tie the units together with ropes. However, ropes are flexible by necessity, and the choppy seas made it almost impossible to hold both units in line; but with the aid of a couple of small motor-boats, pushing away like tug boats, they became near enough to go for it and our Troop made the transfer across. Soon we were running in to the beach and the Rhino bottomed out.

The light armoured car (Recce Car) in which I was a crew member was the first to drive off, and in my elevated position in the turret I felt like a submarine commander, especially when we suddenly dropped into a bomb hole which was concealed beneath the water and only the turret was left exposed.

The Beach Party had been well trained for this situation and had the de-waterproofing area completely organised and running smoothly. Although I almost threw a spanner in the works!

My armoured car had been fitted with a device, which I had contrived, to allow me to operate the smoke canister gun without having to lean outside the turret. Basically, it was a bike brake mechanism which was attached at one end to the gun and, at the other end, the brake grip was attached to my seat support.

Whilst the driver was removing the waterproofing from the engine, the Officer went to a quick 'O' Group (Officers briefing) and the radio-operators tuned in their radio transmitters to the H.Q. transmitter.

This was quite a delicate operation and it was at its finest point when my elbow touched against the trigger. Bang! went the smoke discharger - and as I quickly bobbed my head out I could see the smoke bomb heading straight into the middle of a wired off field, with dozens of painted notices showing the sign of a skull and cross-bones and the words "Achtung Minen". Which didn't take a genius to recognize that my bomb was landing in a German mine-field, and the mines were too close for comfort.

I ducked down inside my turret and held my breath.....

Nothing - oh good! Then Bang! Bang! Bang! I realised it was someone banging on the turret. When I popped my head back out I was confronted with the angry face of the Beach Officer - a Major - whose features reminded me strongly of the Medical Officer with whom I had been acquainted in Scarborough; complete with black curly moustache, but perhaps even stronger on the language!

Soon the various sections of our Regiment were ready to move off to try to reach their pre-arranged target locations. Ours was a wooded hill about 15 miles inland, and our role was to 'seize and hold' it, until the main body of troops could relieve us. It was soon quite obvious that, because of our delayed landing, there was no possibility of us reaching our target that day.

As we drove off the beach, through a pathway made through the minefield and on to a narrow road which ran in a southerly direction, a huge anti-aircraft barrage opened up from the multitude of ships which lay offshore.

As the barrage drew nearer I spotted a German plane flying very fast and very low as it fled southwards directly over our heads. I quickly joined the fading barrage and emptied my Bren gun magazine in the direction of the speeding 'hornet' as it disappeared out of sight. Despite my effort being in vain I felt great satisfaction in at last being able to throw things back at the Germans.

I remember nothing about our advance during the remainder of the day, only that we eventually had to give way to the coming of the night.

My only memories of that first night were that we had to remain standing in the pitch blackness, not daring to make a sound as we had no idea of how close we were to the Germans. We were fortified by a tiny drop of rum, which barely covered the bottom of our tin mugs, and a 'keep awake pill'. Nothing happened all night but we were all relieved when dawn broke and we were able to start off again.

We made some progress on the following day, passing through Bayeux which had already been liberated by our infantry. The German opposition was stronger than we had anticipated but we advanced some distance towards Villers Bocage before we were eventually given the order to 'harbour' down for the night and we drove into a tree-lined field, concealing the vehicles around the perimeter.



I had no idea what our position was, and what the situation was around us. We got news that our Colonel, a typical Cavalry Officer, had been riding in a Bren-carrier (a small tracked vehicle with no turret). He had been standing up, in a 'tally-ho!' type of manner, when a German sniper, who was concealed in the ditch alongside the road, shot him up the bum. We never saw or heard of him again.

We laid out the large waterproof cover from a Bren-carrier and a couple of Troops bedded down underneath it. I assume that every-one else did the same. Sentries were posted at various intervals, armed with Bren machine guns. A foot patrol consisting of Sergeant Robert Black (a Scotsman), a Corporal and 5 men was sent out to reconnoitre the surrounding area.

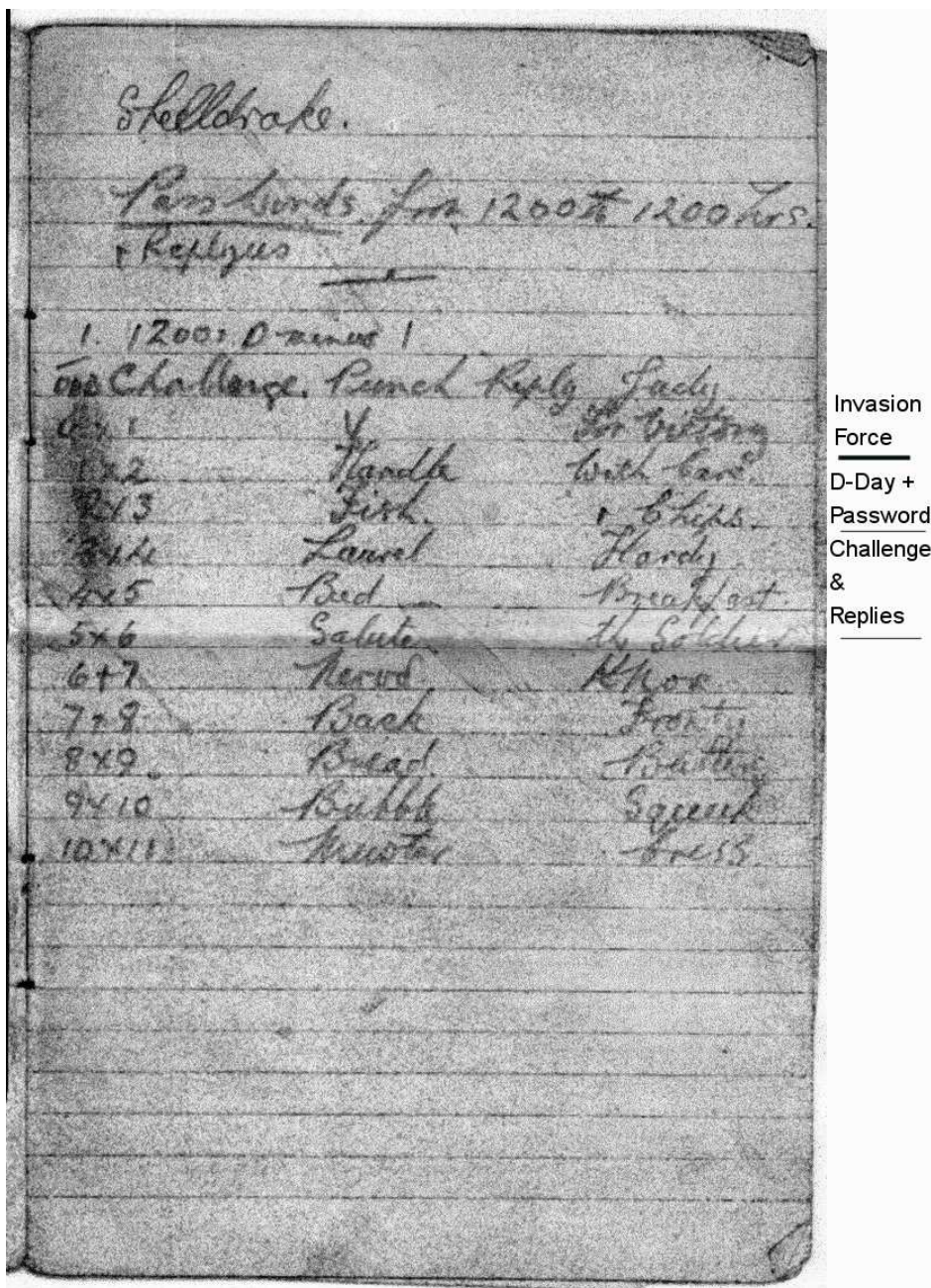
We were jolted awake in the pitch black of the night by the sharp rattle of a nearby Bren gun and loud, frantic shouting. Everyone grabbed their weapons and made for the commotion. What had occurred was this:

Whilst we were on board the LST we had been given a Password with which to challenge anyone in the expected confusion of the situation. The Password was 'Handle' and the Response was 'With Care'.

This seemed quite sensible although we had never used such a method before. The sentry who had been posted near to us was a Yorkshireman from Leeds, and not too gifted in the I.Q. factor. He had been sat behind his gun, on his own, in the dead blackness, scared stiff (as we would all have been) when he heard the stealthy scuffling noise of someone creeping up.

Panic must have set in because, instead of the password, he shouted out the normal challenge of 'Who goes there!' This threw the approaching Glaswegian Sergeant of our recce patrol (now returning to us) right off his stride.

He responded the best way he could - "Onnle wi' kearr! Onnle wi' kearr"! he shouted in his broad Scotch. The guttural accent uttering this strange sounding cry must have sounded like Adolf Hitler himself to the panic stricken sentry, so his fingers jerked at the trigger - killing the Sergeant and wounding the Corporal in the foot.



Invasion
 Force
 D-Day +
 Passwords
 Challenges
 &
 Replies

The following days were almost as chaotic as we tried to tie everything up together. We seemed to be tearing around the countryside without much particular purpose; although I suppose it all had some plan behind it. We were making forward patrols along country roads which were lined with trees, hedges, ditches, or raised banks; all of which were ideal cover for the enemy guns.

Every now and again we would make some contact with the enemy and a skirmish would ensue. Then there would be a push forward, with our troops moving through the cornfields amongst which I remember the sight of dozens of our Self-propelled 25 pounder guns blazing away to soften up an unseen enemy.



Establishing a foothold in Normandy

7th June - Break out to Tessel Bretville.

9th June - Recce Jerusalem

10th June – Tilly-sur-Seulles

13th June - Villers Bocage

One event still comes back to me. We were ‘harbouring’ in a large field which belonged to a typical large chateau. Our armoured cars had occupied dug-out emplacements which had previously been occupied by German tanks. Most of the cattle in the pasture had been killed and the accustomed stench of dead animals pervaded the air. Adjoining the field was a large wooded area in which was positioned a heavy artillery battery which had been engaged in shelling enemy positions for a considerable time. Suddenly I heard the rumbling drone of a German heavy bomber which was seeking out the artillery position and immediately dropped a bomb very close to our vicinity. Taking cover, along with my companion, I dived under the armoured car and waited there until the bomber had dropped all its bombs and the sound of its engine died away in the distance.

As we crawled out from under our cover I felt a trickle running down my knee. Clutching at my ominously sticky pants I said to the other Trooper; “ I think I’ve been hit!”. We both closely investigated the area of the ‘wound’ until - the smell hit us – I had dived into a cow-pat.

15th June

We continued to probe along the byways making contact with the enemy and reporting to base.

On the morning of 15th June, when my car had been leading the patrol along a particularly nasty stretch of road for a long stretch of time, it was decided to pass the job over to a Bren-Carrier Troop.

We pulled in to the side of the road to let them pass through us. The leading Carrier had gone less than a hundred yards when, as I understood at the time, it blew up on a land-mine. Now, 60 years after the event, I am informed by our Troop Sergeant Charlie Wells that in fact the explosion was due to a string of our own mines, being carried in the Carrier, exploding accidentally when a German prisoner lost his balance and fell onto them. All the crew and the prisoner were killed.

We then diverted onto another road which led up to a cross roads near Lingevres, where there had been a tank battle during the previous day. As we moved cautiously along this narrow country road, sensing danger, we came across a knocked out tank which was blocking our path. Charlie Wells decided to scout on foot along the ditch, with the commander of my car Corporal Sam Benson.

They had crept along for a hundred yards or so when they ran into a machine-gun ambush hidden behind the hedgerow. After a short exchange of fire Sam Benson was badly wounded, his stomach having been ripped open by a stream of machine gun bullets.

We decided to pull back out of the situation, and I gave covering fire from my Bren gun while Sam was brought out and carried back to safety on the front of a Bren carrier.



READING MAN'S BROADCAST

Running Commentary on Cross-Roads Battle By a Military Observer

"There's the swine, Harry—
go it, boy!"

"Give it 'em, chum—give
it 'em!"

"Look out! There they
go!"

Men in a unit operating in Normandy with the 50th (Northumbrian) Division, listened intently as through their receivers flashed a sudden running commentary on a cross-roads battle ahead.

For forgetting that the wireless in his armoured car had been left tuned into the entire squadron, Sgt. Charles Wells (25), of 125, Wolseley Street, Reading, broadcast as he and his crew fought and shot up a German machine-gun nest.

The action really started when, unable to proceed any further in their armoured car, Sgt. Wells and a corporal got out and went forward to "recce" a cross-roads 400 yards ahead.

"We entered a field and crawled up the hedgerow," said the sergeant. "In front of us, just before reaching the cross-roads, was a small mound. We ~~had~~ raised ourselves to look over the top, and at that moment two Jerries did the same on the other side. I don't know who were the more surprised.

"The trouble was the Jerries had a machine-gun handy, and a split second later it was in action. We had to get back—and get back quick.

"I got back to the car, reported by wireless to headquarters—then we got cracking on the Jerries.

"Unfortunately for us they were screened by two wrecked tanks on the roadway, both tanks right in our line of fire. In order to get a clear view we backed into a farmyard. I shouted to the corporal to keep down—and our gunner blasted the machine-gun post out of the picture.

"The boys tell me they liked my broadcast," added Sgt. Wells, grinning. "They'd heard words they don't hear on the B.B.C.!"

With the sergeant in the armoured car were the driver, Trooper R. Musto, of Conderton, near Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire, and the gunner, Trooper H. Warner, of 42, Raynham Avenue, Upper Edmonton, London.

Sgt. Wells, who is 25, has been in the Army since the outbreak of war. Before that he was a printer in the C.W.S. printing

As my armoured car now had no commander, I was sent back to Squadron H.Q. and given the job of 'shotgun' on the 3 ton truck which was used to bring ammunition from the dump near the invasion beach.



Infantry Recce Corps
The Daimler Fighting Vehicles Project – Part D7f
www.daimler-fighting-vehicles.co.uk



20th June

On 20th June we set off on our first journey. The truck was driven by a Trooper Docherty and the passenger seat was occupied by a Corporal.

I was sat in the back of the soft-topped lorry; armed with a rifle. We picked up our full load of ammunition without problem, the other members of the crew being obviously used to the procedure, and we set off to return to our H.Q. Now I was sat on 3 tons of ammunition.

It wasn't long however before I realised that our Corporal had lost his way, as we did a couple of reverses in cul de sacs etc.. Then the surroundings began to change from rural roads to rubble streets, and we did the sharpest reverse of all when we found ourselves in the middle of a street fighting scene, which was no place for a lorry-load of ammo.

We had arrived in the besieged town of Caen - a long way off our course. Eventually we recovered our direction and as we bowled along through a little village I suddenly heard a loud bang and our truck came to a sudden halt.

A detachment of infantry was positioned in the village, and there were loud shouts and frantic gesticulations in my direction. I hesitated, not knowing what could be wrong. I didn't hesitate for a second longer however when my Corporal appeared, running rapidly past me and wildly waving for me to follow. After we had sorted ourselves out, and the Corporal had told me what he knew, we went back to our truck to arrange the next move.

What had happened was this: A lone German fighter plane had spotted us making our way down the road, had turned round facing towards us and fired off a single cannon or rocket. This had hit the truck immediately in front of the driver and had blown a hole in his middle, killing him instantly. The ammunition, with me atop, had been separated from the driver by a thin wooden partition.

I was then returned to my Squadron, as a new Corporal had been found to command my armoured car. He was a Welshman named Evans, a reticent type, who never became very friendly or communicative.

The next few days continued to be quite eventful, although I have forgotten most of the detail and the sequential order of events. Some of the village names still spring to mind; although they lack any substance. - Tilly, Hottot, Caumont, Grainville (Crauville?).

The forward movement of the invading troops all along the front gradually ground to a halt as German resistance increased and the planned occupation of Caen was thwarted again and again.

The front line became almost static as both sides dug in to take up defensive positions.

16th July - Hottot les Bagues & Evrecy

17th July Livry (Briquessard)

Our Regiment was detailed to defend a very long, narrow wood, named Le Bois de Briquesard.

We took over at night-time from an American Regiment and took up positions in fox-holes and ditches on the leading edge of the wood, facing across a field to a hedgerow which was occupied by the enemy.

Our Assault Troop sent out foot patrols at night, but there were very few incidents arising from them. The main problem was that we were a good target for the German Nebelwerfers (this multi-barrelled launcher fired mortars whose bombs made a horrible wailing, or howling sound as they made their way through the air before exploding with a loud crunch somewhere in the wood).

Our Regimental Field H.Q. had been set up in the middle of the wood. This received a direct hit one night and quite a number of casualties ensued.

After a week or two in this position we were relieved by an Infantry Regt.



Apparently Lieut. General Horrocks, the Commander of XXX Corps, had noticed that we had been placed in this defensive position and ordered that we be withdrawn. He was a very experienced General, who knew how important it was to prevent his future spear-head troops from developing a defensive attitude to the war.

We were then used on small Reconnaissance foot patrols; and during one of these night patrols we were sent to try to make contact with the Germans who were thought to have infiltrated into the grounds of the nearby churchyard. The night turned out to be extremely misty and crawling through the gravestones was, in itself, a creepy business. The thought that, at any moment, a German machine gun could rattle away into your face was even more disturbing.

However, we completed our search of the area without contacting any Germans, although we found a dugout which they had recently vacated. You could always tell where Germans had been by the smell; it wasn't a repulsive smell, just strongly different - probably due to the food that they ate; German sausage perhaps.

Then we pulled back to take up defensive positions. Along with another young Trooper, I was positioned in an old German slit-trench in a hedgerow alongside a path, armed with a Bren machine-gun. We alternately manned the gun and rested.

During my rest period I was suddenly 'brought up sharp' by a burst of fire from my companion's gun. When I asked him what was wrong, he said that he had seen something move across the path. I looked for a long time (trying to suppress my fear) and then realised that the 'something' was a twig on the hedge, a few inches away, which had been disturbed by a sudden breeze in this otherwise still, dark and misty night.

30th July – Caumont

August

There then began a gradual crumbling in the German defences as more and more pressure was exerted.

3rd August

We began probing again and one day as we approached the small town of Villers Bocage, on a broad front, we drew to a halt as we approached an obvious ambush point between the hedge-rows. This was a sharp bend in the road which was dominated by a farmhouse facing straight up the road. At this moment the Assault Troop, which had been making its way through the fields and hedgerows on our right, came under fire from German infantry and sustained some casualties.

My car was leading the patrol on the road, and every nerve was tensed for any eventuality. I was astounded when a small wicket gate, in a garden wall at the side of the house, suddenly opened and six big German SS troops emerged and ran across the front of the house.

It was exactly like a shooting gallery at the Fairground with the ducks bobbing along from one side to the other. However, I didn't get a prize off the top shelf because I couldn't turn my turret fast enough, and my bullets merely splattered the brickwork behind them before they disappeared round the corner.

We sat there on the road, about 50 yards in front of the house, for about an hour. My light-armoured car was in the lead, and the Troop officer's armoured car was sat about 20 yards further back. I don't know to this day what we hoped to gain by standing there, but I felt terribly exposed in my open fronted, open topped turret, with the enemy lying in wait ahead.

The feeling was later justified as a phosphorus grenade landed on the road a few feet to the left of my car, spitting and fizzling spitefully as it lay there. As it happened the unit of SS troops up ahead must have been merely an outpost, without any heavy weapons, or we would otherwise have paid dearly for such senseless tactics.



11th August

On the 11th August we moved into an apple orchard close to a cross-roads, at Aunay-sur-Odon, which was under shell-fire.

The Troop H.Q. armoured car had positioned itself in the corner of the orchard and they had dug a trench underneath it, filling in the gap below the car with a sheet of corrugated iron that they had found. The driver, down in the slit trench, had then begun to brew up tea for the troop. We were given the signal that it was ready and I climbed out and crossed over towards the H.Q. car, along with a lad from another car, when suddenly a German shell fell short of its target and made a direct hit on the corrugated iron sheet. The blast blew us both underneath another car and we lay there with hearts in our mouths.

Then I said, 'I'm going to dash for it, and as I stood up and took a couple of steps I heard another shell whistling its way towards us. The next thing that I remember is being re-seated in the turret of my car.

A member of another crew, who had been watching through his periscope, swore that I had leapt from the ground, straight into the top of the turret (a height of almost 6 ft.) without touching the sides!

The tragedy was that Henry Ansell, a popular young man, had caught the full blast of the explosion which had blown the corrugated iron into large pieces which had torn him apart. Corporal Mulchay lost an arm and Trooper Alan Penn was wounded in the head.

1st August - Return to Villers Bocage

From the Breakout to the Rhine

1944 August 18th

Then the beginnings of the break-out began, and we moved forward to take up our position.

We advanced from there to Mt. Picon. - not a mountain, but a high rising area of land with a Spot Height of 365. Here I remember seeing a Military Policeman stood on a road junction steadfastly directing the advancing convoys of Army vehicles, enveloped in clouds of red dust, and under constant bombardment from enemy shells.

It was here too that we were paused for a few hours, and on investigating the familiar smell of death nearby, we found a German soldier lying in a covered slit trench. His face was a huge ball of maggots. We managed to get hold of some chloride of lime and scattered this all over him. I still remember the disgusting sight of the maggots flowing from his face like a living stream.

22nd August - Falaise

25th August - Vernon & Seine crossing

30th August - Beauvais

1st September - Arras

3rd September - Tournai

4th September - Lille

September 1944

The American Army had now fully broken out of their less defended sector of the front, almost all the German tank forces having been thrown against the pivot point of Caen. This allowed them to partly encircle the German army from the South and a simultaneous pincer movement by our troops from the North entrapped thousands of enemy troops who were trying to flee through the only gap left at a village called Falaise.

This now became a killing field, with all the Allied gun-fire and the concentrated attacks by our rocket-firing dive-bombers (Typhoons) being rained down on the fleeing Germans. Thousands of the enemy were killed and, as we passed through the devastated area in pursuit of those who had managed to escape, I remember seeing bodies piled on top of bodies to a height of several feet.



The Free French Armoured Division was ordered to advance on Paris, and we moved on to the Seine, in the vicinity of Vernon., and there we indulged in the luxury of a short bathe in the river.

Now the advance was in full flow. Our Regiment was put in as the spear-head of the advance which we did at rate of 60 miles in one day, and passing through towns whose names had been made familiar to me from stories of the First World War, which took place here thirty years earlier. Amiens, the Somme, Cambrai, Arras, Lille and Armentieres. Places which had been fought over for months, even years. We passed them by in a few days.

We were the first troops to cross the border into Belgium and at that point we were relieved by the Guards Armoured Division who passed through us and took up the spear-head.

We were then used to protect the Northern flank of the narrow corridor which was being made through Belgium, and to prevent the escape of the remnants of the 9th. German Army which had been cut off between the corridor and the Northern coast.

5th September - Berchem

6th September - Ghent/Courtrai

7th September - Gheel (cross Albert Canal)

11th September - Burg Leopold (cross Meuse/ Escault Canal)

We were positioned thinly along all the bridges which crossed the Escault Canal. At each bridge was positioned, typically, one Anti-tank gun, a section of Assault troops and one Armoured car. Although the actual coverage probably differed from bridge to bridge.

As night fell we heard the noise of gun-fire at the next bridge further down the canal, and stood ready for action when the fire had abated. It wasn't very long before we heard the noise of approaching German tanks and other vehicles. The first vehicles moved towards the bridge and we opened fire with all we had. The vehicles withdrew away from the canal and we didn't hear from them again.

We later learned that the gun-fire that we had heard from the next bridge had a little story-line to it.

It is the practice of Anti-tank gun-crews to remove part of the firing mechanism of their gun and conceal it, when they are not on stand-to, so that in the eventuality of being infiltrated by surprise, the enemy would be unable to use the gun.

This had been the case here, when suddenly they had been awakened by the look-out who had heard the approaching Germans. But they couldn't remember where the part had been hidden! Panic set in. They searched high and low - but without success. All the time the Germans were getting nearer. A very strong force, consisting of several tanks, armoured cars and field guns.

Soon the leading tank was rumbling onto the bridge. Found it! Shaking fingers put the mechanism together; nervous hands adjusted the sights. Then, when the tank was already in the centre of the bridge, - Bang! Bulls-eye!

After a heavy exchange of fire, the Germans took some losses because of the hidden positions of the defending guns, and there was a lull in the fighting. Then a German officer appeared carrying a white flag. The Officer in charge of the bridge defenders met him on the bridge, where it was agreed for the Germans to remove their dead and wounded on condition that they moved back and didn't return. A funny episode which couldn't have worked out better if it had all been planned.

17th September - Advance on left flank of 30 Corps to Mol and Valkenswaard

18th September - Hasselt and Eindhoven (link up with US 101st Airborne)

19th September - Grave (link up with US 82nd Airborne)

20th September - Cross Nijmegen Bridge over the River Waal

22nd September - Elst

24th September - South bank of Rhine (west of Arnhem)

Until 17th October - Continuous patrols on "Island" (between Arnhem & Nijmegen)



September 1944

It had been decided to strike up through Holland on a narrow front in an attempt to seize a corridor which would reach over the Rhine and into Germany; opening up the way to Berlin.

Airborne Troops were dropped on a line up through Holland with the objective of capturing all the bridges on the line of advance.

XXX Corps would quickly create the corridor and take over from the airborne troops. The first line of smaller bridges was to be captured by the US Airborne; and the last one (at Arnhem) was to be taken by the British Airborne Troops.

Initially everything went quite well. The advance progressed rapidly; and it was during this time, whilst we were moving up behind the Guards Armoured Division, and in a period when our advance had been cut off by a German attack, that Monty stopped his staff-car, had a few words with us and handed out some packets of fags. Very welcome !

In a few days XXX Corps had arrived at Nijmegen and captured the large bridge over the Waal. When we arrived at Nijmegen the battle for Arnhem, a few miles up the road, was taking place. This was doomed to failure, as history knows, and I won't add to it here.

The result was that the whole advance bogged down and, with the approaching winter, conditions would soon be unfit to make a further assault to cross the Rhine. We took up various defensive positions along the perimeter of our territory and a few minor successes were achieved up and down the line but it became obvious that we weren't going anywhere for a while. At this point it was decided to consolidate and regroup.

Part of this regrouping meant that 50th. Division, which had been badly reduced in strength, would be disbanded and broken up to make up losses in other Divisions.

17th October - Venray

18th October - Aachen

20th October - Iseghem, Belgium (withdrawal to disband)

December 1944

With this in mind we, **61st. Reconnaissance Regt.**, were sent back to a small town called Iseghem (Izegem), which is situated in Belgium, close to the French border. We were billeted in various houses, cafés and so on, and our H.Q. and cook-house was situated in the railway goods yard. All our vehicles and equipment were taken to a dump somewhere on the road to Antwerp.

We had a few days of wonderful bliss. Nothing to do but have a few drinks in the cafés and idle our time away.

We hadn't reckoned on the Germans. They had realised that the defensive strength of the US Army in the Belgian Ardennes forest was not good, with only 4 Divisions holding a front of 80 miles long.

16th December - Reform and move to Namur

17th December - Dinant

21st December - Hotton & St Hubert

Hitler himself had ordered 3 Armies, totalling twenty-one Divisions (although well below strength), to be assembled in Germany ready for a huge counter-attack.

This began on December 16th., meeting with great initial success and the American defence lines were cut to ribbons.

The situation was becoming very serious, as the whole 'sharp-end' of the Allied forces were in danger of being isolated. The British forces directed a push down from the north onto the advancing Germans.

We were given 24 hours to reclaim our vehicles and equipment and move out to the Ardennes. This we did and arrived at Namur a few days before Christmas, and were immediately given the task of contacting a forward unit of US Engineers who had been instructed to blow a bridge over a small river whenever they sighted the German advance. The orders had now been changed to 'blow up the bridge regardless', but radio contact with the Engineers had been lost.



We set off on our mission and we were shocked to see convoys of US troops retreating in total panic. They threw us some fags and shouted that we were going the wrong way.

We approached our destination, and turned a corner to see that the road ran down into a steep valley, with a similar road running round and down the cliffs on the other side. At that moment we heard a loud explosion and knew that the bridge had been blown. We continued for a short way down the road before spotting the US Engineers running up behind the hedgerow and waited for them to arrive.

It was then that I observed a German tank on the road across the valley and, almost immediately, a puff of smoke from his 88 mm. gun. There was a whoosh as the shell screamed over my head and took a lump out of the road and part of the tyre from the armoured car which stood a few yards behind me. Within a few seconds our armoured car had disappeared up the road and round the corner, in reverse.

27th December - Celles
30th December - Houffalize
31st December – Rochefort

Christmas Day saw the peak of the German advance, and I remember that on that day on returning to base, after a bitter cold day of patrolling through the snowy forests, we were all handed a Christmas celebratory bottle of beer. When I opened my bottle and tried to drink from it - nothing came out - the beer was frozen solid! The only solution was to break the bottle and lick the beer like an iced-lolly.

We spent the next few days in patrolling the hills and woods of the Ardennes, amongst the thick snow and ice which often made the forest trees look like fairyland.

In the end the German offensive failed to break through the defences and ground to a halt.

January 1945

7th January - Laroche
11th January - Ourthe
22nd January - St Joost (nr. Sittard)
25th January - Return to Iseghem and disband

It was now clear that the bold gamble had failed. The German losses had been very heavy and probably ended any possibility of Germany continuing to defy defeat. His last defensive barrier was the River Rhine, and that was going to be the next target.

Meanwhile we were returned to Iseghem, in Belgium, to continue our little rest and to be notified of our new postings.

1945 February 6th.

I had been posted to the **52nd Reconnaissance Regt.** which was the Recce for 52nd Lowland Scottish Division. We were given the 'MOUNTAIN' shoulder flash to sew on our tunics, along with the St. Andrew's Shield.

They were a Division which had been stationed in Scotland for a long time, training for mountain combat in preparation for a possible invasion of Norway. However their first slice of action came when they left England about 2 months after 'D' Day to capture some islands off the Dutch coast. There probably wasn't a mountain for a hundred miles.

I was at last able to fully take up my role as a 'Driver/Operator' rather than a 'Gunner/Operator' because the Scout-cars in this Regt. were Daimlers, not Humbers, and the light armoured cars were manned only by two men, the Commander and the Driver/Radio Operator. These were wonderful vehicles, highly manoeuvrable, and fitted with pre-select gears and the ability to change gear whilst in reverse selection; theoretically allowing the car to go as fast in reverse as forwards.

The Army pressed forward towards the Rhine with one or two spells of heavy fighting. Then, around this time, I was given some home leave.



From the Rhine to Civvy Street

March 1945

After a few happy days at home, I bade a tearful farewell and returned to my Unit. The whole force was now intent on pressing on into Germany. After some heavy fighting on all fronts (because the Germans were desperate to prevent us doing so) we, the leading troops at that time, eventually succeeded in reaching the Rhine.

The Infantry were then brought through to hold the line and we were pulled back about a mile from the river. We settled in the cellar of a cottage and awaited our next mission, which we knew wouldn't be long because of the intense and heavy build up of men and equipment in preparation for a crossing. During a lull in the gunfire one of the lads in my troop spotted a horse in a paddock alongside the cottage, and decided to ride it. He mounted the horse and had a great time trotting around. Then came a single shot (probably from a German 88 mm. anti-tank gun) which blew his head off.

We had a request for Radio Operator volunteers to be detached to the Royal Engineers on the forthcoming crossing of the Rhine for the purpose of communications. Although soldiers didn't usually believe in volunteering, I was new in this unit and wouldn't miss the company much, so I volunteered.

I was taken (along with another Operator) in a small truck, back into Belgium; where we were attached to separate Companies of Engineers, placed in Heavy Armoured cars and moved back into Germany. My car was moved up behind a huge earth banking, which ran all along both sides of the Rhine in this area, used to prevent flooding of this very low-lying and flat countryside.

The communications set-up was this: The Officer in Charge of the Royal Engineers Unit would radio his messages to an armoured car which was situated near to mine. This message would be relayed to me by means of a runner. I would then send this back to Divisional H.Q. Remember that these radios had a very limited range; especially the back-pack field radios used by the forward engineers.

March 23rd. 1945

Then the attack started. In its own way it was almost as awe inspiring as the 'D' Day landings. It was preceded by a massive airborne assault; with hundreds of gliders flying low over our heads and landing behind the enemy lines. The biggest artillery bombardment ever to be carried out followed immediately behind. Hundreds upon hundreds of heavy artillery opened up all at once, with thousands of shells whistling overhead. The noise was deafening.

Then the ground troops started to move through us and down to the river bank. The Royal Engineers began to build the pontoon bridges which would allow the rest of the Division to cross over. This was done under very heavy German fire, as most of their first line defensive positions, dug into the huge earth banking on the German side of the river, had not been affected by the artillery or by the airborne attack behind them. I don't know what the cost was to the Engineers, but it must have been high.

I was kept fully occupied sending the coded messages back to H.Q. and occasionally receiving some back. Then there was a sudden drop in radio activity and I found time to poke my head out of the turret, only to find that the lull in getting messages had been caused by a German shell which had landed close and killed the runner.

In a few hours we knew that the bridge had been constructed across the Rhine and that the infantry were already across and being followed by tanks. The sounds of warfare became a little more distant and we moved forward to get a good view of the proceedings.

The pontoon bridge was thick with movement, as it had now become a two way highway. All the paraphernalia of an attacking army was crossing into Germany. The rattle of our infantry's small-arms fire coming from the enemy positions was now resulting in long lines of German soldiers being marched out of Germany to P.O.W. camps somewhere in England.



April 1945

This truly was the beginning of the end for the Germans. The Rhine had been crossed at many points and the British and US Armies were pouring across Germany. When I rejoined my unit (I remember catching them up as a passenger in a Bren-carrier) we were leading the advance Northwards to the North Sea port of Bremen (Bremerhaven).

We reached the outskirts of Bremen, and the last target line on our map; and moved into a small villa situated opposite a Displaced Persons Camp. After checking the surrounding ground, we posted a lookout and settled down for the night. In the early hours of the morning we awoke to the sound of heavy artillery shells crashing all around us. It soon became clear that the shells were originating from our own British guns, and it was a great relief when the fire finally moved on.

Apparently, due to some mix-up somewhere, our last target line on the map that night was the first target line for our artillery on the following morning.

We moved on from Bremen to a Prison Camp, called Stalag XB in a place named Sandbostel, which was further East on the road to Hamburg and was liberated on the 29th April by the Guards Armoured and 51st Highland Divisions. Here we found prisoners of all nationalities, all in a terrible state.

May 4th. 1945

It was at Sandbostel that we received news of the German surrender on our front, and it was an emotional experience to sit round a big bonfire and to listen to one of our Regimental pipers playing the beautiful lament 'The Battle's O'er'.

May 7th. 1945

The unconditional surrender of all German Forces was signed.
The war in Europe was at last over.

May 8th. 1945

This was officially nominated as V.E. (Victory in Europe Day).

Because our Senior Officers considered it to be undesirable for us to be allowed to celebrate 'on the loose' amongst the German population, a decision that I could never appreciate, we were confined to our base and spent the day 'bulling-up' our vehicles with a mixture of paraffin and engine oil. A procedure which made them look great for a day or two until the dust had stuck all over the oil.

When I later saw pictures of the great celebrations, in such places as Trafalgar Square, I was a bit displeased.

We then moved East to occupy a town named Salzwedel, which was soon to be taken over by the Russians, becoming part of Eastern Germany and shut off behind the Iron Curtain.

The next few months were a series of moves around the Ruhr (the industrial centre of Germany) in the vicinity of Cologne, Dusseldorf and Munster. Much of our duties were of Police patrol type work.

Germany had used millions of foreign workers as slave-labour, in the North of Germany in particular. These had of course now been given their freedom and were becoming a huge problem. They had a deep hatred of their previous masters. Most of them were of Eastern European origin and were either not wanted by their own countries or did not want to return. Instead they wandered around the country-side raping and looting. We would sometimes be posted at a German Police station and respond to emergency calls out in the country-side.

When things were settling down, our Regiment moved to a small village called Freckenhorst, near Warendorf, which is in turn situated between Munster and Bielefeld. This was a much more settled existence and everything was organised much more on Army camp lines. We had very little work to do, and time was spent in playing games of various sorts, or down in the Canteen which had been established in a big café.



A football Cup Competition was organised, and our Troop team won it. The goal-keeper on the other side was a Captain; and his face was a picture when I headed the ball out of his hands to score the winning goal.

The Colonel (Lt.Col.Stormont-Darling) was a keen Rugby player and he organised a Regimental rugby team. As we were a small unit, and as Rugby had a restricted following, I became one of the team. We weren't a very formidable side and I remember travelling to play a team from the R.A.F. at a big aerodrome in North Germany. We were thrashed unmercifully, and I seemed to spend more time being thrown out of touch, along with the ball, than running with it down the field.

During the following months many of the older members of the Regiment were being demobilised and returned to civilian life in England, and this was an on-going exercise with men waiting their turn in a 'first-in first-out' basis. This of course meant that the army was being rapidly reduced in size and a continual re-organisation of Units was necessary.

I can't help but marvel at the tremendous organisation which managed to keep abreast of all the massive changes which took place.

14th April 1946

Units which had been created during the war were the first to be disbanded. The Reconnaissance Corps was typical of this origin and was disbanded.

Our Regiment merged with the Lothian and Border Horse and we continued on almost as before except with a different cap-badge. A 'wheat sheaf', instead of the 'arrow supported by two lightning flashes' which had been our badge.

This wasn't to last more than a month or two, as it came the turn of the Territorial Army units to be disbanded.

7th July 1946

I was to join the 14th./20th. King's Hussars - another cap-badge - The Austrian Eagle.