

## Capt. Ian Wakefield

### Extracts from – “A Personal Recollection”

I rejoined 2 Glosters (Gloucestershire Regiment) towards the end of April at Ossembly Manor in the New Forest. it was clear that the long-awaited Second Front was imminent.

No-one had any doubts as to the value of achieving tactical surprise and we therefore accepted as boringly necessary our incarceration in a tented camp behind a security fence for about a fortnight before D-Day. No-one was allowed out and we were totally incommunicado. We were eventually briefed very fully just prior to embarkation, but at that time the decision to go had not been taken.



### D-Day

The assault division on Sword was; British 3rd Div of 1 Corps. The 50 Div would assault with 2 Brigades up and 2 follow-up Brigades. 56 Independent Infantry Brigade (made up of 2 Glosters; 2 SWB, 2 Essex) was one of the follow-up Brigades; 2 Glosters were to land at 8.00am.

We embarked at Lymington on an L.C.I. - landing craft (Infantry) - tied up alongside the jetty. This was a narrow shallow draft vessel, designed to run up the beach, with a staircase either side of the prow. She carried 200 troops packed like sardines and without much comfort and pitched and rolled quite a bit. The assault craft, which were small flat-bottomed vessels with a "drawbridge" at the bow, were carried by mother ships and swung out for action usually three miles or so offshore, The L.C.I.s crossed under their own steam.

One of the disadvantages of infantry in a seaborne landing is that number of normal support vehicles - such as the platoon truck — have to be severely reduced in the early stages and therefore everything has to be carried on one's back, Every officer and soldier therefore carried, in addition to arms and ammunition, a pack, haversack, water bottle, a spade or pick and steel helmet ~ something of the order of 60 or 70 lbs. I vowed I would collar the first horse I could find. Some bright spark - or dear old lady? - had arranged the issue of gas trousers - vast waders designed as protective clothing against mustard gas — so as to prevent us getting our feet wet. The danger was that, practically immobile and weighed down by paraphernalia, if one went under, the chances of surfacing again were somewhat remote.

We embarked on the 4th June but were to spend 24 hours on board before the fateful decision was taken by Eisenhower - to go - on the 5th June. However, we had heard on the radio on board that the Allies had entered Rome. Down Southampton Water the armada was unbelievable ~ the 1,000 ships stretched as far as the eye could see. It was a heartening sight and a massive display of strength - not untinged with the thought that the enemy could scarcely fail to see it too. One was aware too that this was a historic moment — a Norman Conquest in reverse - and that, as at Alamein, this time we were not coming back.

The crossing was distinctly choppy and below decks it was stuffy and confined, with a number of soldiers seasick, I went up on deck at about 4.00 a.m. and, although normally a reasonable sailor, puked discreetly over the side and felt better - probably just apprehension. The Air and Naval bombardment was going on and the assault troops were about to go in. We were due at Le Hamel to the west of Arromanches at 8.00am, but we heard that the Hampshires were pinned down at the head of the beach by mortar and machine gun fire, and very sensibly the young naval Lieutenant commanding our L.C.1. put us to the West near Asnelles-sur-mer in the sand dunes. I was the first off and jumped into four foot of water; as I did so my gas trousers split. However, we got ashore with no trouble and were formed up and enroute for Bayeux by midday.

It is said of a parachutist that he is at his most effective at the time when he hits the ground (intact) and I think this may also be true of the soldier carrying out a seaborne assault. There is no doubt that with land under our feet, and having removed our beastly gas trousers, we all felt very much better. The sun shone and the enemy were few and far between. We soon came across the bodies of two German soldiers lying in the road who had been killed by the bombing in the early hours. There was a little mortaring on the road but we suffered no casualties and were beginning to pick up prisoners. Towards evening I came across my horse - in fact we did rather better than that; in an apple orchard we found the deserted transport of a local gun battery with the horses standing in their traces and from then on for the next three weeks our "platoon truck" consisted of two splendid Norman horses pulling a German cart. From then on our packs and other bits of heavy equipment were carried and we were a much more effective fighting unit.

'B' company were equipped with folding bicycles, and I think that this is the Company that was first into Bayeux, although we got there on foot on 'D'+1 and received a rapturous welcome from the inhabitants. That evening we dug in just outside Bayeux. On the following day we entered Bayeux and pushed on in the direction of Tilly-sur-Seules taking quite a number of prisoners.

Two incidents come to mind. We were moving through the bocage, a countryside of small lanes and high banks with thick hedges, well wooded and interspersed with apple orchards, I thought I saw movement about 100 yards up a leafy lane and as I approached a figure, who turned out to be an Austrian Sergeant-Major, jumped out of the hedge. The bullet from my sten-gun - on single shot - clipped his ear before I realised that he had his hands up. He was only too delighted to be taken prisoner; produced from the hedge his 1,000cc BMW motorbike and explained that he was having trouble with the starter. So we push-started the machine between us and I directed him to Battalion Headquarters sitting on the pillion with a pistol in his ribs, for the sake of form. I handed my prisoner over for interrogation to Intelligence and I gathered that the BMW came in quite useful, as one of the battalion dispatch riders had just crashed his own machine.

On another occasion that same day we were moving up a hedgerow when we detected movement. A corporal in charge of my leading section fired from the hip; A German soldier

fell out of the hedge shot in the midriff, followed by 20 others with their hands up. One of them insisted on presenting me with his camera which I still have and subsequently developed the film which revealed that they were members of a field gun battery. Maybe the one who left their horses for us!

There is no doubt that we had had a very easy landing, unlike some others. About a mile inland at a hedgerow junction we ran into several Commandos who stopped for a brief chat. "What sort of landing did "you: have?" I asked their youthful officer; he replied "A bit dicy, but we must get on into Port-en-Bessin". After he had gone, I realised that this was what was left of 47 Marine Commando whose assault craft had hit a mine and this was their C.O, left with a handful of men, whose job it was to attack and take Port-en-Bessin from the rear. This he accomplished on 'D+2.

### **Battle of Normandy**

Coming up to a village called Jerusalem that evening, silhouetted in the flames of the burning houses we came across a neat job. 3 Mark V Panther tanks caught in enfilade by a British anti-tank gun at point blank range and all three knocked out in line ahead, each within 10 yards of one another. It was from one of these that I secured a Schmeisser machine pistol.

The plan was to push the armour through to Villers Bocage, an important road junction, including the road from Caen to the West, about 20 miles inland. En route, about 8 miles south of Bayeux was the hamlet of Tilly-sur-Seules, reportedly held by an ad hoc enemy force, including elements of the Panzer Lehr Division (formerly with the Afrika Korps). 2 Glosters were ordered to attack Tilly; A & D Companies would advance on either side of a track and secure a ridge of high ground south of Marcel and Pont de la Gaillette; B & C Companies would then pass through them and attack the town. I was commanding the right forward platoon of 'A' Company. We advanced across open farmland in extended order but came under fire from a Spandau L.M.G, from the forward edge of a wood, pinning us down. I dumped my steel helmet and equipment, tucked a couple of grenades down my battle dress blouse and armed with the Schmeisser sprinted for the left-hand edge of the wood. I was able to get to within 30 yards of the 3 man Spandau team, who were sitting ducks, but I could not shoot them in the back. Fortunately, these inhibitions were soon solved, for they saw me and rushed towards me with somewhat theatrical screams - no doubt part of their battle school training - so I gave them a long burst. As we lay supine taking pot shots at each other I remembered my grenades, but alas they had fallen out of my battle dress; this caused me to think that two could play at that game, so I decided that discretion was the better part of valour and retired backwards through a shallow pond. By this time the remainder of the platoon had come up and I met our C,S,M, who had appreciated my predicament and reckoned he had despatched one of the three. I thought that I had hit one and that one had got away. So, we secured our objective. This turned out to be an apple orchard and farmhouse quite close to the main road to Tilly and was typical bocage country with high thick hedgerows. Here we organised a defensive position and 'B' company passed through us as planned. A young man in civilian clothes with a Red Cross armband appeared from

the farm with a bottle of cognac, which was particularly welcome after crawling backwards through a pond. However, in retrospect one should have been more suspicious. There were very few young men left in France at that time, many had been taken by the Germans as forced labour, and he spoke excellent English; he also disappeared shortly afterwards, and I am pretty certain now that this was a typical German battle school ruse.

We heard quite a battle going on in Tilly and some little time later I met head-on in a gap in the hedgerow a section of 'B' company in some panic. The first thing that was wrong was that they were going in the wrong direction and keen to keep going. However, I put a stop to that. The story was that they had got into town but had come under fire from armoured cars and their platoon commander had been killed so they ran away. Shortly after this we came under heavy machine gun fire and a Tiger tank was reported up the road, so I sent the PIAT team to take this on through the hedge at literally point-blank range with orders to fire at the tracks. The PIAT was a rather primitive rocket launcher which fired an armour piercing bomb but had a very short range. Fortunately, the machine gun fire was all two or three feet above our heads and it was perfectly safe to walk about beneath it. The Tiger was hit by PIAT bombs but managed to withdraw. The outcome of all this was that the first attack on Tilly failed and in fact this small town did not fall until the 19<sup>th</sup> June after repeated attacks. 2 Glosters were eventually relieved and pulled back to La Valliere where we were in reserve, and I took over second in command of 'A' Company. At that time we only had one officer, Jack Levine, a Canadian, commanding a platoon and the other two platoons were commanded by Sergeants Benfield and Airey. John Lance was still in command of 'A' Company and C.S.M, Archer and C.Q.M.S.

The first duty of a soldier is to stay alive, and one found that those who were stupid and took risks were soon killed or wounded. We had the sad case of a very tall young officer, who incautiously peered over the top of a hedgerow and was promptly shot between the eyes by a sniper. Some who were perhaps the wrong age group or had the wrong temperament cracked up and had to be sent back and among this group was one company commander. Quite a few were injured in genuine accidents that should not have occurred. However, those that were left soon became really effective fighting soldiers.

At La Valliere we were able to get some rest and smarten ourselves up. The food had improved since the days of the desert campaign and we now had self-heating soup in cans, which heated by the application of a cigarette, and delicious food; steak and kidney puddings which were served hot in the tin - we even had bread - this was a great advance on the bully beef and biscuit of desert days. The local brew was Normandy cider and Calvados. However, the farmhouse variety of the latter had to be treated with respect; we had one soldier who thought that it could be drunk like wine and as a result was blind for six hours, but I am glad to say that he recovered his sight.

In Normandy, as in the latter days of the Desert, we had complete air superiority and I only remember seeing one enemy fighter - a Messerschmidt 109. We also made considerable use of artillery and it was common practice for the gunner Forward Observation Officer

(FOO) to be up forward with the leading company, so that in case of need he could call down fire very quickly on enemy positions, and eventually we were also in a position to call for air strikes when held up by enemy resistance.

According to the personal message issued by Monty, C-in-C 21 Army Group, on the 10<sup>th</sup> June "After four days of fighting the Allied Armies have secured a good and firm lodgement area on the mainland of France". Certainly, within a week of 'D' Day British 2nd Army and the U.S, 1<sup>st</sup> Army had linked up and held a continuous front in Normandy. We were on the extreme right flank of the Anglo-Canadian forces and contacted U.S, 1<sup>st</sup> Division, known as America's "Big Red One", west of Bayeux. At that time, they were very new to action and unable to distinguish between the occasions when it was necessary to hit the deck and the times when an enemy shell coming in would land a safe distance away.

The Americans were keen on psychological warfare. Loudspeakers addressed the enemy in reasonable German but the gist of which was "O.K. you guys, you've only got two choices - you can come over to us now and we have a cuppa hot cawfee ready for you, but if you don't come over, you'll get this - and a Corps stonk followed. But if you come over, we still have that hot cawfee .....

About this time David Paine and I had a day's mackerel fishing from Port-en-Bessin in the vicinity of which a sort of tented rest centre had been set up and we spent a night there. This was a welcome interlude and quite unexpected after a week's action.

Meanwhile, to the East the Battle of Caen continued with increasing ferocity and we were committed to a month or so of the modern equivalent of line warfare. We would be well dug in, often in hedgerows and with some form of head cover, but there was generally little movement permissible during daytime. Food and ammunition was brought up after dark and there was a certain amount of night patrolling activity. The object of this was to establish the identity of the enemy forces opposing us by taking prisoners. The usual drill was for the patrol commander to make an air reconnaissance in the evening and this was quite helpful. The Lysanders used for this purpose were top wing monoplanes flown by army pilots; one was treated to a large meal and then subjected to various aerobatics! However, I did spot a German armoured vehicle lurking in a farmyard on the route I had intended to take that night. When we set out up a track we came under spandau fire, firing straight down the track, but having made a detour one of the patrol was wounded, probably by a shrapnel mine set off by a trip wire, and we came back without a prisoner. It so happened that three weeks or so later we made an attack over the same ground and found the machine gun position that had fired at us down the track. This was on a fixed line mounting and the machine gunner merely sat at the bottom of a deep weapon pit and pulled a string connected to the trigger every time he heard a sound. Several days later Peter Burton took a prisoner. He found two German soldiers in a weapon pit, shot one and the other put his hands up, so we were able to establish the necessary identity of the forces opposing us.

Although we had had a splendid reception from the towns people of Bayeux on 'D' +1, the effect of modern warfare on the Normandy countryside and small towns was beginning to be pretty shattering and it was not surprising that the Normandy farmers preferred the comparative peace of German occupation, since now their hedges and fields were being cut up by vehicles and their cattle killed and maimed. In fact, this was one of the most distressing things and one sometimes had to put a poor wounded beast out of its misery. The stench of dead animals was at times all pervading.

Generally, after about 10 days in the line we went into reserve; I went over to see 1/6 Queens, who were still part of the 7th Armoured Division and stationed not far away. Fairly early on the tanks of 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade had reached Villers Bocage, to the south of Tilly-sur-Seules where they had run up against enemy armour in the town but had been forced to pull back. One troop had been bottled up almost nose to tail in a lane in a narrow cutting with the lead and rear tanks knocked out. The tank crews had no choice but to bale out, while the young German tank commander, who had arranged the ambush, bowed to them from the turret of his tank with each salvo. However, Rodney said that they had had a well-prepared defensive position supported by medium machine guns, when they were attacked by German infantry, who had already marched something of the order of 20 miles and so were dead beat when they were pitched into the attack. They had been cut down at almost point-blank range and very few had survived. There is little doubt that the German army fought well, particularly bearing in mind the fact that the Allies had air superiority and no lack of petrol or ammunition, The Germans had conscripted a number of more or less unwilling foreigners into their army and the practise was to have a trio of two Germans and one foreigner, who got all the dirty jobs. It was not an uncommon ruse for some wretched Pole to be ordered to walk towards the Allied position with his hands up and directly someone came out to take him in he would fall flat on his face when the Germans would open fire. This habit of course rather discouraged us from taking prisoners at this time.

During this period the British Second Army kept up the pressure by continuously mounting attacks, particularly in the Caen area but also elsewhere from the bridgehead, so as to prevent the German Command from assembling any sizeable armoured forces, capable of delivering a significant counter attack. Whatever troops Rommel had available in reserve had to be committed piecemeal to deal with these attacks and so Monty created what he christened "wet hen tactics" on the part of the enemy. This stratagem was remarkably successful. Meanwhile the U.S, First Army had mopped up the Cherbourg Peninsula, including the important port of Cherbourg itself, and by July 14<sup>th</sup> had taken St Lo.

Although the original plan took much longer than was intended and involved some very stiff fighting with set piece attacks reminiscent of the First War, it was beginning to take shape. Preceded by an assault by 460 R.A.F bombers, Caen had eventually fallen on the 9<sup>th</sup> July to the 3rd British, 3rd Canadian and 59th British Divisions and the so called hinge had been secured. The British 2<sup>nd</sup> Army continued their drive south from Caen towards Tilly-la-Campagne and Falaise. The Americans drove down to Avranches and Le Mans and then up

towards Alençon and Argentan - thus creating a giant pincer movement, the object of which was to close the gap on the German 7th and part of the 15th Army in the area of Falaise Chamboix - the Falaise Gap.

Although 2<sup>nd</sup> Glosters had been involved in at least one frontal attack, our main role during this time had been defensive but casualties were mounting.

There is little doubt that by this time 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group enjoyed an immense superiority of fire power and in addition to this the Allies had total air superiority. Following the R.A.F. bombing on Caen on the 9<sup>th</sup> July there was a 1,000 bomber raid on Villers Bocage on 18<sup>th</sup> July and another on the area of Tilly-le-Campagne on August 7<sup>th</sup>. I remember seeing the July 18<sup>th</sup> raid which was carried out in daylight. It was an amazing sight to see this mass of aircraft flying over leisurely and unscathed; it was also quite heartening to the infantry to feel that they had this weight of supporting fire power.

The jaws of the pincer were beginning to close. By the 9<sup>th</sup> August elements of the U.S. XV Corps had entered Le Mans and the British and Canadian forces were engaged in a bitter series of frontal attacks along the Falaise Road. Meanwhile the German High Command had launched a counterattack with 5 Armoured Divisions on the American forces in the area of Mortain and Vire, well west of Falaise, thus sealing their own fate.

56<sup>th</sup> Independent infantry brigade was ordered to cross the Orne and 2 Glosters were allotted the task of taking the small town of Thury Harcourt. The crossing of the Orne was unopposed, and the battalion was in position by first light on the 12<sup>th</sup> August on high ground to the west of the town. In the normal course of events one would have the opportunity of sending out patrols to reconnoiter the lie of the land; however, this was not the case, for we were ordered to attack without any preliminary reconnaissance having been made. The old army adage - that time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted - was never truer than on this occasion. There is no doubt that such an order should have been resisted, but John had only recently taken over the battalion and was therefore perhaps in a less established position than Dennis might have been vis-a-vis higher authority.

The battalion attacked with two companies up. 'A' Company under my command and 'D' Company commanded by Julian Fane. The attack was preceded by a fair amount of artillery support so that the enemy knew we were coming. The attack took place down a very steep and heavily wooded slope descending to the main Caen-Flers road running north/south, which by-passed the town itself lying to the east. This road was mined and covered by machine gun fire from enemy posts on the edge of the town well dug in and difficult to detect.

When 'A' Company attacked, we had the greatest difficulty in getting across the road and suffered casualties. The pioneer section sent in to remove the mines did so and were killed or wounded to a man. I ordered my reserve platoon to circle round to the south and to get into the town that way and then went over to have a word with Julian Fane. His leading platoon had got into the town from the north but had also suffered heavy casualties and had to withdraw so that by this time, about mid afternoon, the net result of our efforts was that an

increasing number of our men were being killed or wounded. We decided therefore to ask permission to fall back and to request covering fire from the supporting guns, to enable us to do so. As we were talking, we came under mortar fire and managed to get into the lee of a stone wall. We were both hit by shrapnel, Julian being nicked in the neck; and I was hit in the right knee. However, I got back to Company Headquarters and spoke to John Lance; he agreed that we could fall back at an agreed time and that supporting artillery fire would be laid on. So this was arranged. Communication by that time was by RT. The "18 Set" of that day was by present standards large and cumbersome being carried on the back by a radio operator, but nevertheless quite effective for short range communication, so that I was in touch with Battalion Headquarters and both forward platoons but had lost touch with my reserve platoon, under Sgt. Nicholas.

The 25 pounder supporting fire for the withdrawal, when it came, was somewhat alarming. In order to achieve the necessary trajectory to hit enemy positions 200 yds to 300 yds on the east side of the main road the shells were coming through the trees about 50' above our heads at company headquarters, which was situated near the top of the wooded ridge. However, we managed to get the remaining members of our leading platoons back and I was left with the problem of my reserve platoon, who of course knew nothing about withdrawing. I would normally have gone to find them myself, but my knee was stiffening up and it was difficult to walk, so I sent my second in command, Macaulay, "Well, where are they?" he said. I had to admit that we were out of touch. I met him perhaps 25 years later quite accidentally and he told me that he had got them back, but was still clearly somewhat put out at the vagueness of his orders.

By this time, it was evening and both attacking companies had been withdrawn (with the exception of my reserve platoon) so I had a jeep brought up, reported to John Lance, gave him an estimate of casualties and was then driven back to the battalion first aid post. I was flown back next day by Dakota to U.K. I heard later that 2 Glosters put patrols into Thury Harcourt next day and the town was empty, so although the battalion had taken a pasting, the enemy also had had enough, and the object had been achieved. Falaise was taken on the 14<sup>th</sup> August and once the gap was near enough closed the greater part of the German 7<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> armies were trapped and eliminated. Miles of enemy vehicles and tanks nose to tail on exit roads were subjected to repeated Allied air attacks and the enemy suffered very heavy casualties. An indication of this is 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer division, who had given the Canadians a bloody nose on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> June at St Authie; they started the campaign with 21,000 fanatical Hitler-Jugend and got just 60 out of Normandy.

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

*To a generation that has experienced war, recollections of wartime tend to be pretty boring and one is currently satiated by the concentration upon war themes by authors and television writers often with little regard for reality or conviction.*

*The purpose of these notes is to provide future generations of my family, some perhaps yet unborn, with a first-hand account of some of the events that befell me between 1939 and 1946. However, it must be appreciated that I am writing in 1980 of events that had taken place 35 to 40 years earlier. This has the advantages of selectivity and hindsight - it is easy to be wise after the event, but the major disadvantage of having to rely on memory for most of the facts.*