

Rifleman Harold William Hones

No.12 Commando and No.6 Commando.

Cold, wet and frightened

WHEN Harry Hones was 17 he put his age on a year and joined the Commandos. It all seemed like a great adventure.

Just how 'great' he was to find out later when on the morning of D-Day he found himself wet and frightened standing on a Normandy beach, a part of the greatest invasion in history.

"My first thought was 'what am I doing here'," recalled Mr Hones at his home in Gloucester Road, Burgess Hill. He is 69 now but the events of June 6, 1944, are deeply engraved in his memory.

"I have very mixed feelings about it," he said. "I lost some very good friends over there and of the original 2,598 men in our brigade who landed, 967 were dead, wounded or missing after 89 days when it was felt we had completed our task.

"It all seems a terrible waste now, we were all very close mates; the Commandos were a special brotherhood. I still attend meetings with some of them every month in Hove.

THE TEENAGER'S STORY

"The French certainly appreciated what we did. We had 200 Free French Commandos with us in the invasion and that always helps ensure us a really great welcome when we go back to Normandy every year."

When young Harry Hones trained to be a Commando in Scotland — the course lasted about 10 weeks — everything was made as realistic as possible. They were taught unarmed combat, how to handle high explosives, how to climb mountains and a variety of other things it was felt would stand them in good stead when taking the enemy by surprise.

It was all made so realistic there were 41 accidental deaths during the training. Men were killed in various ways like drowning or premature explosions.

Harry survived the training but got kicked out of the Commandos for a while when they found out about his age. "My father got worried about me and wrote and informed them," he said. "I can understand his action now. In a similar situation I would have done the same thing."

Later he returned to do the job for which he had been so thoroughly trained.

On the eve of D-Day his battalion embarked at Warsash, near Netley in Hampshire, and as the landing craft made their way down the Solent men on the support vessels gave them a rousing cheer. A piper standing in the bows of the leading landing craft played his pipes.

"The armada was huge, it was an absolutely fantastic sight," said Harry. "It was quite rough out there and we were pleased to see the land ahead at last.

"As we approached the beach the landing craft came in line abreast and the British cruiser HMS Scylla was firing on the shore preparing the way for us.

"We hit the beach at 7.30am and after wondering what I was doing there and feeling scared I remember the saying we were always using in those days — 'bash on regardless.' We were under fire and being wet and cold was the least of our worries but fortunately the enemy fire was spasmodic because they had taken such a hammering.

"We did well to land so early. The chaps

who came along after us got it worse."

The task for Harry and his colleagues was what was termed 'a fighting march.' This meant advancing as quickly as possible and avoiding trouble whenever possible. They skirted anything they couldn't deal with, leaving the resistance for others to cope with later.

By the end of the day they had reached the village of Amfreville, situated on a hill and dominating a valley. And at 5pm gliders came in with more troops. There were a lot of dead Germans scattered about and many prisoners were taken.

They ended up at Honfleur opposite Le Havre and after 89 days their job was deemed to be done and the survivors returned home.

"The Germans were broken," said Harry. "They were in full flight."

He doesn't know if he killed anyone in France while he was firing in the advance. Better not to know he feels.

His recollections are lots of little things — a French farmer waving a Union Jack as they advanced under fire across a wheat field; standing on the beach for the first time; the paratroops coming in; above all the remarkable camaraderie of the men who on the eve of the landings gave the impression they were off for their holidays.

He has no hesitation in nominating his worst moment. He was left one night to make a signal from an old barn that had been captured.

The building was being used as a temporary mortuary and several dead British soldiers were in there.

Next morning prompt action had to be taken against a stray dog that had got in. For Harry and his fellow Commandos the corpses were the bodies of comrades. For the dog they simply represented fresh meat.

Clearly it's a memory that still deeply affects him as he looks back 50 years.

After the Normandy landings Harry ended up with the Black Watch in Palestine — but that's another story. "I'm glad I wasn't there long," he said. "It would have been terrible coming to grief in Palestine after surviving D-Day."

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Ready for adventure — Harry (standing, fourth from left) in a picture taken while training at Hurstpierpoint, and (inset) pictured at a recent reunion

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