

A few impressions of the activities of 3 Troop/3 Commando before, during and after Dday, 6th June, 1944.

Keith Ponsford

Western Australia

Commando Training

- This started with a course of training at a camp situated in the highlands of Scotland called Achnacarry. The nearest railway station was Spean Bridge, a hamlet about six miles from the camp and about the same distance from Fort William which stands at the end of a sea loch and at the base of Ben Nevis. From the time the recruits arrived, after a windy journey from Glasgow, training started and took the form of a march up to the camp carrying kit and weapons.
- From then on, their training lasted for about 3 weeks without a break. There is speed marching, which involved marching and doubling in a given time, over distances from 5 to 15 miles. There were many other forms of training such as physical training, rock climbing, abseiling and cross-country marching over mountains that surround Achnacarry, usually taking all day.
- Team boxing was another entertaining form of activity known as "milling", where two teams of around ten men collected on either side of the ring. Each man boxed his opponent flat out for one minute, and when the bell was rung, they jumped out and the next two carried on. The referee, usually the C.O., decided on the winner of each bout by raising the team flag. He therefore also determined the winning team. The support for the teams was deafening.
- One of the most important aspects of the behavior of the commando soldier is self-discipline and self-reliance. Normal army discipline is of little importance. If a man cannot accept these principles he is better off where he came from. This is known as R.T.U. (Return to unit) and rarely happened. In every commando unit there existed a most extraordinary spirit of comradeship and pride in wearing the Commando Green Beret.
- On arrival at his commando unit, each man was sent to a private billet where he was housed and fed. He was given a special allowance to pay for the out-of-pocket expenses of the people involved. Usually these people were very proud to have the men with them, particularly when they realize they were looking after well-behaved soldiers and playing an important role in helping the war effort. This arrangement meant that the men had no arduous duties such as spud bashing and guard duty, and spent more time preparing for action, which was never far away.

Organising the Commando.

- The Commando consisted of six Troops, each with approximately 65
- Each Troop was divided into two sections. (ie Troop 1 had sections 1 had sections 3 & 4, Troop 3 had sections 5 & 6 and so on.)
- The sections were led by a Captain with two Lieutenants.

The Concentration Camp

We all knew we would be called upon to play a part in the invasion of Europe, indeed was the main topic of conversation among the troops and civilians alike. The unknown questions were when and where.

Toward the end of May we were moved to what we called a "concentration camp", quite close to Southampton. Here we were under canvas and we enjoyed a bit of relaxation, as normal training was impossible. We were allowed to take the troop out under our strict supervision for some exercise, but no contact with civilians was permitted. However, there were occasions when we were met by young lasses also out for exercise, and they seemed to enjoy the catcalls and wolf whistles, which were impossible to control and proved quite harmless fun for those who were shortly to land on the French coast.

While in the camp, we were shown a model and various maps and aerial photos of the beach we would be landing on, but little more. Lt. Ted Lewes, the other lieutenant in the troop who lived in Guernsey, told me that he knew the coastline, but to his credit he never breathed a word as to it's whereabouts.

On the afternoon of the 5th of June 44 we were moved down to Warsash and there we kicked our heels for a couple of hours. We had been supplied with a folding bike each, together with a canister of 3" mortar bombs weighing 10lbs each, which we were instructed to tie to the handle bars of our bikes. This might sound reasonable enough, but it proved to be a most difficult and exasperating job getting them on board, storing them on an already heavily laden boat, and finally getting them off at the enemy beach.

The men were both subdued and apprehensive but were greatly heartened to see their Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, there to see them off.

The Landing Craft Infantry (L.C.I.) is not a large boat, and it was a tight squeeze for the 65 men and naval crew plus kit, weapons and bikes. We finally made it, the moorings were slipped and we went out onto the Solent to await the time for departure which was about 22.00 hrs.

As we moved down the Solent towards the open sea, every man on deck was enjoying the wonderful send off we were given by every kind of boat that you could imagine. From the smallest to the largest: L.C.P's, L.C.A's, L.C.F's, L.C.T.'s, cruisers, battle ships and

many of the merchant navy. They were all wishing us well with their flags and sirens. This was indeed a great send off, and it did much to raise the spirits of all on board, particularly of those that were experiencing their first taste of action.

Darkness was falling as we approached the open sea and most of us watched England fade into the night and then we looked around for somewhere to sit down to rest, but there were not many who slept. It was a fairly bumpy journey, but we made good time and arrived at the position from which we were to attack about an hour early. For a while we circled round until the naval skipper decided we were using too much fuel, and he cut the engines. We then drifted in a good swell, and we wallowed until most of us had deposited what was left in our stomachs over the side. The Royal Navy was stationed about half a mile from our port side, and as we waited, they gave us a grand show, plastering the shore with their heavy guns. The roar was deafening, and we couldn't see the ships through the haze of smoke they created.

The Run In And The Landing

It was a relief to start moving and start the run into the beach at approximately 8.30hrs, with the satisfaction that we knew we were being well supported by the navy.

The whole troop was on deck watching the spectacle. However, we soon became aware that our commando had become the target of the German gunners, who had a few near misses from the coastal guns they had rounded on us. We were moving in at line abreast and we were the boat on the port side (the one nearest to the gunners.)

As we closed on the beach at good speed, a shell landed about thirty yards away. Several of the lads had been shouting instructions to the gunners as to how to correct the range. In fact they over corrected it and the next shell took our radio aerial away but landed on the boat that Six Troop were in, with disastrous results as most of the troop were below decks, and the boat sank.

The landing from our boat was almost dry but particularly slow. The bikes proved a great hindrance at a time when speed was essential. However, although the boat was a sitting target, as were our men as they struggled up the beach, we suffered remarkably few casualties. Here there were ditches to cross and they were filled with water. With the weight of the bikes and mortar bombs it was no easy job getting them over, particularly for some of the shorter chaps who very nearly disappeared!

While we were crossing the marshes, the Germans kept a fairly constant cascade of fire with their multiple pom-poms. The bombs spread out in the air and on landing covered a wide area. We were glad to reach a small wood where we were sheltered from enemy view. Here we remained for about half an hour while the troops ahead of us got sorted out into the correct line of advance. We emerged onto the main road leading to the bridges,

having cycled up a series of winding lanes in time to pass the leading troop as they marched up the road on our left.

The bikes now came into their own. We passed the airborne troops who had landed by glider, and marveled at the accuracy of the pilots who had put the gliders down very close to the German positions on the left of the road. The field on which they had landed was covered in posts, between which the pilots had to weave.

They caught the enemy sleeping and evidently had no difficulty in capturing them and taking the bridges over the Caen River and canal – a very valuable asset. We stopped briefly to obtain details of the enemy positions, and were told that there was some sniping by the enemy to the right of the bridges.

We therefore put our heads down and cycled fast without stopping, but in spite of this, Trooper Campbell was killed. We went up a slight rise after crossing the bridges and then took a left turn which took us onto the Route de Cabourg, and within quite a short distance, came across Brigadier Lord Lovat, who was standing on the road at the junction of the Rue Morice, talking to Colonel Otway.

Lovat had summed up the situation. He said that Otway of the paras (the Parachute troop) had a few men in or very near Amfreville, but there were too few to attack the garrison. He suggested that Otway should take Roy Westley and myself on a reconce of the area close to the village. When this was completed, Westley and I returned to where we had met up with Lovat, but there was no sign of him. Westley then organized an attack up the Rue Morice.

The Attack on Amfreville

We moved up the road as a body until we came to a right bend in the road. At this stage we were fairly close to the village and there appeared to be no cover at the sides of the road. We came under a hail of automatic fire, and our only means of cover was to retreat down the road on which we had approached, and find cover to the right of the road where we had left our bikes and kit.

Captain Westley had received a bullet through his right arm, Sgt Hill had a bullet through his tin hat, which had opened up a parting down the center of his scalp, and Harnet and Arnott were wounded.

As I was the only unwounded officer left, Westley handed over command of the troop to me, while he and the other wounded went off to find the medical officer.

Just at the time the troop was being reorganized, a British Airborne soldier turned up carrying the barrel and base plate of a 3" mortar. We thought we were in luck, but when we opened up the cases of the bombs we found that all the secondary charges, which gave the bombs their main lift and distance, were missing. Rather than trying to use them as they were, I decided it was better to organize the attack using what we had.

I then called for a volunteer to accompany me forward to the row of houses at the top of the rise – Trooper Osborne immediately came forward. So, leaving Sgt Major Coaker to get the troop into a firing position, should we require it, we went up the rise and found a narrow entrance between the houses, onto a grass square onto which the houses faced.

This gave us an excellent position to view the whole village. I therefore called up our 2nd mortar group and started firing the mortar at low angle towards the houses and stone walls where the enemy was concentrated to our left. In the meantime, I called the rest of the troop up to a position near the opening from where we were firing. I told Sgt Salisbury to take 6 section and clear the enemy from every house facing the square, and leave two men in the upstairs front room of each house ready to give us covering fire when we attacked with 5 section.

I allowed 6 section about fifteen minutes to do their job and in the meantime we kept up a continuous bombardment with the 2nd mortar. By this time, I felt we would have subdued the enemy and it was time to attack.

The green signal was given and we charged over the open ground to the area beyond the schoolhouse. This proved a great display of courage from the men of 5 section. They were all there in the open, ready for a fight, and we took our objective without losing a man.

The Germans gave up in droves, and our men acted as though they had rehearsed the job. They searched the prisoners and lined them up awaiting orders. Four men were then detailed to march the men down the road from which we had so recently withdrawn.

Holding the Line.

Having sent the prisoners to HQ, we immediately took up position along a hedge of trees in front of a small field, opposite an orchard from where the enemy might launch an attack, if they ever decided to do so.

There were a few Germans still hiding in the village, and we managed to pull some out, but on the whole they didn't prove much trouble. At this stage, most of the inhabitants of Amfreville turned up and gathered near the entrance to the Chateau D'Amfreville, situated on the far side of the village from where we had attacked, and gave us a great welcome.

However, I was aware that the Germans had a habit of shelling the position they had been driven out of, in the hope of capturing the enemy before they had a chance to dig their trenches. I therefore spoke to the French people in my best schoolboy-French, and together with arm movements, asked them to go back to their houses as it was very dangerous where they were. They did what they were asked.

Having seen the troop settled, I left Sgt Major Coaker in charge, and made my way to the other end of the village in order to contact Six Commando to see if they wished to link up with us so as to make an unbroken line in front of the village.

I came across Colonel Derrick Mills-Roberts who was in the process of organizing a shoot from one of the battleships. He had a radio operator with him who gave the gunners their instructions. The first shell landed midway between our position and the target, which was a wood known as Le Bois de Bavant.

A correction was made and the next shell came over and landed just a few yards the other side of the bank behind which we were sheltering. There was a mighty roar as the 15 inch shell exploded, opening up a huge crater. Tree branches fell all around us. The air was blue as Mills-Roberts let fly at his radio operator. The shoot ended forthwith.

I returned to our lines, unable to hear anyone, and found Sgt Major Coaker lying in the road with a shell splinter in his head. He was dead, and we had lost a fine soldier who had been in many Three Commando operations, including the attack on St Nazaire.

I was disturbed to think we had lost two officers and two senior NCO's. However we had some fine men to take their places who were delighted with what they had done, and they all worked with a will.

It would be difficult to describe the great spirit of elation that had swept through the troop. This lasted during the difficult days ahead, and the whole time we were in Normandy.

The Attack on the Merville Battery.

While we were busy in Amfreville, Four and Five Troops were making their way to Merville where an active shore battery was making its presence felt. Major John Pooley was in command of this operation, and it proved a particularly difficult one as the enemy were housed underground and could only be seen when they poked their heads up out of their bunkers to fire at our troops.

Our poor chaps eventually returned to Amfreville having lost John Pooley, one of our finest officers, and a great number of their men, who were killed or wounded.

Back to our Defence Position.

The Germans started the shelling and mortaring of our positions that evening, and the Luftwaffe were over our shipping during the night. The ships produced a fine fireworks display with their tracer.

D+1 The food situation in the troop was becoming pretty acute. Much of our kit had been left behind when we made our attack and with it was our "iron" rations. We had eaten

scarcely a thing since leaving England. Personally, I didn't feel very hungry, but thank God for an occasional cup of tea!

Snipers were still busy in the village. I took a party out and pulled one out of the first building we went into which was the village school. The French troop had moved into the field to the right of our position and they spent a lot of their time looking for snipers, and they showed little mercy when they found them.

D+2 An attack of battalion strength (so we were told) was put in on our position. Heavy shelling proceeded it. One and Six Troops put in a counter attack. On their signal we opened up with everything we had including several German fast firing machine guns, which they had discarded when they withdrew. Many Germans were killed.

Lt. George Herbert, who was leading a section in the counter attack, was shot by a bullet that passed through his DCM ribbon as he was standing in an orchard changing the magazine of his Thompson machine gun. He was a well respected, fearless Welsh officer who had done a great deal of work for the Commando as an NCO. About fifty prisoners were taken by our troops.

D+4 10th June. I remember this day well as this was my wife's birthday and was one of the most trying days that we had. The shelling started on our position at dawn and went on all day. I saw Colonel Peter Young and told him of our lack of sleep. He said that he would relieve the troop in the morning with Five Troop.

D+5 We heard that a brigade attack was coming in our position and at first light the shelling and mortaring started, and the Germans really meant business. Casualties were mainly caused by enemy shells exploding in the trees above our heads. Cpl Hodgeson and Sgt Edmunds were both badly hit and Lt Wills, L/Cpl Irving, Tps McVilvie, Parsons and Collins were wounded. Cpl Hodgeson and Sgt Edmunds both died during the night. It was during this attack that Cpl Garratt did such a wonderful job in evacuating the wounded.

We became the Patrol Troop.

We were given a position on the right hand side of the garden wall at the rear of the chateau Amfreville where Commando headquarters and the medical center were situated. The lads immediately got things organized. Trenches were dug, a cooking area was developed, and everyone was washed and shaved. What a joy it was to have some freedom. We all had a sleep and then were told that we were to become the patrol troop and were given our first job that afternoon. We were to clear a wood of the enemy just south of Le Grande Femme du Buisson. (This farm was about a mile or two from our position, and one which we used a great deal for our job as patrol troop).

As we approached the farm we saw two of the enemy making their way up the road towards us. Corporal Grant had climbed a tree to observe, but was spotted. The men turned and ran down the road. We shot one but the other escaped. We took the wounded soldier down the road and into the farmhouse and asked a man from adjoining troop to keep an eye on him while we went to clear the wood. On our return we called at the farm to pick up the prisoner, but he had been removed by the Germans.

We returned to our lines and reported to the Commanding Officer. He was wild that we had lost a prisoner. However, I did get his Schneisser (a light sub-machine gun that took 9 mm ammunition) and used this for the rest of the time we were in Normandy. It proved a very useful weapon.

D+6 12th June. A good day of rest, the first since we landed. The boys brought in some ducklings which they informed me were quishing ducklings and therefore must die! They were smashing, being cooked to a turn.

In the afternoon volunteers were called for to go out on a patrol with the CO. 37 volunteered, which was very pleasing. At about 20.00hrs we entered Le Grande Femme du Buisson then made our way across the cornfields towards the Gonneville Rd. Capt Nixon, who was in charge of the patrol, took half the men and went to the left and I took the rest to the right. The object was to capture prisoners. We crept up to the road and could hear men breathing.

We had a man who could speak German with us called Cpl Lawrence. I told him to wake the men in the trench ahead of us and tell them to come with us, and keep his mouth shut. This he did. We went to the next dugout and did the same. This time there were two men who were armed with a machine gun. Fortunately I managed to get hold of it by the barrel before they could fire, and dragged out the man who was holding it. We quickly removed the belt of ammo and held the two men at gunpoint as there was someone walking down the road, presumably doing an inspection.

The prisoners told us that it was the Sergeant in charge. As soon as he had moved on, we collected everything belonging to the Germans. We all agreed that we had repaired the damage caused by losing the prisoner the day before! We returned to our lines and after handing over the prisoners, went to bed as the sun was rising. The cooks we had left behind had a hot drink waiting for us, which kept us going until about midday when we got up for breakfast.

I took out a small standing patrol of twelve men under Sgt Synnott to the Grand Femme to hold it for the French troop who were going out during the night. At about 20.45hrs a German patrol surrounded the farm. Half our men withdrew leaving Sgt Synnott and four men behind. Just then a number of American planes came over and bombed the t-junction to where our men had withdrawn.

Sgt Synnott, Cpl Grant and the men saw their chance and dashed back to the t-junction in a cloud of dust made by the bombing. Trooper Davis came dashing back to our lines with the tale that Sgt Synnott and his men were trapped in the farm. I informed Major Hobson, our second in command, and the French troop, and we all went to their aid. We plastered the area of the farm with fire for about three minutes and then occupied the area. It was empty. During the next few days we were sent out on patrol. Other troops were doing the same thing and the enemy was very much alert, and most of our activities came to nothing.

D+13 Monday 19th June. We woke up to find it had been raining pretty heavily during the night, but fortunately my dugout remained dry. The boys had not managed to scrounge any additions to the rations so we had to survive on what we were provided with, a great comedown. However, the boys killed a fatted calf so we were okay for a few days. It rained most of the day, and as a consequence the order came round that all training was cancelled.

Our mortars opened up at 22.00hrs. 45 RM Commando attacked the wood forward of their position. One German remained and was taken prisoner. The rest fled. The Daily Mirror had a report in their newspaper about the Commandos. There was a good report about George Herbert.

On the 26th June, we carried out another raid on enemy lines. Late that night we set out for the Grande Femme Debusson and went the full length of the cornfield, about half a mile. The enemy was on the alert for they kept sending up parachute flares. The troop was quite used to this and ducked down into the corn whenever one was sent up. Close to a road at the end of the cornfield there was a line of bomb craters, which we used as cover. Half the troop was left in these craters while two parties of six advanced onto the road, which ran at right angles to our line of advance. TSM Edwards was leading one party and I had the other. I told Edwards to go to the right up the road, and try and catch a prisoner. This he did but soon came under heavy firing. We were aware that he had run into trouble and I decided to take my party down the road to our left, as I thought the enemy would think we were German troops.

We therefore marched down the road in the hope of fooling the enemy. This proved successful for it was not long before a German soldier ran up to us and asked what was going on. In our party was a German-speaking NCO called Cpl Spencer who informed our guest who we were and that he was a prisoner. His name was Gefr Janz and was very willing to answer questions. As it was still dark I decided it would be a good plan to get a more senior prisoner. So having found out where their Headquarters were located, we made our way back.

But all this had taken a bit of time and dawn was approaching. We therefore retraced our steps and made for the position on the road from which we had started. I had the idea that we could possibly find the other party but it was getting light quickly now and there was no time to spare. We got back to our position at the bomb crater and the prisoner was handed over to Sgt Sinnott whom I felt sure would not allow him to escape. The enemy started firing with small arms and mortar. We gave them a bit of their own back and withdrew into the cornfield and back to base.

We had lost TSM Edwards, Trooper Barnes, O'Connell, Bluet and Kingsley. This was a great loss at the time as we had already lost half the troop killed and wounded. We were all delighted to see TSM Edwards back a few weeks later. He and an Airforce Sgt had killed their guard and escaped. He immediately took over his old position as troop Sgt Major. He didn't know what had happened to the other lads that were taken with him, as they had been sent another camp. We were all pleased to see him back.

Jock Grant was with us in France from D-Day until the 12th July 1944 when he was killed. In that time he was promoted from Trooper to Lance Sergeant. This was an indication of his ability. He gladly took responsibility. Peter Young, our Commanding Officer, sent for me and said that one of the other troops required some help and told me to send them a NCO and a trooper for a short period. Jock needed all the experience he could get so I sent him and another man. So off they went, being told to do their best to

assist. It didn't seem long before a message came back telling me that Jock had been killed. I went out at once to find out what had happened.

Evidently the German lines were only about 150 yards from our position. Our line was extended by a hedge, which gave cover. For some reason, Jock moved along until he came to a gap in this hedge. He got across the gap but on his way back, the Germans were waiting for him. It was a sad day for Three Troop for he had many friends, and they all turned up for his funeral in the back garden of the Chateau Amfreville, a nice spot as a temporary resting place.

The next month or so was spent in routine work: patrolling, running a sniping school and generally keeping the lads on their toes. A basketball court was set up, and some good games were played. We occasionally went down to the canal for a swim and there were various inspections by the CO and others. Everything was found to be in good order.

The German Withdrawal

1st Aug. 1944

A short time after Edwards return, we left Amfreville and took up a position further down the line at a place called Le Bois de Bavent where we were much closer to the enemy. Here we encountered a good deal of shelling and mortaring and we suffered a few casualties, but it wasn't long before they discovered that we also had the weapons, and they were a lot quieter when they received twice the quantity of shells and bombs that they were sending us. They soon began their withdrawal and we were fairly close up behind them.

Le Bois De Bavent

This proved to be a rather unpleasant spot, being flat land which was covered with trees and hedges, thus restricting our field of view. The previous occupiers were certainly less aggressive than we were and the Germans at first had very much their own way. On arrival we were greeted with a shower of mortar bombs that resulted in many casualties, mainly caused by the lack of adequate dugouts. However, this situation was soon put to rights and within a few days proper dugouts were dug with good headcover. We got to know where many of the German strongpoints were located, and by ensuring they got back double the number of mortar shells than we received, it proved an excellent method of keeping them in their place.

12th Aug. 1944

Trooper Bennett, one of those in Sgt Major Edwards squad that was captured during our attack over the cornfields, turned up having escaped and making his way through the German and American lines. He was offered some leave but asked if he could stay with the lads for a while. So two of the six had returned. In mid-August we got word that we were to leave this rather unpleasant spot in which we had lost several good men wounded. Early in the morning we were told to prepare to move.

The Advance 17th August, 1944

Four Commando led the advance in single file, followed by four and five troop of Three Commando. All went well until we reached a village called La Riviere when four and five troops came under fire from two machine guns. Plans were rapidly prepared for a frontal attack, but before this could be developed the enemy withdrew. Not long after Varaville was occupied. The village had been completely ruined by Naval gunfire and the enemy had withdrawn across the marshes to the east, leaving some well prepared positions which we were glad to take over. Three troop occupied a line of excellent dugouts on the side of the slope facing east after they had been examined by senior NCO's. One had been mined and was blown up without mishap.

I was sent for by the CO who informed me that it was most important that we found out the condition of the Varaville bridge. It was a request of the Sixth Airborne Division, to which we were attached, and he said that he wanted me to take a small patrol out there during the night. He also said he was sending me Sgt Gray who had been wounded early in the initial landing. I thought this was a chance to get to know the man and so decided to take him with me that night.

The bridge was approached by a straight road of about two miles. All the land on both sides of the road was flooded and so our approach had to be down the road. After a short rest we set off, each armed with a sub-machine gun, a stick and plimsolls, just after it was dark. And it WAS dark. It was a question of feeling rather than seeing. However we found our way not hearing a thing until there were voices ahead from both sides of the road. We had found the main bridge.

Whether it was still intact or not, we still didn't know. In retrospect, we could have risked going right over and taking the chance of being discovered, but we didn't. We retraced our steps and I stripped off and found a gap in the hedge. Here we found two insulated wires, which we thought were telephone wires and so we broke them, and I slipped into the flood water, the idea being to view the bridge from the side. The water was about two feet deep so I was able to pull myself along with my hands without making too much noise.

I got to the riverbank and lay there for about half an hour, hoping the light would improve, but no luck, and I was getting very cold and getting a stinging feeling all over my body. So I returned to the gap in the hedge. The stinging I had felt was caused by leeches! I got dressed and we returned and reported to the CO.

We thought that the bridge was still intact but were not certain and this information we gave to the CO. He therefore decided to send out a daylight patrol of ten men under Lt Thompson and an officer who had recently joined our troop. They set out in the afternoon of the day following our night patrol. I was still asleep when they left but woke soon after and decided to follow them so as to give them the benefit of the information I had gathered the night before.

I caught up with Thompson at a crater in the road about 400 yards from the bridge, and here he and his party had been fired on. After about 300 yards a doodle tank moved into the road and started coming towards the patrol. Lacking any anti-tank weapon, they engaged it with small-arms fire. It started spinning around the road and became uncontrollable. This was a result of the wires being cut the night before.

I then took five section over the field to our right to a house that stood near the River Dives in the hope of getting a good look at the two bridges. The nearest one was still intact but we couldn't see the second one. I was determined to get the information that was wanted, so we attacked across the field with machine guns, moving alternately with rifles. Halfway across, the bridge went up. We continued and took possession of our side of the river, including the dugouts on either side of the road. Looking over the gap I saw a group of Germans a short distance down the road having a pow-wow. Our Bren-gunner, using his mates' shoulder for support, together with my Schmeisser, raked the group with fire while others of our party lobbed grenades on them.

There was a fair amount of debris left in the water from the demolition of the bridge, which made it possible for men to cross. I therefore sent Lt Thompson with a few men over the river in the hope that they could get a view of the second bridge. A short time later Thompson returned having been separated from his men.

It was about this time that Melville was hit from a sniper from our rear, and died shortly afterwards. Hawksworth, our expert sniper and another man were wounded. We sent information back to the CO and when he heard that the main bridge had been blown, he sent Colin Rae, the intelligence officer, to order us to withdraw. He also told the forward observation officer to lay down a smoke screen with his 25 pounders, assisted by our 3" mortars, which didn't have the range to be very effective.

Having been ordered by various officers to withdraw immediately, I thought the lads over the river would make use of the smoke and get back okay. We withdrew our men without further mishap and explained the position to Peter Young. The men who were left over the bridge made their way a short distance upstream and one of them swam over. The others stripped the Bren-gun down into five parts and managed to throw them over the river. One of the men was a non-swimmer, but somehow the other men managed to drag him over, and so they got back without mishap.

During the night that followed, the Germans opened up with their guns, and more by good luck than good judgment they scored a direct hit on the dugout I was in. This

brought the roof down which just missed our feet. Lt Reg Mills was sharing the dugout with me and he thought we should dig our way out. I didn't agree and was soon asleep again!

My batman woke us wondering whether we were alive or dead, and didn't take long to dig us out.

We had a hurried breakfast, thinking that we should get orders to advance, but these were delayed until the evening. Starting an advance, involving the whole brigade of three Commandos, to commence at about one in the morning, was no small achievement, particularly as there was some disagreement amongst the OC Commandos as to how it should be done. However, eventually an agreement was reached and we set off in single file!

20 Aug. 1944.

The night was as black as the night before which was an advantage in that we couldn't be seen by the enemy, but keeping contact with the man ahead was no easy job. We thought that we would be heard but we weren't and we reached our objective which was the top of a high ridge overlooking the river Dives and the bridges we had so recently attacked. This was at first light after a trek of about nine miles. We took the Germans completely by surprise and there were several incidents of them running into our troops to their loss.

Two things that we were short of were food and ammunition, but to our relief ^{DSR} an officer had organized a convoy of three trucks, which were laden with both commodities. By speed alone, they had dashed through the German positions before they had time to wake up! They were with us in time for breakfast, a great effort, which was thoroughly appreciated.

At the top of the ridge, the Germans had built a fine concrete bunker which we made use of to get a spot of sleep. But we weren't there long before the order came through from General Gale to press on and keep contact with the enemy. We were given orders to advance. This we did in bounds, the first being Pont L'Eveque where fortunately we found some shelter for the night, as it rained heavily. The Germans now had the enemy as their guests and started firing from a house that Slinger Martin had passed on the low ground, using what appeared to be cannon shells.

We returned their fire. Troops from other commandos were standing out in the rain, and in the words of Stanley Holloway, "determined but moist!"

The next day, 22nd August, we were moved by transport to Drubec. From there we went to De le Bas Surville. On again to Quetteville being led by Colin Rae who took us up and down every kind of country. We were all tired by the time we arrived.

So the next day we looked forward to a break, but there was no rest for the wicked and orders came through to advance to Bouleville to try and cut off the German retreat and capture the Wehrmacht. A troop from each commando in the Brigade, including 3 troop, started off in the middle of the night.

We had soon left the troops from the other commandos behind and gone on at our usual rapid pace. It was some distance to Bouleville, and we weren't sure where the enemy had withdrawn to, and it was daybreak before we got to our objective.

We discovered that the Germans had withdrawn about two hours before we arrived, and having made a brief stop before entering the village, we were invited into a farmyard where a friendly farmer filled the mugs of every man with warm milk. That, I think, was the finest milk I have ever tasted, and later I became a dairy farmer!

Before departing, the Germans had detonated a mine in the main street, and we were glad to see that it hadn't done too much damage. The radio we carried was out of range of our base, but the French people were delighted to help with the loan of a bicycle on which a messenger was dispatched back to headquarters to report where we were.

We found an excellent billet in the form of a hay barn with a thick covering of straw, and there wasn't a man awake less than ten minutes after we arrived. What a lovely spot that was: restful, beautiful country, good food and no orders. This lasted nearly a week during which time we caught up on our sleep, visited local towns and sampled their excellent wines.

At last we had the order to leave our new friends at the farm, and catch the bus to Mulberry Harbour, which had been floated over from England. There we embarked and awaited sailing orders, minus our bikes and a bed to lie on. We had had about 85 days of action, and now it was time to leave a country we all felt we had done our bit to liberate.

