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THE ROLE OF 56th (INDEPENDENT) INFANTRY BRIGADE DURING THE NORMANDY CAMPAIGN JUNE-SEPTEMBER 1944

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THE ROLE OF 56th (INDEPENDENT) INFANTRY BRIGADE DURING THE NORMANDY CAMPAIGN JUNE-SEPTEMBER 1944

by

ANDREW HOLBORN

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in fulfilment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

April 2009

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University Award.

This work has been undertaken by the author and has been completed by research. It has been self-financed. Relevant lectures provided by the University of Plymouth have been attended throughout this period.

The author has completed the following works and lectures relevant to this study:

1. Lecture 'From Farm Help to Front Line. 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade, Autumn 1943-Normandy 1944.' 26th May 2005. University of Plymouth Public Lectures Series.
2. Article of 2500 words '2nd Battalion Essex Regiment, March – May 1944' published in the Essex Regiment magazine The Eagle March 2008.
3. Introduction to artist Judith Green exhibition of Normandy paintings prompted by her father's service and wounding while serving with 2nd Essex during the Normandy Campaign. Displayed as part of the exhibition on two large panels consisting of 2000 words and photographs. Also as an introduction to the exhibition catalogue. Exhibited in the Etz Chaim Gallery, Highgate Gallery and Musee de Tilly-sur-Seulles. Summer 2008.

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Signed.....

Date..... 16th July 2009.....

ANDREW HOLBORN

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ABSTRACT

Comprised of three regular battalions of infantry, 2nd Battalion The South Wales Borderers, 2nd Battalion The Essex Regiment, 2nd Battalion The Gloucester Regiment and Brigade HQ, 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade was only formed in early March 1944. Its specific task was to land 'under command' of 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division on D-Day. This Division itself was made up of three brigades of very experienced infantry.

What is remarkable is that 56th Infantry Brigade's infantry battalions had all been on Home Service since June 1940 and were not experienced in battle. Despite this, within only thirteen weeks of formation, 56th Infantry Brigade task was to land on Gold Beach on D-Day as follow up troops and fight inland taking the town of Bayeux by nightfall. After this the Brigade was expected to provide infantry for 7th Armoured Division in a quick push south to take Villers-Bocage.

This study traces the journey made by the three battalions of 56th Brigade from 1940 through to a very concentrated forming up and training period specific to the Normandy landings in 1944. It follows their actions from the landings through to the taking of Le Havre in September 1944, by which time the Brigade had served in four different divisions and lost its 'Independent' title to become a permanent member of 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division for the remainder of the war in North West Europe.

No study has previously been made of 56th Infantry Brigade and extensive use has been made of primary evidence from The National Archives and other sources in this investigation. A considerable amount of new evidence has been gathered by interviews with surviving veterans of 56th Infantry Brigade. The evidence is used to explore issues that shed new light on life in the Army at home during the war, training for war and the Normandy Campaign.

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The Imperial War Museum Departments of Documents and Books, Photos and Film Archives were unfailingly helpful and interested. Equally The National Archive at Kew was crucial in providing primary sources. The staff there were very helpful, either face to face or via e-mail, in providing links to sources on occasion when a dead end seemed to have been met.

I received much help from the LST and Landing Craft Association, Veteran Affairs Canada and the Naval Museum of Manitoba when trying to gain information about 264th (Canadian) Landing Craft Flotilla.

Finally this work has gained enormously from the information, interest, help and encouragement of the members of 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade who contributed in so many ways. Their names and regiments appears in the list of Primary Sources on pages 293 and 294 at the end of the study.

'NOS A GULIELMO VICTI VICTORIS PATRIAM LIBERAVIMUS'

('We, once conquered by William, have now set free the Conquerors native land').

Inscription on the Commonwealth War Graves Memorial to the Missing, Bayeux.

Introduction.

This thesis will investigate the part played by 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade, which was raised barely three months before the D-Day Landings. The Brigade was given important tasks on D-Day, during the Normandy Campaign and throughout the remainder of the war in North West Europe. The work will focus on the raising of the Brigade and its training and deployment in operations from April until September 1944. The brigade was the smallest tactical formation in the British Army. No proper evaluation of a British infantry brigade involved in Normandy appears to have been attempted before. Certainly the role of 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade in the Normandy Campaign of 1944 has not been investigated. The thesis will therefore offer an examination of the Normandy Campaign from a fresh perspective and provide insight into the British Army at Brigade level in the later stages of the Second World War.

Works on the Normandy Campaign have concentrated on army, divisional or battalion level, but the critical role of an infantry brigade in the structure, organisation and operations of a division has not previously been attempted.[1] The rank of Brigadier is the highest field officer rank. An infantry division usually contains three brigades, each of three battalions. Also an infantry division would have attached to it 'under command', artillery, heavy mortar, anti-tank, medium machinegun, signals, provost, engineer, armour and other units depending on the task in hand. Some elements of these units as required would be passed down and come under the command of the divisional brigades.

As late as February 1944 Montgomery; (the overall land forces commander in operations) decided that 50th (Northumbrian) Division would replace 49th (West Riding)

Division for the assault and exploitation of the landings on Gold Beach. In planning for D-Day, General Graham of 50th Division decided he required an extra brigade to fulfil all of his allotted tasks. Also Montgomery perceived the future need after the landings and initial exploitation of a spare brigade under 21st Army Group's direct control, to deploy as required. Hence 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade was raised and was unique in respect of being an Army Group formation rather than part of a divisional unit for the majority of the Normandy Campaign. In the event the plans for a swift breakout after the landings were not realised and the allied army had to swiftly adapt to the changed situation during June, July and early August 1944, fighting in the close confines of the Normandy countryside known as the bocage.

The methodology for the research behind the thesis involved an examination of primary and secondary sources from the British National Archive, Imperial War Museum, National Army Museum, regimental museums, county museums, museums in Normandy and site visits. This material includes written, oral, photographic and film sources. Many books have been written about D-Day and the Battle of Normandy and these secondary sources, where relevant, were used to look at how discussion, argument and even myth over the effective role of different forces in Normandy has developed over the last sixty years. In this study the most important primary source was the surviving veterans of the Brigade, the majority of whom have not been interviewed before. Forty-four members of the Brigade have helped by giving interviews and materials. Useful information has also been gathered from a veteran from 2nd Hertfordshire Regiment Beach Group who landed on Gold Beach early on D-Day, a veteran of 203 Field Ambulance Unit attached to 56th Brigade until August 1944 and two French people who as children lived in the vicinity of Tilly-sur-Seulles. Despite the passing of over sixty years memory has provided a useful and vivid link with the events

of 1944 and this oral history provides a test for the veracity and usefulness of some primary and secondary written sources. The text from these interviews is to be made available to centres such as the Imperial War Museum, National Army Museum and the relevant Regimental Museums as well as museums in Normandy at Arromanches, Bayeux, Caen and Tilly-sur-Seulles. The agreement of the interviewed veterans for this dissemination has been properly sought. The relationship of this project to the evolution of military oral history will be discussed in the conclusion.

There are a number of reasons that make the operations of this particular infantry brigade and its differences from other infantry brigades at that time worthy of investigation. The Brigade was only formed as a new brigade in March 1944. This gave it little time for the three battalions to get used to working with each other and to train for their expected tasks on D-Day and after. Next it was made up of three regular battalions - 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers, 2nd Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment and 2nd Battalion Essex Regiment. They had been 'Home Service' battalions since 1940 and had not, prior to February 1944, expected to have an important part in the coming invasion. They were under strength as they had been used in the previous three years as reinforcement units based in the UK. As an 'independent' brigade they were to be 'under command' of 50th Division for the initial landings. They were subsequently expected to be taken under command by 7th Armoured Division (General Erskine), as an extra brigade of infantry during the planned quick exploitation and breakout from the bridgehead. In the event they only came under command of 7th Armoured Division for a brief period of time and between June and September 1944 they fought as part of four different divisions.

It is a unit that followed a much more complex path than expected from January 1944 to the end of the campaign in Normandy, reflecting how the campaign developed very differently from that planned. In one aspect in particular it bears close scrutiny. Of the four Infantry Brigades that landed on Gold Beach on D-Day, it alone was not already tried in battle. 50th Division as a unit had been brought back from Italy by Montgomery as an experienced division to ensure all went well in Normandy. As with the three other 50th Division brigades, 56th Brigade had important and clearly allotted tasks on D-Day. It was to land, drive inland and take and hold the ground around and south of Bayeux by that evening. In addition it was the unit that was tasked to hold the extreme right flank of the British Army in Normandy, and make the junction with US forces. As things turned out even this complex task was made more difficult by events on Omaha Beach and the harder than expected German resistance elsewhere.

The training of the Brigade in the three months prior to D-Day was not always specific to task. Its late addition to the D-Day order of battle meant that it had to follow a steep learning curve. Many of the men had been in those battalions for some time. A few had fought in Norway or France and had suffered defeat in 1940. In the interim the battalions had provided Home Defence and men for units fighting abroad. By 1944 the battalions comprising the brigade were a mix of regular soldiers and conscripts of all ages. Some were recuperating from wounds or disease caused on active service in Italy or Burma, while others were considered too old to stand up to the rigours of combat. It meant that replacements were joining the brigade to bring the battalions up to full strength very nearly to the day of embarkation for France. The number of replacements was considerable. The Brigade Headquarters of some two hundred men also had to be built from scratch.

Once landed in France the allies found defeating the German Army was much more difficult than expected. Realisation of this simple aim was often confused and complicated by differences of opinion and personality between the allied generals and the differing political hopes and aspirations of the allied leaders for the future. Without doubt the invasion of Normandy was an extraordinary event in the World Wars of the last century. The organisation and training of the very large inter-service and international allied force that landed on the mainland of Europe was more difficult than any previous operation carried out by the allies. They then had to maintain this force by sea and fight and defeat a tenacious, well-trained and equipped enemy versed in the arts of holding defensive positions in a campaign lasting over three months. Failure on D-Day or soon after would have significantly altered the course of the Second World War and it is doubtful if such an invasion could have been re-launched. This was fully realised not only by the Allied leaders, both military and political, but the German General staff as well.

The sources mentioned below give an overview of the written material available directly relevant to 56th Brigade and its operations. Important primary written evidence concerning 56th Brigade can be found at the National Archive: Public Record Office (NA: PRO) in the following series; WO or War Office; ADM or Admiralty; AIR or Air Ministry and CAB or Cabinet Office. Of greatest importance are the unit War Diaries in the series WO 171. On a daily basis a record had to be kept of actions and their results by each of the three Battalions[2] and the Brigade Headquarters.[3] These diaries were kept on a foolscap sheet, typed or even sometimes handwritten on 'Army Form C 2118 War Diary or Intelligence Summary'. They provide a fascinating insight into the day-by-day progress of the Brigade. The War Diaries often contain as annexes complete operational orders. That for D-Day; (56 Brigade Operational Order No. 1) runs to twenty-five

pages. The War Diaries provide a brief overview of events, sometimes including casualties and positional map references. Their annexes may contain individual patrol reports, passwords and minute tactical details. All the war diaries carry a weekly register called a 'Field Return'. For the officers it gives names and ranks, but only numbers of men for non-commissioned officers and other ranks. However this is a very useful piece of information for tracking casualties, reinforcements and appointments.

An important addition with the 2nd South Wales Borderers War Diary between January and May 1944 is a copy of the Battalion weekly mimeographed newspaper, which included Battalion Orders as well as lectures and accounts of inter-battalion Rugby matches! Once committed to action this seems to have been either discontinued or not saved with the War Diary. A copy of each War Diary appears to have been officially filed with the Army War Diary Section within a few weeks of writing according to official stamps observed on some of the War Diary pages. However at Brigade HQ and in the Battalions they were written typically by a nineteen or twenty-year-old Intelligence Officer (IO) holding the rank of Lieutenant, or a member of his section, usually within a few hundred yards of the front line. They are inevitably not completely reliable. No one was specifically trained to do this job - it was something you 'picked up'. Sometimes during very difficult fighting there are even gaps in the War Diaries for a few days. The War Diaries of some units operating in the same areas as 56 Brigade have also been examined to add to the available evidence in some actions or operations. However not all War Diaries were kept at the end of the Second World War. An example of an important loss to researchers is that of the War Diary of 47 Commando who landed on Gold Beach on D-Day. "The unit diaries for April to July 1944 unfortunately have not survived for 47 Commando Royal Marines".[4]

There are other official documents at the National Archive with direct relevance to the Brigade. A good example is WO 219/30077. This is the Landing Table document, which shows that already by mid April 1944 the specific type and number of ships required to land 56th Brigade, including all its tracked vehicles and motor transport on D-Day, had been worked out at a time when the Brigade had only been in being for six weeks. Cabinet Office papers were often written about specific actions in order to provide the Cabinet detail of operations and intelligence or a historical record. Useful papers in this series exist giving sometimes detailed information for actions involving 56th Brigade, CAB 44/247, 'Operations 7th – 16th June 1944' and CAB 44/248 'Operations 16th June – 29th August'. These are extensive written documents including maps from the Cabinet Office Historical Section. Shorter papers include the taking of Le Havre in September 1944, CAB 106/958 'Operation Astonia'.

A number of studies were written soon after the end of the war and were officially sanctioned. In the first instance some studies and papers were written to inform and educate the British and United States military as to how an event or campaign developed. Doubtless these formed the basis of lectures or modules at Staff Colleges and Military Academies in both countries. Directly useful to this study is D-Day: 30 Corps and Gold Beach, completed by May 1950 by Lt. Col A. Warhurst who took part in the Normandy Campaign. These types of narratives (the official description) are put together by the careful scrutiny of battalion and other unit war diaries and the interrogation of key people within a few years of the events. Much of the detail from narratives such as that produced by Lt. Col. Warhurst were then incorporated in the later 18 volume official British History of the Second World War. The two volumes directly covering this study are Victory in the West, Volume 1. The Battle of Normandy, (1962), and Victory in the West, Volume II. The Defeat of

Germany, (1968). It will be noted that these two volumes were published quite some time after the war had ended and did not escape criticism for a bland exposition of events, and a favourable interpretation of events towards General Montgomery.

Other, but very different, important contemporary works written by the War Office concern the various training manuals. Examples of direct relevance are Infantry Training Part VIII. The War Office 1944. This manual for tactics up to platoon level was used from March 1944. It allows us to understand the tactics used by the smaller units within the battalions, but being published so close to D-Day one wonders how much time officers and men had to draw conclusions over its content. Similar Pamphlets in the series Infantry Training: The Anti Tank Platoon 1943 and Infantry Training: The Carrier Platoon 1943, help us to understand how these vehicles and weapons were to be used to aid the infantry battalion in action. One other pamphlet, Military Training Pamphlet No. 63: The Co-Operation of Tanks with Infantry Divisions is worthy of examination due to the controversy that was later to surround infantry/tank co-operation in Normandy. Yet again this was published too late in May 1944 for time to be given to digest its teaching. The above are good examples of the type of contemporary pamphlet available giving us an insight into how units were organised and why they operated tactically in the way that they did.

A further source of primary written evidence lie with the Regimental and County Museums, where veterans of the war have deposited diaries or notes they made at the time or later. An interesting point is that the keeping of such diaries were strictly against orders. Where these exist they often shed a very real light on events. Luckily three such diaries have been copied to the author from the veterans themselves. However a search of the relevant museums showed only a small number of records

exist. The generation who fought in 1944 seem to have been less likely to produce writing for us of this type than their fathers did after the Great War of 1914-18. However each of the 56th Brigade battalions have left some sort of history of their actions. 2nd South Wales Borderers had a definitive history written by Major Boon published in1955,[5] 2nd Essex published a smaller booklet in the late 1940's[6] while articles published between 1950 and 1980 in their regimental magazine, The Back Badge, trace the war history of 2nd Glosters. These are very good on actions and personalities down to at least NCO level, but of course offer little critical evaluation within the battalion actions, although they occasionally offer veiled criticism of other units or orders from above.

In the Imperial War Museum (IWM) Collections rest important primary evidence in the shape of contemporary photographic, film, oral and written evidence. Film or photographic evidence can be used to confirm any manner of detail; what the infantryman carried into battle or even the sea state or weather for a particular day. However, again, unfortunately there is no great store of this material directly relating to 56th Brigade. Even though trained soldiers from the Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU) landed on D-Day and carried on throughout the campaign, when examining the archives one is struck by the lack of material considering the breadth of the action. Careful analysis of photographs has allowed this author to offer evidence to re-title and date a small number of photographs within the collection.

Another useful resource would be to investigate similar documents and articles pertaining to the German forces opposing 56th Brigade. However primary evidence documents such as War Diaries seem to have all been destroyed in the fighting and retreat by the German Army in August 1944. Useful documents exist but are further

removed from the unit. Examples include, D-Day: German Appreciations and Operations 6th June – 25th August 1944 and German Operations in North West Europe 20th August – 16th December 1944, both authored by the Historical Section of the Canadian Army, they give a narrative from the perspective of the German Army from captured contemporary sources or interrogation of German prisoners of high rank.

It is important to understand the context within which 56th Brigade operated. The Normandy Campaign has been ceaselessly written about for the last sixty years, yet it still invites comment, discussion, investigation and controversy. Because official British Documents concerning the Normandy Campaign were not open to public examination until 1974, (usually their original 'release' date was 2045 or later), the early writers based their works on their personal memories and through interview or correspondence with the main protagonists. Later writers could have recourse to examination of official documents, briefing notes, appreciation notes personal papers of staff officers and notes from Staff College courses.

The works of three authors who were present in Normandy and beyond are worth exploring at this stage. Firstly Chester Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe is a well-written and comprehensive work. Written by a war correspondent who landed on D-Day by glider with 6th Airborne Division, Wilmot unusually had access to both the Western Allied sources and German sources available just after the war. In the Preface to the 1964 edition Michael Howard shows the scope and quality of the work:

> Now as then it stands out as one of those rare works of military history... which have enduring value both as an eyewitness account and as authoritative survey of a large and complex campaign... it fell to Wilmot to give the English speaking world the first general survey, based on documents, of the manner in which strategy and grand tactics had been shaped on both sides of the hill, and of the bitter conflicts which lay behind the great decisions of war.[7]

Written without access to Russian sources at the height of the Cold War and of course without reference to 'Ultra' - knowledge of which did not enter the public domain until the 1970s - his work has stood the test of time.

The second author has a similar pedigree as a war correspondent who landed on Gold Beach later on D-Day. Writing about the war from the invasion of Italy in 1943 until the end of the war in Europe, Alan Moorehead in Eclipse has completed a very different, and worthwhile work. In his Foreword to the book, Moorehead writes: 'In the beginning it was my intention...to try an experiment: merely to sketch in the military details and tell the story of the collapse of German Europe sociologically and politically, psychologically and even emotionally'.[8] This is a highly informative, readable and personal account of the war. It shows insight into events and personalities and received critical acclaim when first published.

The third author is Milton Shulman who wrote, Defeat in the West. Shulman was an Intelligence Officer with the Canadian Army and with Lt. Colonel Leslie Chater interrogated twenty-six senior captured German Officers. He correctly claims that his book contains some 'unique primary source material' and for the purposes of the investigation of 56th Brigade it contains directly useful evidence in notes from the interrogation of the Le Havre fortress commander and some of the commanders of divisions, which at times faced 56th Brigade.[9]

A very good British novel, From the City, from the Plough by Alexander Baron, brings to life the journey of a fictitious unit, the '5th Wessex Battalion', from January to July 1944. First published in 1948 this novel was critically acclaimed by The Tribune as

'magnificent'.[10] Alexander Baron served in the Army in the Second World War and landed with the first wave on D-Day. It was his first novel and it is purported to have sold over a million copies. There are uncanny similarities between characters and events in the novel to some of the stories told to this author by veterans or read in Battalion or personal diaries from 1944. The strength of this novel is that it highlights the effect of the Normandy battlefield on the ordinary British soldier. Some of the detail disguises real events and it is skilfully written. While serving Baron made notes on events and questioned men from the front during rest periods. Many veterans have or had read a copy. In his own Normandy Campaign history, Caen Anvil of Victory, based around the controversy relating to the taking of Caen and Montgomery's strategic claims, Alexander McKee - himself a Normandy veteran - states that 'The best description of 5 Wilts (5th Wiltshire Bn.) at Mont Pincon is in Alexander Baron's 'From the City, From the Plough', a novel, written as fiction, but factually by far the best thing done on the Normandy Campaign'.[11]

The early release in the 1970s of wartime documents held at the British National Archives allowed historians new and unparalleled access and led to a number of important critical works by the 1980s. One of the most important is Decision in Normandy [12] by Carlo D' Este. This clear and comprehensive work centres on the strategy of Montgomery and the debate on its success or failure that still excites controversy today. D' Este encapsulates its content in his Introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition: 'Montgomery's so called master plan became one of the most debated and least understood stratagems of his military career. It generated nearly endless debate and to this day arouses fierce reaction in his critics and admirers'. D' Este writes fluently and authoritively about the campaign and focuses on the post-war controversy surrounding the relationship between Eisenhower (Supreme Allied

Commander) and Montgomery (Army Commander), and Montgomery's assertion that the Normandy Campaign went according to his master plan. As well as interviews with important politicians and generals, D' Este availed himself of American and Canadian material that had been available since the end of the War as well as the 'new' British National Archives material.

At about the same time as the release of the PRO documents, the death of Field Marshal Montgomery released Nigel Hamilton from his promise to Montgomery to publish his three-volume biography only after the death of the Field Marshal. The three volumes cover the Field Marshal's life as follows: Monty, The Making of a General 1887-1942 (1981), Monty, Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944 (1983) and Monty, The Field Marshal 1944-1977 (1986). Hamilton explores the disagreements between Montgomery and Eisenhower, and Monty's insistence that his battle plans from Alam Halfa in 1942 onwards always went to plan. His sometimes harsh and seemingly thoughtless treatment of fellow Generals is fully explored including an assessment of Montgomery's character. What is also very useful is to follow how Montgomery developed as a field commander and especially the development of his tactical appreciation of the battlefield. D' Este in the Epilogue of Decision in Normandy makes it clear that the two authors had a lively debate by letter.

Montgomery's own autobiography The Memoirs of Field Marshal Montgomery (1958) caused no little controversy. Without doubt the autobiography is flawed by Montgomery's relentless pursuit to show himself in a good light. However that does not mean that he was not one of, if not the best battlefield commander on the Allied side. The Memoirs of Field Marshal Montgomery is a very useful book on a number of counts. Montgomery reproduces primary evidence in the form of notes that he used and

letters he wrote, as well as telling the story from his point of view. He gives a very interesting picture of those he had working around him.

The Longest Day [13] by Cornelius Ryan is an early text in the long line of writers who have presented D-Day by the use of oral history with supporting evidence linking the story. It is a very good example of how eyewitness testimony can be simply woven into a text that holds and fascinates the reader. The use of oral history adds to our knowledge of the events of D-Day providing us with detail not usually found in official documents. The best accounts are very human and hold our attention through the power of personal narrative.

The most widely read of these offerings in the last decade have been written by the American writer Stephen Ambrose. Two volumes, D-Day (1994) and Citizen Soldier (1997) have been very successful commercially. The first follows the planning and preparation for the invasion to D-Day, while the second book takes up the story from June 7th until the end of the war in May 1945. Major criticisms have been levelled at Ambrose's work. He undoubtedly concentrates heavily on the American experience in Normandy. Yet on D-Day the British sea and air landings were not only more successful than the American, but they also put ashore much greater numbers of men and material as planned. Moreover there are some doubts whether or not some events took place as Ambrose has written of them. As an American writer it could be understood that Ambrose wrote initially for an American market. As Director of the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans he had easy access to its repository of US military oral history. In fact it seems that a number of American writers including Ambrose have undervalued the contribution of the British Army and its successes from D-Day to the end of the Normandy Campaign. For example Ambrose does mention

almost in passing some problems faced on Gold Beach, but what is missing is reference to the bravery of the assault battalions who doggedly continued in their task of reducing strong points and fighting inland to allow passage for the follow up troops of the second wave including 56th Brigade. Also his description of the Gold Beach topography and defences is clearly inaccurate and replicates mistakes made by earlier American authors.

Exploration of the actual battleground is very important to aid in the understanding of what happened, why certain decisions were taken and why often enough confusion rather than order seemed to reign. To understand relatively small unit actions from brigade down to company level it is vital, where possible, to visit the actual ground. Holmes has written, 'I had not visited the battlefield (El Alamein) before working on this project, and I am reminded, yet again, of the unwisdom of imagining that one can really understand a battle without seeing the ground'.[14] Therefore this author has undertaken a series of visits to Normandy to determine where possible the course of actions and difficulties caused by the terrain. Publications which have helped achieve this include the Battle Zone Normandy [15] series. Most of the authors have some connection with the Royal Military Academy which as part of its teaching has undertaken battlefield tours. Well illustrated with photographs, maps and diagrams; both contemporary and modern, they are ideal for a person who wants to delve into a certain area of the battlefield. However they give little in the way of extra insight and for the serious historian; no attempt has been made to acknowledge the sources of information. Two similar volumes in the Battleground Europe series, Gold Beach-Inland from King [16] and Gold Beach-Jig Sector and West, [17] are disappointing as they really offer only an overview with a little insight into some of the actions. A useful and fairly comprehensive battlefield tour book for D-Day and the Normandy landings was found to be Major and Mrs. Holts Battlefield Guide, Normandy Beaches. [18]

The picture we have of the Normandy Campaign is deeply problematic as a result of significant gaps and problems with both the primary and secondary sources. This study, utilizing fresh primary sources, will address a significant gap in our understanding. It will examine closely, through the use of primary and secondary sources and the eyes of the veterans, the journey made by a British infantry brigade from relative safety in the UK to speedy mobilization and intensive training, fitting it for close combat from D-Day to the completion of the liberation of Normandy with the capturing of Le Havre in September 1944. It will add to the understanding of British Army operations 1944 from the level of Brigade down, the problems faced and overcome by commanders in the field at different levels, underline the differences between British and German tactics and add a significant body of oral history. Together this will give a unique worms eye view of British operations in the Normandy Campaign.

References: Introduction.

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Chapter One.
In the Wings. Continental War to Home Front. 2nd Battalions Essex, Glosters and South Wales Borderers. June 1940 – December 1943.

This first chapter will be used to describe how the three battalions that eventually formed 56th Independent Infantry Brigade, 2nd Battalions Essex, Glosters and South Wales Borderers, made their wartime journey from early exposure to battle, then service on the Home Front from 1940 to the end of 1943. By then, at least some officers became aware that the battalions would play some part in the invasion of France in 1944. Importantly this chapter will be used to show the differing backgrounds and experiences of some of the men that made up these battalions, and how induction, training and service in the army affected them during this period. It will also show how the expected use of the army evolved and developed over three and a half years. From an army very much inexperienced and lacking the experience of modern war, yet expecting to have to fight off a German invasion, to an army ready to take on the enemy through one of the most difficult of military operations – an opposed landing on an enemy coast.

During the first half of 1940 all three battalions were involved in operations against the German Army. 2nd South Wales Borders saw action in Norway and the 2nd Essex and 2nd Glosters were involved in the so-called 'Phoney War' and then the desperate fighting in France and evacuation of the British Army at Dunkirk. Their service was typical of regular units at this time. They suffered from having to use inadequate weaponry and tactics caused through nearly two decades of the political pursuit for peace.

The 2nd South Wales Borderers were part of 24th (Guards) Infantry Brigade in Norway, first as part of a unit called Avonforce from 01/4/40 to 19/4/40 and then

Rupertforce from 19/4/40 to 13/5/40.[1] Although the battalion was only involved in a small amount of fighting, it suffered six men killed and thirteen wounded. Two men won the Distinguished Conduct Medal for gallantry. The conditions were trying with a lack of equipment suitable for the Norwegian weather and limited air support. When this unsuccessful campaign came to an end, the 2nd South Wales Borderers were embarked on the cruiser HMS Effingham and were lucky to escape without casualties when HMS Effingham struck a rock and was wrecked on 17th May 1940. The battalion had to be transferred to another destroyer before evacuation home to a nation now living in uncertainty and near chaos compared with the situation of only a few weeks before.[2] One newly trained soldier, joining 2nd South Wales Borderers on their return to Britain, provides this insightful vignette:

> I was called up on 16th October 1939 to go to Brecon. I lived in Swansea. The food was absolutely awful; the numbers of people being called up swamped them. We had a lot of lads from Lancashire, they couldn't understand us and we couldn't understand them! But it worked itself out! I joined the 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers in Scotland in 1940 when the Battalion came back from Norway. Rather a strange brigade there – a battalion of the Scots Guards, South Wales Borderers and the Foreign Legion![3]

The 2nd Essex were present during the 'Phoney War' in France and then the retreat and evacuation at Dunkirk. Most men came off along the Mole at Dunkirk in good order on 30th May 1940 and were evacuated to England. However the confusion that reigned during the evacuation is apparent from the regimental history: 'the Battalion was dispersed from Aberdeen to Bulford. By 10th June 1940 Battalion HQ was at Newcastle-under-Lyme and consisted of only 3 officers and 37 other ranks'.[4] It took another fortnight for the battalion to gather to near full size of 23 officers and 895 other ranks. Peter Giggens then a newly trained recruit to the Essex Regiment was caught up in the chaos of a battalion returning from Dunkirk and having to quickly reorganise:

> I was called up in 1939 and after training and roadblock duties near Billericay, was sent to Dover to join 2nd Essex in France. We paraded daily at Dover Harbour then told we were not going over that day. After some days we noticed some soldiers coming back from France and one day some wounded being unloaded from the ships. Finally we were briefed about what was happening at Dunkirk and sent to Stoke on Trent with some of those evacuated at Dunkirk, then on to Keele Hall where the Battalion was reformed.[5]

Another new 2nd Essex soldier, Charles Benford, was similarly on his way to Dover at the same time when his progress was checked. He had completed four months training before he was sent on a draft from Billericay Station to Dover in May 1940. He was expecting to go by boat to France to join 2nd Essex and the BEF already fighting the Germans. On the first night he was billeted in Archer Hall, Billericay, having previously loaded his kit bags on to a train to Dover. The following morning the officer in charge fell ill and was taken to hospital. Unfortunately nobody informed Warley Barracks of this. Now another day later, having slept on a hard floor covered by only one blanket with his haversack for a pillow and nothing to eat, he waited for orders. In the end the soldiers got onto the senior corporal to go to the police station and inform them. The police allowed the corporal to phone Warley Barracks and explain the situation. In due course an officer arrived to take charge. Later a 15cwt lorry arrived with food in hay boxes. "Then another officer arrived. He addressed us and told us it would be doubtful if we would continue to Dover as they were having a spot of bother. We would have to stay there until further orders".[6] After complaining to the officer about the hard floor and only having one blanket, another lorry arrived carrying straw palliasses and two extra blankets each. To keep them occupied they were detailed in parties of four to go to the bus stop, get on the buses and check people's identity cards. Eventually they received an entraining order and went to Newcastle under Lyme and were billeted in Keele Hall. There they waited to be joined by the remnants of 2nd Essex from Dunkirk.[7] Confusion reigned as the authorities strove to bring military order out of the chaos of the Dunkirk evacuation.

Like the 2nd Essex, the 2nd Glosters were also involved in the 'Phoney War' from early October 1939, the Battle for France, and the evacuation from Dunkirk. As part of 145th Infantry Brigade they had a much harder time of it, particularly when fighting a fierce action at the small hill town of Cassell that blocked the road to Dunkirk. Many men were lost and a Cabinet Office publication states, 'the Brigade suffered heavy casualties during May 1940, the Brigade Command and the units were surrounded and captured. Only details of Bde HQ and Units escaped and returned to the UK on 1st June 1940 to reform'.[8] Around 100 men of 2nd Glosters came home. The casualties were severe, 5 officers and 132 men were dead and 472 made prisoner.[9] Bill Robinson remembers what it was like to join and serve with the Glosters. Called up in September 1939 Bill went to the Glosters Barracks at Horfield. There they had ten weeks infantry training which mainly consisted of square bashing. "You couldn't get out of the barracks at all before you could salute properly, and despite it being a hot summer, you had to have greatcoat and gloves on before they would let you pass the guardroom!"[10] To him it was worse than a prison and like a prison a big wall surrounded it. He made good friends but they were split up and one group followed through as infantrymen and the others went into the Motor Transport (MT) Section. The infantry training was based on the cricket ground and the MT Section on the Memorial Ground.

Just before Christmas in 1939 they were all told they had three days leave. No special reason was given. When they got back to barracks they had to get into Full Service Marching Order (FSMO), with kitbags and rifles "the bloody lot". Told initially they were marching to New Passage where the rifle range and assault course was they realised that they were going straight down Gloster Road to Bristol Temple Meads railway station. This had a special fish platform that they went straight onto and then

onto a troop train to join the BEF as reinforcements for the 2nd Battalion in France. At Dover they boarded two rusty steam troopships. The crossing was not very comfortable and it took more than four hours to get to Calais.

> Two at a time we had to go on deck with our rifles looking for mines. When we looked at the other ship, one minute it was there and the next minute it had disappeared in the swell, it was that rough! Anyway my time in France in 1939/40 ended up being wounded after a Stuka had bombed the truck just beyond Rouen. Shrapnel hit me and I had a big red X on my forehead because I had been given morphine. I was put on a hospital train to Dunkirk and got away on a destroyer from the docks and ended up in hospital at Stanmore in Middlesex.[11]

Once back in the United Kingdom and reorganised, these regular battalions of the British Army had a heavy burden to bear. The expectation was that the German Army after its swift victory in the Low Countries and France would follow up with an invasion of Britain. An immediate programme of expansion of the Army and re-equipment was put in place. The Local Defence Volunteers (LDV – later Home Guard) were formed. According to Winston Churchill the BEF had left behind in France 7,000 tons of ammunition, 90,000 rifles, 2,300 guns, 8,200 vehicles, 8,000 Bren guns and 400 anti- tank rifles. 'Never has a great nation been so naked before her foes'.[12] On 8th June 1940 the War Office supplied a very worrying general sketch of Home Forces. It was expected that it would take three weeks to reform the BEF. Meanwhile, including Northern Ireland, there were fifteen infantry Divisions and one armoured division available. The average strength of each division was just over half their establishment figure at around 11,000 men per division. 'Two had done no divisional training, five very little and the rest were at a standard described as "fair".[13]

In times other than world conflict a regiment of infantry of the line would have two regular army battalions, one battalion (Foreign Service Battalion) often serving

abroad for several years and the other (Home Service Battalion) providing training for new recruits and reinforcements as required for the battalion abroad. The Terms of Engagement for the Regular Army were seven years with the colours and five years on the Reserve, so that there were two benefits; firstly a pool of highly experienced soldiers and secondly that officers and men served for many years together. In the summer of 1939 the terms were reversed. "A number of pre-war officers and soldiers were still there at D-Day".[14] Also there would have been a territorial battalion, part-time for home service only and containing a large number of ex regulars serving their five years 'on reserve'. The centres for all of this were the Regimental HQ and barracks; Brecon for the South Wales Borderers, Warley, (Brentwood) for the Essex Regiment and Horfield Barracks, (Bristol) for the Glosters. In wartime the territorial battalions increased in number and with the regulars were likely to serve abroad. By 1944 the earlier establishment figures of 1941/42 infantry battalion had been increased but because of cross postings, training, illness, injuries and casualties when in action, this figure was not often attained.

An important point to establish is that the different battalions in a regiment were unlikely to serve together in wartime. Each regiment had its own badges, customs, special days, likes and dislikes and geographical areas of recruiting and so was distinctive from other regiments. Each man would learn these regimental ways and become a part of this special group. The Regiment even used its Victorian Regimental number, so that the South Wales Borderers were the 24th Foot, Essex, 44th Foot and 2nd Glosters, 61st Foot and in this way another distinction, pecking order and rivalry, were perpetuated. The lower the number the more senior the regiment. But in the developing war some battalions of a regiment might serve in the UK, others in the Middle East and yet others in the Far East. Each infantry battalion usually became part of a brigade

formation (normally of three battalions) and each brigade part of a division (normally of three brigades). A Division had other supporting arms of service attached such as artillery, service corps, signals and engineers and even armoured formations as required.

Immediately after June 1940 the concentration of effort had to be on defending Britain, while at the same time maintaining operations in the Middle East and a grip on parts of the Empire not directly at war. This meant that not only was the army very stretched and limited in weaponry after Dunkirk but it had to be prepared to defend the country while maintaining an effective training programme. The 2nd Essex for example included physical training, tank hunting and repelling parachute troops in their training regime. Also they were responsible for helping train the newly formed Local Defence Volunteers and help in the construction of blockhouses, ditches, wiring and other defensive works. At this time along natural physical barriers like rivers or downland, a number of 'Stop Lines' were being erected in the east and south east of the country, the area most likely to receive the expected invasion.

This use of trained soldiery as labour exasperated Winston Churchill, the new Prime Minister. A note to the Secretary of State for War on 25th June 1940 ordered, 'I fear that the troops are being used in large numbers on fortifications. At the present stage they should be drilling and training for at least eight hours a day, including one smart parade every morning'.[15] He wanted all the labour for these tasks found from civilian sources. He wasn't to get his way. Further, the expectation was that trained infantry would not be used either to guard or defend vulnerable points or be locked up in fortifications, they were fit for a war of manoeuvre. In the immediacy of the crisis static defence was the task of older soldiers and the LDV. At least by mid June every active regular soldier had a personal weapon to hand.

Peter Giggens of 2nd Essex describe how at Worthing, Sussex they built a pillbox inside the post box of the large central Post Office. Sandbagged on the inside, people posting letters were "surprised and jumped a foot when the letters were taken from their hands when dropping them through the opening, which became a disguised fire slit."[16] They erected Dannert Wiring[17] as defences between Lancing and Worthing. On the Isle of Wight they put up scaffolding defences at low tide and mined the beach. Charles Benford believes that the battalion was responsible for erecting 60 miles of steel framework around the whole island. "We used to go out and take note of the tides. Sometimes we were out there and the tide was coming in and the officer might say, "come on lads one more frame before the water gets in!"[18] This use of regular infantry as labour was to carry on long after Churchill's minute of 25th June 1940. Over a year later he wrote: 'Prime Minister to Secretary of State for War 5th October 1941: I do not approve the idea of using the Army to dig land drains or for other work of this character during the winter'.[19] However as late as February 1944 the 2nd South Wales Borderers received a letter from James Christie, the Secretary of the Norfolk War Agricultural Executive Committee, sending thanks for the invaluable work carried out by the battalion helping farmers to harvest root crops during the autumn of 1943. Inevitably this work was named 'Exercise Sugar Beet!'[20]

By mid June the 2nd Glosters were in the throes of reforming and training after the losses in France, and use of this regular, but largely rebuilt, infantry battalion seems similar as Syd Hampton recalled that as the 2nd Battalion Glosters were being reformed Churchill's idea was to send troops back into France. They had had little training and if it had happened Hampton believes that they would have been massacred. While at

Ross-on-Wye a lot of men came from the South Wales Borderers Depot at Brecon to join the Glosters. They also had only been in the Army six weeks. The battalion moved down to Tetbury and then down to Crediton (Devon) and then along the south Devon coast. "Bishopsteignton was Battalion HQ. We weren't always welcomed in those days. Some of the shops wouldn't serve you in Torquay if you were in the Army. They were happy to serve the RAF types!"[21] They were on coastal defence at Torquay after Crediton and put a lot of concertina wire on the beaches including Slapton Sands. "I can remember using the Forces Tavern at Halwell. Also at Yelverton we wired in the airfield."[22] An important point in this memory is that through expediency the army had to make changes it didn't like or normally carry out. These included combining men from one regiment into another decimated by war. This was a situation that inevitably worsened as the war progressed. It also shows that whatever the requirements of a demanding Prime Minister the need for coastal defence seemed paramount and instructions did not filter down the line. The use of troops in these matters was probably more effective, quicker and cheaper than employing local contractors.

The invasion crisis was not to disappear with the winning of the Battle of Britain in 1940. A Memorandum from the Prime Minister for September 3rd 1940 stated: 'The danger of invasion will not disappear with the coming of winter and may confront us with novel possibilities in the coming year. The enemy's need to strike down this country will naturally increase as the war progresses'.[23] In fact the threat of invasion remained a real possibility to the British Government and constrained the life of the people throughout 1941 and 1942. Even after D-Day in 1944 a raid in force aimed at British shores was perceived as a possibility. The Home Guard, who were seen by Churchill as a genuinely important formation in resisting invasion of the UK, was only stood down, not disbanded, in December 1944.

The veterans, when revealing the dearth of transport available after so much was left behind in France, provide some good examples of the way necessity became the mother of invention after June 1940. One soldier from 2nd Glosters later recalled: "I had a car and motorbike licence and at Crediton those of us like that were put on a lorry and taken to a big motorcycle shop, Pykes of Plymouth, and told that as we knew about motorbikes we were to go in and pick what we needed!"[24] They formed a motorcycle platoon with sidecars as a mobile force in case paratroopers dropped on Dartmoor and used civilian lorries due to a lack of military vehicles. They were also tasked with teaching some of the junior officers to ride motor cycles, "But as ex – public schoolboys they weren't going to listen to us. We used to let them fall off!"[25] 2nd Essex dealt with a similar problem: "I was on parade one day when we were asked who could drive, I stepped forward and found I had the task of learning how to drive the new battalion transport – a fleet of single deck buses commandeered from the local bus company!"[26] With no driving instructors or manuals they started learning by trial and error around the parade ground.

Gradually the situation regarding the supply of military materials improved. Supplies from the USA meant that the Home Guard was armed with imported American Springfield rifles, thus releasing Lee Enfield rifles and ammunition to the regulars. Against this between August and December 1940 production of new rifles in the UK dropped from around 9,500 per month to less than 4,500 per month entirely due to German bombing of the Small Heath factory in Birmingham.[27]

Deficiencies in transport were improved and military lorries began to replace the commandeered civilian transport. As ever Churchill took an early interest in the

maintenance the health and morale of the Army over the winter period: 'Prime Minister to Secretary of State for War, 1st September 1940, I should be glad to have a full report of the arrangements being made to provide educational and recreational facilities for the troops during the coming winter. Who will be responsible for this important branch of work?'[28]

For 2nd South Wales Borderers the return to the UK from active service merely heralded swift reorganisation and movement to a Northern Ireland threatened by both German invasion and internal strife. Dick Phillips remembers that after joining the returned Battalion at East Lothian they weren't there very long: "On the Saturday I was detailed as a potato peeler and the next thing we knew we had to pack our kit and get on a train around two in the afternoon".[29] This journey seemed interminable and they arrived at Glasgow docks. They believed they might be off to the Middle East because they were putting artillery pieces on board. However there was no accommodation for the troops on board and it was night. They left Glasgow and later saw lights. Someone said, "Good God, I have been there, its Larne". They disembarked and after another interminable journey arrived in Omagh in County Tyrone, the Depot of the Enniskillen Fusiliers. The following day was Sunday morning and church parade. "The Enniskillen's were coming back from the Catholic Cathedral and we were going to the Church of England, the band of the SWB trying to outdo the pipes and drums of the Enniskillen Fusiliers!"[30] The posting was not a very happy one and three soldiers and a civilian lost their lives.

> There was a young fellow being instructed how to challenge when he was on sentry go by the Sergeant. The Sergeant accidentally shot and killed him. Then we had a chap who was drowned on a river exercise and the third one who run in the back of a TCV (troop carrying vehicle), then there was another one where a chap was on sentry go and challenged someone who was slightly drunk and the chap just came forward and he shot him. Of course we were worried about the

> IRA. So that was four I think who died in unfortunate circumstances. I was company clerk and corporal for a while and of course my pay went up. I was in A Company. We were in Ireland for some time before coming back to UK. We worked, much to our dismay, for the farmers. We didn't like it and the farmers didn't like it either.[31]

Privates Coates, Freeman and Duggan of 2nd South Wales Borderers lie in Omagh Cemetery and died between 15th July and 30th December 1940.[32]

Back on mainland UK it became clear that the pre-war organisation for training could not cope with the huge influx of volunteer and conscript soldiers. Throughout the war there was a problem of accommodation for troops and private houses, hotels and estates were often requisitioned on a large scale to make up the shortfall in properly constructed bases. From July 1942 recruits were enlisted into what was called the General Service Corps for six weeks training in a common syllabus at a Primary Training Centre (PTC). While there the recruit undertook tests to determine which arm of service he was best suited for. If chosen for the infantry they were then sent to their parent Infantry Training Centre (ITC) where they completed their infantry training. At its peak in 1944 this system of PTC and ITC was handling 200,000 recruits at any one time. Prior to this, the pre-war capacity of the ITC's was around 18,000. By this time also the need for officers had expanded greatly. After selection at a War Office Selection Board (WOSB), candidates were sent to a pre-Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU) where training continued, for a final decision on the suitability of a candidate. This period might be as short as a week before a Potential Officer (PO) was sent to an OCTU or as long as nine weeks. Unsuitable candidates were 'Returned to Unit' (RTU). For Infantry Officers the OCTU course lasted seventeen weeks.[33]

Major Pat Barrass of 2nd Essex came through the officer training system prior to the war. His account of training and selection is as follows: "I joined the army from

school in October 1938 and narrowly missed a place at Sandhurst with a mark in the exam of 230/250. I became an officer via the Supplementary Reserve route in the Essex Regiment".[34] After interview for a commission he trained for two months a year. One month was spent at the Essex Regiment Depot, Warley Barracks, where his time in the school OTC (Officer Training Corps) really helped. He drilled with the recruits and shared all the square bashing and cold showers. Major Barrass stayed on and joined 2nd Essex, which was also stationed in the main part at Warley Barracks. He attended a military crammer and then via the WOSB he gained a regular commission.

Brigadier Sir Nicholas Somerville of 2nd South Wales Borderers recalled: "I joined the army after leaving Winchester at the age of 18 and first went to a Young Soldiers Battalion at the Depot. I became a L/Cpl. Weapons Instructor before going to OCTU".[35] Like many new infantry officers he was an officer with 2nd South Wales Borderers at just 19 years of age.

Major Basil Stephens joined the Territorial Army two days after the start of the war and was called up to Stroud with fourteen others. He was made a Lance Corporal and they slept on straw, were fed in a café in town and used the Drill Hall in Gloucester. Later they moved to be billeted in the stables at Cheltenham Racecourse and he was made Acting Sergeant and then sent to OCTU at Aldershot. However he caught flu and was sent home on three days sick leave. The flu turned into pneumonia and he was out for a further two months. He had to restart OCTU and when training was completed he was commissioned to a Young Soldiers Battalion of the Gloucester Regiment. After a spell at Burnham on Sea, where he met his future wife, the battalion returned to Gloucester guarding Brockwood Aerodrome where fighter aircraft were made. Then he was called to join the 2nd Gloucesters at Paignton, Devon.[36]

The stories of the above three officers in training show the changes in the system from pre-war to the speeded up process required in wartime. Of the other officers interviewed for this study; two were NCO's promoted on the battlefield and therefore did not go through the PO and OCTU system, while a third, Captain Dennis Whitaker (later to win the Military Cross in Holland) did and joined the 2nd South Wales Borderers in Holland in early 1945. However his story follows a different course and is worth exploring. He joined the Army in early June 1940 in the Queens Own Royal West Kent Regiment at the time when Dunkirk was being evacuated. He stayed with the Royal West Kent Regiment through to the rank of sergeant and in the mid-1940s the battalion was broken up and became a Primary Training Centre for recruits. Selected NCO's and officers remained at the PTC as instructors. He then spent about a year or so training troops in Gravesend, Preston and Derby. From Derby he was commissioned on 16th June 1944. "At the time of D-Day we were up in the mountains of North Wales on our final exercise before commissioning and while having breakfast heard the news on the radio of the Normandy landings".[37] He was commissioned into the Buffs, sister Regiment of the Royal West Kent, went to the regimental depot in Canterbury and spent more time training infantry recruits. Then he was sent as a reinforcement officer to 21st Army Group in January 1945 where he joined 2nd South Wales Borders. Captain Whitakers' story reflects the fact that many famous regiments could have units broken up and men re-distributed to other regiments, and that such units could be used for purposes other than front line duty to fit military expediency.

Two further 2nd South Wales Borders officers, Dennis Davis and Sam Weaver went through OCTU, but were then trained for the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC). Their story is one of too many RAC trained officers and a lack of infantry officers. Sam

Weaver was called up in 1942 as a Trooper in the RAC and trained as wireless operator on the 19 Wireless Set, which was used in tanks, then sent for commission in the RAC and attended OCTU at Sandhurst. He was commissioned in September 1943 in the RAC but it was realised that there were more tank officers than required, so 400 were transferred to the infantry and underwent a conversion course at Dunbar.[38]

Most of the men interviewed for this study who joined as soldiers went through ITC training. As some of their stories show induction into army life was not always straightforward. Albert Daines, 2nd Essex was conscripted into the Army on 15th July 1943. He was exempt from service as a farm worker though the farmer forgot to exempt him! After six weeks training at Warley Barracks he got food poisoning and was a fortnight in hospital. When he came out of hospital he joined 2nd Essex at the Hawthorn Hotel, Bournemouth in November 1943. There he was put in D Company, 18 Platoon.[39] Bill Speak of 2nd South Wales Borderers joined the armed forces in June 1943. "After a six week Basic Training Course at Brecon I went to Shelton Road Camp, Shrewsbury and was trained on a specialist 3inch Mortar and Bren Gun Carrier Course - that's why I ended up a sniper!"[40] Don Leech, 2nd Glosters was called up into the Army in 1942 from Bishops Cleave, Gloucestershire. Firstly he went to Royal Hydrabad Barracks at Colchester, which was a depot for Glosters, Somerset and Wiltshire Regiments joining 15th Infantry Training Battalion. "It was put to me that I was good with my hands and that they would like me to take a Carrier course. So rather than join the Battalion I stayed three months in Colchester. I went to 2nd Glosters and joined C Company in March 1943".[41] Ernie Partridge, 2nd Glosters was called up December 17th 1942 and similarly went for six weeks basic training at Hydrabad Barracks in Colchester, then to Gloucester to join a training company.

> Gordon (Duffin) and I were in Number One Platoon there where we did twelve weeks. Then we joined 2nd Battalion Glosters in March 1943. I was in A Company, 8 Platoon. With Platoon Sergeant 'Sturmey' Archer in charge and the Sergeant Major was Vicky Walker, British Army middleweight boxing champion. This was in Winchester Barracks.[42]

Len Cox of 2nd Glosters was called up into the Army on 18th June 1942. "I weighed 8 stones 4lbs and was 5' 4½" tall. Doing the training did me a world of good. When I came out I was 5' 6½" and 10 stones 7lbs".[43] Going into the Royal Armoured Corps he went to Gloucester, Reservoir Camp, where they completed basic training. Then after six weeks he was transferred to the Glosters at 15 ITC, Colchester. Training there until October, he then joined 2nd Glosters at Woodhall Spa in Lincolnshire.

The variances within each veteran's statement are significant, as it sometimes appears that the route taken was not necessarily PTC followed by ITC. Also it is worth remembering that many recruits to the regular army had been in the Home Guard and were already partly trained in marching, tactics and the use of weapons. One man who did not have as smooth a path as some in entering the army - but by this route received a sound longer-term training period - was Frank Clark. He was a member of the Territorial Army at Uffculme, Devon, prior to the war and after joining the Regular Army was discharged after a motorcycle accident, which left him with a leg in plaster. He had problems with this leg but worked hard to improve it. By 1940 his leg had improved so much that he cycled to Exeter for a medical and passed A1. After some time in depot at Plymouth, (where he found the quality of officers lacking, they were older and some had been brought out of retirement), he was posted to the 70th (Young Soldiers) Bn. Gloucester Regiment. Here the quality of officers improved as an increasing number of young officers from OCTU joined the battalion. Their main weapon was the Canadian Ross rifle with a long sword type bayonet.[44]

It is worth reflecting here on three areas. Firstly it is the story of a young man who wants to join the army and fights adversity to get in. Secondly the telling comment about older officers and the energy brought by the newly commissioned younger officers from OCTU, and lastly that the Ross rifle was the main weapon of this battalion to start with. The Canadian Ross rifle from the First World War was disliked and not in the same class as the Lee Enfield. It had not stood up to wear and tear on the battlefield in the previous war. It is generally remembered as a rifle that along with the American Springfield rifle, armed the Home Guard. It is often forgotten that they also armed other second line land-based units, such as young soldier battalions, naval and RAF units.

Other notable insights given by the veterans interviewed for this study include the fact that at least two joined up under age. This is usually remembered as a First War phenomenon. Both used the excuse that they had lost their Identity Cards and only a parental signature was needed on a form to confirm this. Neither would they be safe from action. In the actions later in Holland 14739982 Private PJ Hewitt of 2nd South Wales Borderers, killed on 6th November 1944, is buried in Bergen-Op-Zoom Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery (CWGC). He was just 17. Another feature is that given away by Albert Daines of 2nd Essex (above). As a farm worker he was in a reserved occupation as was Stan Daines of 2nd Essex. They are possible distant cousins and despite serving in the same battalion did not know each other. This is another indicator that for the serving soldier it was his section of ten men and platoon of thirty that he got to know best. Certainly men in other Companies of the same battalion were often remote from each. In action, as we shall see, this became even more pronounced. Stan Daines reports that after one winter of working in the fields he had had enough and sought to join the army. Not only should his reserved occupation have precluded him at

the recruiting office, but the fact he was under age was circumvented as well.[45] Phillip Maillou of 2nd Essex is another veteran known to have joined under age.

> There were a few of us as a gang of about six yobs got called up in October 1942, between the ages of say 16 to 18. Three of us went to the recruiting office in Holloway to volunteer and explained to the recruiting sergeant that we wanted to join together. I was only sixteen and a half. My mother had agreed and had to swear that I had lost my ID Card and was not under age. The recruiting sergeant said we had to have a medical and decide what we wanted to go in. We wanted something to do with driving. In the end we signed up for the 70th Essex Young Soldier Battalion, as there seemed little else available. So we went away with the King's Shilling and spent that on a pint of beer![46]

From 1941 until the end of 1943 the three battalions led the usual existence of Home Service battalions: moving around the country; sometimes becoming involved with building defence works in the earlier period; and engaging in military exercises and farming activities. Most soldiers in the battalions were very young men and it was a time of growing up very quickly in a country at war and in a service that demanded fitness and discipline. Some of the experiences were comical; some showed the difficult nature of living in an environment that included men from a variety of backgrounds. High jinks, alcohol and thieving were all variously experienced. Sometimes it was the fittest and toughest that suffered, and for some skills learnt in 'Civvy Street' put them above the others. In 1940s Britain some recruits had already been at work for three or four years before joining the army.

Charles Benford of the 2nd Essex set out to go to the pictures in Kington, but it was full. After a night drinking scrumpy at the Swan Hotel it was time to return to camp. Already a large crowd was waiting at the taxi rank. The taxis took them back crammed in about twelve at a time. Charles was hanging outside on the running board. He remembers little else. "When I came to there was a sentry prodding me with the butt of his rifle! I look around and I am back in the camp lying outside the tent. The sentry

said, "Get up and back in your tent".[47] His mates had waltzed him past the guard and got him undressed and in bed. He presumably had got up in the middle of the night to relieve himself and passed out again. Harry Conn of 2nd Essex was called up into the Essex Regiment in 1940 and was trained initially at the Depot at Warley. As he was from Durham NCO's and men accused him of speaking a foreign language! He joined 2nd Essex at Kington in Herefordshire in C Company, 13 Platoon. Boxing was a real strength and he became Divisional champion in 1941. After one bout near Worthing, Sussex he had a pain in his side, which turned out to be a burst appendix. Moved to Cuckfield Hospital his parents were sent for, as he was so ill he was not expected to survive. However he improved, but unfortunately when on leave he managed to burst his stitches, which caused further complications. By 1943 he had rejoined the Battalion at Fort Widley, Portsmouth, then on to Tenby, which included some training on landing craft; back to Isle of Wight and finally Durham where he managed to break an ankle.[48]

There was plenty of opportunity as Peter Giggens relates to attend courses if one was interested, or ordered to. He attended a number of courses including the arduous Battle School Infantry Training Course including gas demonstrations and major assault courses at height. Another course was as a Mortar Demonstration Section at a Battle School for officers. By this time he was Corporal i/c Section and they arrived at 1a.m. The guard sent them to a spare hut where they fumbled around in the dark to find beds and blankets. The following morning a sergeant arrived with the orderly officer (female) for inspection. Peter was put on a charge for sleeping with the men! Now it was light a small area at the end of the hut could be made out for NCOs. Also a broken strut in the hut was put down to them as wilful damage! Peter was given a small reprimand and had to serve 6 days extra duty in the orderly room. His first early morning task here was to take tea in a bucket to one of the huts, this was full of female ATS who persuaded Peter

to go in and serve them tea in bed! Coming out just as the orderly officer arrived he was told to report to the Major. Expecting more trouble a short talk ensued during which the Major realised that Peter had little experience of the female in the Army and also told him to read orders and turn up properly dressed next time, as he had been unknowingly made up to Sergeant. For the demonstrations the section appeared highly efficient driving up and leaping into action very quickly and efficiently. The truth was a little different; they had previously set up and ranged the mortars in ground unseen by the spectators.[49]

Petty criminality was widespread as Stan Daines of 2nd Essex remembers. One of the favourite tricks during training involved urinating in someone else's boots and tipping them out of the window after a night out on the beer. Soldiers going on leave were not above pinching a pair of boots and neck scarves to sell or give away. Stan and his best friend 'Blondie' Goodyear from Norfolk (they had joined up together) spoke a different language as farm boys compared with the men from London. Stan points out that they may not have been as good as the City boys in things like boxing, but on field exercises the country boys came into their own, even winning weekend passes for battalion shooting competitions. Darker incidents included 'Blondie' Goodyear receiving postal orders regularly from home. They had to watch out for the Post Corporal who got to know this and expect 'Blondie' to buy him a beer. Another unfortunate incident was when one of Stan's mates stole washing from a civilian who had befriended them and taken them to his house for tea a number of times. Stan was on guard when the indignant man arrived at the gate accusing both Stan and his mate. The duty Sergeant sorted this out and the thief had to face a civilian and military charge.[50] This reveals a valuable insight into how civilians tried to do their bit for young soldiers away from home and the varying backgrounds of men thrown together in wartime.

The following three reminiscences are useful as they give an idea of how three young soldiers saw similar situations sometimes differently while training with the 2nd Glosters. At Winchester Barracks in 1943 Maurice Wells remembers that they were there for a considerable time and did a lot of training. "They even came and asked for volunteers for the Parachute Regiment. We had a practice jumping out of three-ton lorries. After that I don't think anyone volunteered!"[51] One long exercise went from Winchester down to Beaulieu marching and practising tactics on the way. Then they marched north and two days later walked past his own front door on the way to Windsor. They were due to do a river crossing at Windsor. A few of them including Ernie Partridge nipped back to his parents' house. The next day they did the crossing then marched down to Henley-on-Thames where they practised some street fighting. They then carried on to the Vale of the White Horse. "They called a halt to it there saying we were using too much petrol. We had marched all the bloody way! Then there was an argument about marching back but we got transport in the end".[52] Another exercise involved invading the Isle of Wight. They practised street fighting in Southampton and then marched down to Southampton Water and crossed to the Isle of Wight. On landing the local children were spitting at them as they were the 'enemy' and had swastikas on their arms. Arriving back in Winchester 20 of them were sent to help train officers as a demonstration platoon at a training establishment at Dunbar. "It was so cold up there. We had to keep going around waking these officers up in case they died of cold".[53]

Gordon Duffin, 2nd Glosters gives a slightly different view of the same time. He remembers the food as being absolutely terrible. The older soldiers said it was about

time they made a proper complaint. At mealtimes the officer came around and asked if there were any complaints. An old soldier stood up:

> Yes Sir, this food is terrible, the potatoes are covered in grit and muck and there is nothing like enough. "Ah yes" the officer said, "now when you have finished your meal how do you feel?" "Well bloody hungry Sir!" "Good" he said, " that is the answer I wanted, because I have consulted with the MO and he assures me that a sign of being fit and well fed is that you still feel hungry after a meal![54]

Later on the Isle of Wight they were in terrible broken down houses and had a cook who seemed to delight in serving up awful food. Again the old soldier asks them to back him if he complains. This time the result was even worse as they were ordered to queue up outside the cookhouse with their mess tins every morning before Reveille to be given their food. On the first morning they lined up and were given a piece of grisly meat, half an oxo cube, one and a half potatoes complete with dirt and grit, a piece of cabbage, four slices of bread, some custard powder and three dried and shrivelled prunes all dumped into their two mess tins. "Well, what the hell are we going to do with this stuff and we are on a route march around the Isle of Wight. We had had no breakfast, as we hadn't had time to sort it out with collecting it, making beds and so on. Comes to dinnertime we stop". When the old soldier says asks "what about our dinner?"[55] They are told that they have been given their ration and it was up to them to sort it out. "What the hell could we do? We could eat the bread and jam and biscuits and its all making a mess where it was dumped in our mess tins".[56] Eventually they had to give in on the promise that they would never again complain about army food.

Duffin was then sent to Dunbar in Scotland as part of a Demonstration Platoon. A Scottish officer with a kilt, dirk and all the paraphernalia that goes with Scottish Regiments greeted them. The weather seemed very cold after the South Coast but their billet was in a large mansion on a cliff overlooking the sea. They got told off non-stop,

but after a few days the officer said, "I think I can see the possibility of making you into a demonstration platoon."[57] It was the first best praise they had had since they arrived and they began to enjoy the perks. At Christmas nobody wanted to go on leave because it was so good in Scotland. The food was up to Hotel standard and plentiful. When they came back from town supper was waiting and they could brew up tea or cocoa. It was so good that only one married man went on leave. The Platoon were there to help train the officers and they acted out every infantry role; section attack, platoon in attack, reconnaissance and everything else in the manual for platoon infantry tactics. One task was to get the officers to appreciate being under fire:

> From a camouflaged position I had to fire my Bren gun over a group of Officers from 450 yards, as close to their heads as I dare. I didn't like this, so I set the sights to 600 yards. After I had fired a magazine I hear the Scottish Captain 450 yards away screaming "Lower!" I went down to 500 yards on the sights but was still screamed at to get lower! In the end I got it low enough to the officers' satisfaction! The idea was to get them to hear the Crack! Thump! of a bullet and to work out where the thump is coming from. The crack is the sound as it goes over your head; the later thump gives away the firers position. On the officers signal I also fired to the left and right so they could hear the difference.[58]

Ernie Partridge, 2nd Glosters remembers that at Winchester Barracks it was all marching, training, marching and training. Up and down the Romsey road 20 miles, twice a week, into the New Forest and back. His memory of the scheme involving the river crossing at Windsor involved marching to Reading and sleeping the night in a park as a battalion and after three days crossing the bridge at Windsor where A Company set up on the side of the bridge.

> My mate Jerry Dingman said, "Have you got two bob?" I said "I haven't got a bleeding penny Jerry". You see my Dad died in 1942 and the Army sent half of our pay home, which was two bob a day (10p) so I had seven bob a week, only 35p now! I couldn't afford a bird! He sees a youngster coming along and he says, "Is there a fish and chip shop near here?" The youngster said, "I'll get you

> some mister". We gave him this two bob and never saw him again! Training was going on all the time. Rifle shooting, having your rifles re-zeroed, they took away the 18 inch bayonets and issued us with the triangular pig stickers.[59]

The above gives us valuable vignettes into the life of young infantrymen under training and life in wartime Britain At this point it is worth considering in detail the weaponry and organisation of an Infantry battalion by 1944. The infantryman's main weapon was of course the rifle. During the 1930s the Army had developed newer rifles including semi-automatic, but pre-war constraints had not allowed production, and in the early years of the war soldiers still used the same rifle and bayonet their fathers had used in the First World War. It was not until 1940 that mass production of a new rifle was begun, the Rifle No. 4 Mk. 1. This rifle weighed just over 9lb and was to prove an excellent weapon, though it still used a bolt action loading mechanism. It fired a .303inch round held in a ten round magazine and had a range of a mile, although targets were effectively engaged from much nearer. It had a shorter cruciform shaped bayonet and importantly it was "soldier proof" and difficult to break. Officers were armed with a Webley .38 pistol, only effective at very short range. From the middle of 1941 the machine carbine Sten gun was introduced and was carried by officers and NCO.s. It was cheap to produce, easy to maintain and fairly reliable. However lacking a safety catch a number of accidents and deaths were caused by its propensity to fire accidentally if dropped or knocked, and it was not always held in high regard. The basic hand grenade in use was the No. 36 Mills fragmentation grenade. This could be thrown from the hand with a four to seven second fuse, or fired via a cup discharger by rifle. Other grenades included the No. 69 Bakelite blast grenade, Phosphorous: Grenade Hand Smoke No.77, and Grenade Hand Incendiary (SIP) No. 76. These last were often disliked by infantrymen. The idea of burning an enemy to death was abhorrent to many and the consequences of one going off accidentally while being carried were equally horrific.

The main section weapon was the Bren Light Machine Gun (LMG). This was a well-crafted, very accurate and robust weapon with an effective range of 1,000yds and an overhead box magazine holding 29 rounds of .303in. ammunition. Stan Daines remembers:

> I was trained as a Bren Gunner which paid me another 1s 6d a day as a specialist. Each Section in a Platoon had a Bren as section weapon to provide immediate suppressing fire. The Bren was heavy and carried by a handle when on the move, the No.2 carrying a spare barrel, adjuster key, spare magazines and his own rifle. I can still remember the drill to clear a jammed weapon. We could set up to fire on fixed lines at crossroads or gaps in hedges or walls. Often targets were indicated by trip wires or by listening and hearing enemy movement.[60]

A small 2-inch mortar, able to fire a High Explosive, smoke or illuminating 2.25lb bomb out to 500 yds, was carried by each Platoon. Weighing nearly 19lb it could be carried by one man and it was even possible to fire it horizontally against targets including armoured vehicles. Infantry were also armed with one-man anti-tank weapons. By 1943 this was the Projector Infantry Anti-Tank (PIAT). This fired a hollow charge anti-tank grenade to an effective range of 100yds against tanks and against buildings up to 350yds. Being spring-loaded it needed the strength of a Hercules to load and was not always popular, but was effective as long as the firer was brave enough to approach near the target. An infantry battalion also had its own heavier weapons carried by its 'S' or Support Company, in or by small tracked vehicles called Carriers. Support Company included Platoons for 3inch Mortars, 6pounder (pdr) Anti-Tank Guns, Pioneers and a Carrier Platoon with extra Bren Guns for covering or defensive fire. By 1944 the 2nd Essex Mortar Platoon Sergeant was Peter Giggens:

> At Kington in Herefordshire I became part of the 3inch Mortar Platoon. The Platoon had six 3inch mortars, with four men to each. One mortar carried per Carrier plus 66 bombs and extras forced in where possible, such as a box on the floor with the passenger seat up. The officer had his own Carrier with wireless set on one side and extra bombs down the other. A good mortar crew can put 16 bombs in the air by the time the first one lands. The mortars had to be dismounted from the Bren Carriers before use.[61]

A 3inch Mortar had the capability to fire HE or Smoke bombs between 500 yds and 2,800 yds. The anti-tank guns in use by the infantry never quite did the job. The 6pdr anti-tank gun was withdrawn from Royal Artillery service by 1944 and replaced by the 17pdr. The 6pdr was handed down to the infantry to be towed by their support Carriers. It had a range of 5,500yds and was able to fire 10 rounds per minute. But it could not penetrate the frontal armour of the heavier German tanks. This was the anti-tank gun taken by the infantry battalions to Normandy.

Infantrymen had to be proficient at using the weapons listed above and be able to read maps, patrol, dig defences, be fit and capable of great endurance, possess initiative and leadership skills and take quick intelligent decisions. It is pertinent to report two observations made at different ends of the war related to the intelligence required of an infantryman: 'In September 1939 approximately four out of ten soldiers were placed in what was generally (and mistakenly) regarded as the least skilled arm of service, the infantry'. Contrast that statement with this one by General Slim made in April 1945, showing that he believed the infantryman had to be a highly skilled soldier: 'Any infantryman who is capable of going out on long distance patrol must have acquired a variety of knowledge, a quickness of perception, and a skill in handling of his own weapons which is required of no other fighting man'.[62]

It is worth quoting Gordon Duffin, 2nd Glosters at length, to get an infantryman's view of this:

> In my opinion the infantryman had to know more things than any other branch of the Army. Sounds daft because everyone thinks the lowest of the low are bunged into the infantry to be used as cannon fodder. Well that is a load of rubbish. There are many things you have to know. All the separate lessons on the rifle and the bayonet, the Bren, Sten and Tommy guns, the PIAT and each type of grenade. Lessons on booby traps, erection and crossing of barbed wire. Map reading 1 inch to the mile Ordnance Survey map, which tells you nearly everything you need to know about the ground and use of the compass including bearings and back bearings, bearings on noises, bearings on aeroplanes. The slit trench is the British Army name for what the Yanks call a foxhole. The British soldier on active service will live in his slit trench until such time as you have to get out of it to advance. It will be 4feet 6inches deep, 4feet long and 18inches wide. This is for two men. The spoil must be carried away and hidden! Well of course 4-600 men digging in it can't be done! You can't hide that amount of activity. Some of the spoil would be put up in front to stop shrapnel or bullets. You would try to dig in behind a hedge. The Jerries couldn't see behind it, but you could see through it for your field of fire. There are two types; the two-man as explained and that in a V to house the three man Bren Gun Group with the Bren gun at the point. There is one other trench we dreamt up ourselves and that is a trench in a letter T. If you are lucky you can find something to make a roof over the leg of the letter T for shelter.[63]

Tactically within the battalion the Section was the smallest unit consisting of 2 non-commissioned officers and 8 other ranks. There were three sections to a platoon led by 1 officer, usually a Lieutenant or 2nd Lieutenant. Three platoons made up a rifle company led by a Major, with a Company Sergeant Major as senior non-commissioned officer. The battalions of 56th Brigade went to Normandy with four Rifle Companies, plus S Company of around 200 men. The Battalion HQ of 5 officers and 45 other ranks was split in action between a main HQ and a small Tactical or Tac HQ, which went forward with the Rifle Companys. Usually the Commanding Officer went with the Tactical or Tac HQ. In battle the battalion could deploy just around 530 men in the rifle companies, plus S Company. This meant that something over 150 men were required in B Echelon as drivers, tradesmen or cooks. In 1944 an infantry battalion's establishment figure was 36 officers and 809 other ranks.

Usually individual platoons used fire and manoeuvre to advance their sections forward, and depending on the strength of an enemy position the platoon commander might use one, two or all three sections. Often one section was kept in reserve as two sections moved to destroy a target, such as an enemy sniper or machine gun. At its simplest the Bren gun team fired on a target to keep enemy heads down as the rest of the section advanced, the section then covered the advance of the Bren gun team and so on until the enemy had gone away, been killed or a charge could be made on and through a position. More complicated fire and manoeuvre could be used by using the Bren gun team and splitting the remainder of the section into two. These drills were carefully learnt and practised. In the close confines of the small fields of the Normandy bocage it was often the platoon or even section which had to deal with the enemy, and many men have commented that you would not have a clue as to what was going on over the next hedgerow. In towns and villages other careful drills were practised to clear built up areas. These included 'mouse holing' through walls and floors using pick and bayonet to break through. All of this had to be carefully orchestrated. They could rely on their own S Company for close support with mortar and machine gun fire, and they could rely on aerial supremacy and a great weight of artillery. But things could go wrong and communication by radio was sometimes impossible. If the radio did not work properly, the old system of runners was fallen back on.

But despite all the weight of firepower and technology the British Army took to Normandy, the infantryman would soon learn that the German section usually deployed two light machines guns per section, either MG 34 or MG 42, (from their date of introduction into service) with twice the rate of fire at 1,000 rpm than their Brens, and that by a system of levers and telescopic sights, the German machine gunner could fire from below the safety of the lip of his slit trench. They would learn that the German

deployed more sub machine guns than them, and that it was more reliable. Many British officers and NCOs would replace their Sten gun with a Schmeisser. They would find that the German stick grenade could be thrown further than the 38 Grenade, the Germans were expert with the use of mortar, and that the German soldier excelled in camouflage and digging defensive positions protected by the clever use of mines and booby-traps.

By 1943 it was worrying to the professional soldiers of the three battalions that their units were staying on Home Service. Although they took part in exercises - and by now 2nd South Wales Borders were part of the lorried (or mobile) infantry of 9th Armoured Division - they were not necessarily seen as first rate fighting units, and seemed to provide demonstration sections, labour or reinforcements as required. A further urgency was that it was obvious that a Second Front would soon be opened in Europe, and war may come to a conclusion without them having the opportunity to prove themselves. It must be said that some were quite happy with this situation, most did not think much about it too much, but others whether professional, conscript or volunteer did want to come to grips with the enemy. Those who were part of the battalions in 1940 had a score to settle, others hated what the Nazi regime stood for, and others wanted a reckoning for relatives and friends lost in battle or air raids. As 1943 drew to a close a major problem for each of the battalions was that they were up to 200 men under strength and a number of officers and men in the battalions were too old and others not fit for active service.

> January 1944 found the 2/24th forming part of the 7th Infantry Brigade in 9th Armoured Division. Unfortunately it had become obvious that the Division was losing priority and disquiet was felt that the Inf. Bde. might at best become a draft finding formation and at worst be disbanded.[64]

This fear was soon to be overtaken by events and led eventually to the three battalions landing in Normandy on D-Day itself.

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[17] Dannert Wire was an American trade name for the concertina rolls of barbed wire used in single or multiple rolls. It could be built up in layers to provide high walls of wire and was used by all nations to provide obstruction or 'wire in' a position and make it less vulnerable to infantry attack. The steel framework or scaffolding mentioned by Charles Benford was another commonly used method of obstructing the seashore. Wired in and mined, it would have been an effective barrier to infantry landing by sea. Later the word Dannert was officially dropped by the army, but often crops up in conversation with veterans, and was in common use long after its official demise.
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[58] Gordon Duffin, 2nd Glosters. Interview with author 12th January 2006.
[59] Ernie Partridge, 2nd Glosters. Interview with author 12th January 2006.
[60] Stan Daines, 2nd Essex. Interview with author 15th December 2004 and 21st March 2005
[61] Peter Giggens, 2nd Essex. Interview with author 22nd March 2005.
[62] French, D., Raising Churchill's Army, Oxford University Press, 2000. p 66 & p 71.
[63] Gordon Duffin. 2nd Glosters. Interview with author 12th January 2006.
[64] Gillespie, HP., 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers, 24th Regiment. D-Day toVE Day. Germany. May 1945. p5.

Chapter Two.

Chosen for the Second Front. Training and Organisation into 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade –1st January to 25th May 1944.

By January 1944 the return to Britain of experienced troops from Italy with their commander General Montgomery, and the increasing build up of US troops in the UK, showed that the opening of a second front in Europe was imminent. But as the previous chapter indicates there was disquiet among the senior officers of the three battalions that 'their' battalion would be left out of future active operations. It was not only the Colonels in charge of the battalions that were pushing for action. Within the military hierarchy there were a number of senior officers with enough interest in the three battalions to push for their inclusion in any future invasion of Europe.

Perhaps the key decision that ensured the inclusion of the three battalions was the rapid expansion in the projected size of the invasion force by Montgomery to five beaches instead of three. Montgomery was to be overall land forces commander for the invasion and subsequent breakout from Normandy. Above him was to be the American General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who held the role of Supreme Allied Commander. Montgomery pronounced the plans for a three divisional landing as 'impractical' after his first reading of them on 1st January 1944.[1] Eisenhower, Brooke (the British Chief of the Imperial General Staff – CIGS), Churchill and other Generals had all expressed a lack of confidence in the plans for an invasion as presented in 1943, but it was Montgomery that produced the final thrust for change.[2] Interestingly one of Brooke's worries was the breakout from Normandy through the Bocage as he had withdrawn some remnants of the BEF through this area to Cherbourg in 1940.

The landings were originally projected for May 1944 but with the increase in the size of the initial landing force to five divisions this date was put back to June. Even so this was a very short time in which to plan and implement a scheme on such a vast scale.

Within 56th Brigade it appears that by January 1944 the most senior officers of the three battalions and their Adjutants had an inkling that their battalion would be involved in some way in the second front. Sir Nicholas Somerville the Intelligence Officer (IO) of 2nd South Wales Borderers remember that as a regular battalion in late 1943 they felt misused and that they would miss the opportunity to play a part in the invasion of Europe. However with the arrival of some new officers before Christmas 1943 they felt that their prospects might be improved. One of the new officers, who became a Company Commander, was Major Henry Gillespie. He had been on General Morgan's staff planning the invasion of Europe. "As IO I was the CO's personal staff officer. If the CO went off on some mission he would take the IO with him. As IO I had to get the big picture and brief down to Company level. We were often as young as age 19 for this level of responsibility".[3]

Lieutenant Dennis Davis joined the SWB at Hunstanton in January 1944 after training as an officer in the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC), but due to too many officers being trained for that Corps he was transferred to 2nd South Wales Borderers. He joined C Company but expected to be posted on active service, possibly Italy. In fact he had had inoculations and was packing to leave when the Colonel told him "not to bother as we are in for the Second Front!"[4]

Thus was to begin a very busy time for all three battalions. They were under strength and some of the soldiers they contained were deemed too old for battle. Other soldiers were psychologically unfit. Also they were equipped with second-class transport. Despite this they had only four months to train for the Second Front. All three battalions were put on a war footing in February and from then on changes and exercises took place quickly. The battalions had been active in defence of the shores of the UK and had worked hard on exercises. Many of the younger men were well practised and fit for war. There had been many exercises keeping the men fit and trained and quite a number had worked in 'Demonstration Platoons' away from the battalion to help in officer training or tactical demonstrations.

During January 1944 things carried on as usual. The War Diaries of the three battalions outline typical activities for a Home Service Battalion. The 2nd South Wales Borderers were at Hunstanton and on 2nd January they were bivouacking on Doncaster racecourse. Following this was a move to Kirkleathem for over a fortnight during which time two Rugger matches were played against Redcar Hospital and the Yorks and Lancs Regiment. As 2nd South Wales Borderers apparently included some ex-internationals in their team and Rugby is the national sport of Wales, they did very well! One Battalion Order posted showed one way in which men looking for extra excitement or a change might take as a way out of the routine of a Home Service unit: '24th January 1944 – Glider Pilot Volunteers. No more officers required, still need other ranks'.[5] However even this was not a sure way out as the building up to War Establishment started in earnest within the battalions.

Peter Giggens of 2nd Essex was part way through his training: " I was on another course as a Glider Pilot at Hurne Airport. Lots of time was spent in the classroom, but I

remember the bumpy ride in a Glider and hitting the slipstream of the tug aircraft was like hitting concrete".[6] However at this point he was recalled to 2nd Essex. The needs of the Glider Pilot Regiment would have to take second place to that of a D-Day spearhead unit.

An insight into the dangers even Home Service held is contained in Battalion Orders during January 1944 by 2nd South Wales Borderers: 'Accidents- Ammunition and Explosives, December 1943. Accidents x 20; due to carelessness x 8; killed x 1; injured x 22'.[7] Many of these were accidents in training were caused by carelessness with hand grenades or the 2-inch mortar. Five were injured when an instructor kicked away a 69 Grenade, which was dropped by the thrower and did not immediately go off. Civilians were included in the numbers injured where unexploded ordnance had not been dealt with properly at the end of exercises. Orders were issued for instructors to ensure they were familiar with dealing with 'blinds' and other unexploded material. This theme continues with an order published on 22nd January 1944: '2-inch mortars must only be fired when there is a clear line of flight. Accidents have occurred recently as a result of bombs hitting trees or other obstructions'.[8] This helps underline the realistic nature of the training.

The 2nd Essex were now at Bournemouth and the War Diary reports a typical range of activities: Lt. Col. Marriott went on a three-day sniper's course for senior officers on 3rd January 1944, the following day all field officers received a lecture on Map Reference codes. 2nd Lieutenant Sandbrook and ten 'other ranks' were attached to 3rd Battalion, 175th US Infantry and received from them Captain JT King III and ten other ranks to be attached for two weeks. Unfortunately the Diary contains no further information on exactly what this was for. It is worth noting that while the 2nd Essex sent

only a 2nd Lieutenant, the US Army sent a Captain. Other activities included the attachment of a Sergeant and ten other ranks to 47th (London) Infantry Division Battle School as part of a demonstration platoon, a Battalion HQ exercise to study camouflage and march discipline, and for officers, a Divisional Study Day at Chichester Barracks, entitled 'The Infantry Brigade in Defence'. Sports too were on the agenda with the battalion coming 7th out of 19 in the Divisional running races and Cpl. Conn being narrowly defeated in the Divisional Boxing Championships. By 24th January the battalion had left the South Coast and moved to Durham.[9]

Meanwhile 2nd Glosters were at Whitewell in Lancashire and their War Diary reports a number of exercises during the month. These included a brigade exercise to practise communications in the field, which involved skeleton Company HQ's and the full Battalion HQ. There followed a two-day exercise called 'Exercise Hoppitt' to practice digging and wiring in defence. The 'Bow Belles' Dramatic Society provided light relief on 9th January with a play entitled 'Night Must Fall' at the Atherfield Camp NAAFI. The 2nd Glosters were part of 47 (London) Division at the time who were known as the 'Bow Bells' Division, hence the play on words. On 20th January the battalion moved by train to Middlesborough.[10]

To get an idea of the activities outside of training that were provided by the battalion organisation and the communities that they were among we can turn again to the 2nd South Wales Borderers War Diary for January and early February 1944, where 'Battalion Orders' gives a list of the opportunities available under the heading 'Entertainments':

> There was a Whist Drive and Social for all ranks on 30th January. A discussion of The Beveridge Plan led by the YMCA Programme Organiser for the northeast

who had apparently worked in Welsh coal mines. On 1st February there was a film show titled 'Coney Island' at the Boys Club in the evening. On 3rd February an ENSA Show at the same venue and a 'Gramophone Recital' at the YMCA Club on 9th February. A 'Games Knockout' - Darts, billiards and table tennis on 8th February. The 'Brains Trust' will answer any questions on 11th February. A Red Cross Dance at 2000hrs the Boys Club 12th February and HQ Company dance at the Boys Club 13th February.[11]

So not only was there an extensive programme to cater for all tastes, but also an order allowing troops out until 2359hrs without a pass shows there was a reasonable latitude after 'work' to enjoy oneself within the limits of the closing hours of public houses and the blackout. It is also of note that the Beveridge Report provided a discussion subject to entertain and educate soldiers. Led by an ex Welsh miner one is left to wonder if the discussion followed a left wing direction. The Army was effectively facilitating thought among the military electorate, which may have helped lead to the 1945 Labour landslide General Election.

At this time Bill Speake joined 2nd South Wales Borderers from training at Brecon and along with the usual earthy marching songs they had another reflecting the politics of at least some of the men from South Wales. Verses one, four and five are enough to give a flavour of the lyrics:

Once I was a Civvy lad, as happy as could be
Working in a factory earning bags of £. S.d.
Then they put me in the army, in the SWB
And they told me it was all to save democracy

Now the Colonel kicks the Major, and the Major has a go
He kicks the poor old Captain, and he kicks the NCO's
And as the kicks get harder, the privates you can see
Get kicked to bloody death, to save democracy

Now when this war is over, and soldier I'll no more
Not even for the 24th, or any other Corps
They can keep their lousy quid a week, and do the best they can
For they won't have me for Old Joe's sake, to be their orderly man.[12]

As Bill Speake remembers this was sung when marching to and from the Sennybridge Ranges or on route marches. But when marching in Brecon it was always timed so that when they passed the Duke of Wellington's statue in the centre of Brecon they would be singing verse four. The officer in charge for the day would be leading them swagger stick in hand, trying not to smile.

The above outline of the work of the battalions during January and the first half of February gives a feel that the three battalions were starting to be prepared for what was to follow in terms of exercises and combat, but no existing documents have been found by the author that show this to be a fact. What is fact is that after their moves to the north of the country all three battalions were to take part in a major exercise called 'Exercise Eagle' during the middle of February. This was an exacting exercise that took place in poor weather requiring the 47th (London) Division to act as part of a Corps playing the part of German forces in defence of an attack by 8th Corps and 'Exercise Eagle gave all ranks invaluable experience under most realistic conditions'.[13]

A number of the veterans of 2nd Glosters have vivid recollections of 'Exercise Eagle'. Ted Castle, stretcher-bearer with A Company, 2nd Glosters remembers that weather was terrible, it snowed and froze and they had to be out in slit trenches. The roads were in a terrible state under about a foot of mud from the tanks. "Never seen so much armour in my life. The Air Force had Spitfires diving at our positions. It was very realistic. I think it was one of Monty's brilliant ideas for a scheme before D-Day".[14] Syd Hampton, also 2nd Glosters was also impressed: "We were on big exercises like Exercise Eagle on the Yorkshire Moors, so we got plenty of practice for our job. There is a Carrier still sunk up there! The Light Aid Detachment couldn't get it out!"[15] Finally

Frank Clarke gives another very good description of the conditions during this particular exercise:

> February 1944 was as cold as charity. Snow whipped horizontally across the Yorkshire Moors as the biting winds gnawed at one's very vitals. Some brass hats dreamt up exercise Eagle and the whole battalion went off to take part. I mercifully was sent on a Senior NCO's course. B Company were just recuperating from Eagle when I got back to my unit. Quite a number were suffering from frostbite and seventy percent of 10 Platoon were 'Attend C' the medical term for bedded down.[16]

However, as always a certain humour existed even in the poorest of conditions. The 2nd South Wales Borderers published a regular paper, (as all battalions did), entitled 'The Sphinx' so called after 2nd South Wales Borderers cap badge. The late February issue was published on four sides of A4 typed paper whilst on Exercise Eagle. One section titled 'War News Plus – The Sphinx Thinks' included some humorous asides typical of the period: '1. The commander of a detachment living in the back of a pub must have a lot of willpower. 2.The Signals line parties can't be having much fun these nights'. A line party was tasked with the laying of telephone wire. By night and moving tactically in bitter winter weather this must have been a desperate task. A third comment relates to improvements in the Composite Rations or 'Compo' that were issued in the field for Exercise Eagle. 'The compo rations now being issued will be popular. They contain stewed steak, soup, vegetables, jam, margarine, biscuits, cigarettes, matches, salt, sweets and what one NCO thought was writing paper'.[17]

For the remainder of the month the 2nd South Wales Borderers remained at Alnmouth, 2nd Glosters at Middlesborough and 2nd Essex were at Durham. No doubt the lessons of Exercise Eagle were being absorbed at all levels of command while the men in the battalions recovered from the experience. It had been the first major exercise of the New Year and was attended by a number of senior commanders who were to take

part in the Second Front. Also the strong rumour that the battalions were to be involved in some way in the invasion had reached the lower ranks: Philip Maillou, 2nd Essex, tells what the battalion thought would be their task and why: "We thought we were going to be a back up mob, putting up tents and organising camps. We had done a good job on this in Wales on Exercise Jantzen."[18] Exercise Jantzen was a landing exercise in the summer of 1943 in Pembrokeshire.

Any doubts were put aside by the new orders that arrived for each battalion as they moved to the Clacton area to form a new infantry brigade. The 2nd Essex had a personal farewell visit and praise from Major-General Robinson, the commander of 47 Division, at the railway station as they entrained to Clacton. 2nd Glosters went also to Clacton and 2nd South Wales Borders travelled to nearby Dovercourt. According to the War Diaries of each battalion they all arrived at their allotted camps around Clacton on 2nd March 1944. The Brigade was to be called 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade under an experienced officer, Brigadier E.C. Pepper. Born in 1899 he had already been awarded an OBE and CBE as a staff officer earlier in the war and in 1943 had served on the British Staff in Washington. Between the wars he had served in India and China as well as the UK.[19] Brigade HQ was established at Harold Road, Frinton-on-Sea.[20]

Major-General Graham, who took over command of 50th Division on 19th January 1944, has this to say about why the new brigade was formed:

> When we got down to studying our assault task it was clear we had not enough soldiers to make sure of success. We therefore asked for and were given a fourth Bde – 56 Bde. This consisted of three inf bns drawn from two different divs and a completely new Bde HQ. No bn had been overseas so far and neither Bde HQ nor any bn done any combined ops training whatever. When formed about 20 Feb it was stationed on the Essex Coast. Besides training as a res Bde for the assault, 56 Bde had to train to work with 7 Armd Div in subsequent phases of the Corps plan.[21]

Although a number of new units were being formed for the invasion of Europe this one was different. It had within its title the word 'Independent'. This placed it among the units that General Montgomery kept as 21st Army Group HQ troops instead of being allotted and tasked permanently to any infantry division. Montgomery retained under Army Group Reserve an unusually high number of units for Normandy, including eight independent tank or armoured brigades (about 1,400 tanks), the equivalent of six brigades of heavy and medium field artillery (about 700 guns) and six Engineer Groups. This added about a further twelve divisions to the British order of battle for Normandy.[22] However the only independent infantry brigade retained in this manner was 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade.

By this period of the Second World War the British Army infantry division was made up of three brigades plus other supporting attached arms of service such as artillery, tanks and engineer units. Occasionally, as in the case of 56th Brigade, a decision was taken that this unit was to be used by attachment to other divisional units who might be either mechanised or infantry. An infantry brigade was the smallest tactical formation able to operate independently on the battlefield and could be very much self-supporting. Typically three infantry battalions in size, it may have attached to it for support a company of medium machine guns, a company of heavy mortars, a troop of heavy anti-tank guns, a field ambulance unit and one or more troops of tanks. At Brigade HQ would be artillery officers, engineering officers and signals officers for liason with division and corps. Also it would have its own vehicles, from jeeps to bren Carriers to lorries and a special HQ Armoured Command Vehicle(ACV) Signals lorry plus the drivers and fitters including a Light Aid Detachment (LAD) to deal with difficult breakdowns and recovery. In command was a Brigadier which was the highest

field officer rank. The rank of Brigadier General was abolished in 1922. In terms of numbers of men, an infantry brigade could take the field with over 3,000 men under command, although its real fighting strength was only around half this number, made up of the twelve rifle companys from the three battalions, plus the three battalion Support Companies.

The infantry battalions and new signals staff may have arrived at Clacton but the Brigadier had not, as he was working on plans in London. So the CO of 2nd Essex, Lt. Col. Marriott assumed temporary command of the Brigade and Major Higson MC assumed temporary command of 2nd Essex. Brigadier Pepper arrived to take command of his new brigade on 4th March. 'Things were rather chaotic as may be imagined and Brigade Headquarters were at their wits end as they possessed no kit whatsoever, not even a pencil. Also a whole host of signals equipment arrived from field telephones and cable to the 38 Wireless Sets used down to platoon level'.[23] As they had just moved from work as lorried infantry within 9th Armoured Division 2nd South Wales Borderers were already ahead of the game in signals training.

Brigadier Pepper faced an enormous task and set about making the Brigade a homogenous unit fit for war in a very short time. A great help were the three very able CO's of the battalions that made up the Brigade. He had decided on devising a unique shoulder flash to set his men apart and after the inevitable 'Pepper Pot' flash was put aside it was Lt. Col. Marriott who suggested a 'Sphinx', as a 'Sphinx' appeared in each of the three regimental cap badges. 'Thus was born this Brigade's unique and proud distinguishing flash'.[24] This emblem can be seen in Appendix One page 284. There are in fact a number of stories as to who designed the flash depending on which battalion

the man belonged to. However the version above would fit the events and is the only written record.

It has already been seen that all three battalions were under-strength and the records of 2nd South Wales Borderers are probably typical of each battalion. This shows that on 11th March 1944 the battalion was short of 143 riflemen and NCO's.[25] It is worth noting at this point that when examining the battalion war diaries the information written down varies between not only battalions but also diary writer and no other battalion makes comments on shortages of men during March. Only the 2nd Essex makes reference to the following arrival of personnel to select those fit for war: 'On 5th March a Board of three Captains and five Sergeants were attached to 2nd Essex for the selective testing of 'other ranks'.[26] It is safe to say though that each battalion was tested and each was short of men. The results of testing would make the battalions even shorter of personnel as those found wanting left to join different posts within the Army.

The vehicles of these battalions were by now too worn for use in war and needed replacing. Again it is the 2nd Essex War Diary showing the scale of replacement: 'Between 9th and 16th March the Battalion received new vehicles – eighteen Carden Lloyd Carriers, seventeen Bren Carriers, two three tonners and two jeeps'.[27] It should be remembered that Transport and Support Companies played a vital role in the effective operation of these battalions and the Brigade. Philip Maillou makes this important tactical point about the new Bren Carriers: "We ended up with the Universal Carriers. These were better than the Carden Lloyd Carriers as they had a lower silhouette".[28] Charles Benford adds another piece of important information as to the preparation of vehicles: "We came back to Clacton where we had to give our Carriers in and were given all new Universal Carriers and we spent a week waterproofing them and erecting

side screens against the waves".[29] They were informed that it was up to them to do it properly and if they did not they would drown.

One new piece of essential equipment caused some amusement. The Army had been struggling with the forage cap of pre-war vintage and was replacing it with a new beret. This was nothing like the berets we are used to seeing soldiers wear today. These were more voluminous and being sturdily made they defied efforts to form them into some reasonable shape: 'Many various and devious methods were apparently used by the men to make this object look more presentable. (Usually with little success)'.[30]

With the re-equipping and the reinforcements needing to be assimilated, the first three weeks of March showed the frantic pace that was needed to prepare for the invasion. The Brigade had a series of important visits from the Generals whose commands 56th Brigade were likely to come under; on 15th March from the 50th Division Commander, General Graham; on the 16th March General Erskine, Commander of 7th Armoured Division, who was expected to include 56th Brigade in his Division shortly after D-Day as 'lorried infantry'. Then on the 21st March General Bucknall, Commander of XXX Corps visited and spoke to all the Brigade officers. These visits are significant as it shows that by early March the potential role of the Brigade had been mapped out and Brigadier Pepper and his senior officers had started planning. But other than those officers directly involved, very few knew what was to be expected of them. Much of this planning took place in buildings taken over by the War Office at Flat 131, Ashley Court, London.[31]

One regular visitor - to the outside anyway - was not an officer, but had a necessary role to play. Frank Dilworth was a member of Brigade HQ Signals Section

and a Dispatch Rider (DR), also commonly called a Don-R. He has outlined how communications were kept up between London and Clacton. After he was transferred from 48th Division he went to Wellington in Durham where they formed the Signal Section for the Brigade HQ. After about three days they journeyed down to Frinton-on-Sea and joined the rest of 56th Brigade HQ. There he learnt all about the Brigade and its different battalions. He makes an important point about an extra burden for an independent brigade: "One of the big jobs was going down to 21st Army Group in Ashley Gardens, London. As we were an Independent Brigade and not in a Division we had to do all our own admin. So every day there was this journey for one of us down to Ashley Gardens". They stayed about three hours while the mail was sorted and came back all in a day. Signposts had been removed early in the war and Don-Rs new to the task would find their way from a verbal set of instructions.

> You worked the rest out for yourself. You became like a bit of a homing pigeon. That's what your life was as a DR. You were told very little but expected to know a lot! Sometimes an officer might hitch a ride to London on the back of your bike. Strictly speaking that shouldn't have happened and you met round the corner from the guardroom![32]

Syd Lee was one of a number of Signallers who were all on the same training course at Catterick as members of the Royal Corps of Signals (RCS) and were sent in one batch to work in 56th Brigade HQ. Later some of them served as signallers with the battalions as the link between Brigade and battalions. The battalions also had their own trained signallers from within their ranks. "After Catterick we were all posted direct to 56th Independent Infantry Brigade HQ at Frinton, living in an empty house with palliasses on the floor. We used to parade at 7.00 in the morning when it was still dark. I can remember going out having a few drinks at night!"[33]

Although some men in the battalions remember the time at Clacton as not being overactive, this may have been in comparison with the previous month and Exercise Eagle. Certainly many of the officers and NCO's were heavily involved checking and signing for new equipment. But military training was also continued as Tony Mansi 2nd Essex shows in this insight into both training and military humour:

> I remember at Clacton it was run on pretty military lines and we even practised giving instructions wearing gas masks. The old Army thing of giving a message to a runner starting "Send reinforcements, we are going to advance" and the message finally ends up after going through a number of men as "Send 3s 4d (Three and fourpence) we are going to a dance!" There was a lot of that sort of humour. It could be a bit boring, as we weren't doing much, route marching and so on and keeping fit. We were in Civvy billets and a lot of civilians complained because you were doing a lot of shouting in the street organising things and they would be complaining for you to keep the noise down.[34]

It gives us food for thought that a 1944 soldiers' idea of "not doing much" includes keeping fit and route marching, doubtless with full pack. Also of relevance is the point that throughout the war, including the invasion of Normandy, the spectre of the use of gas had not gone away. It was normal to train for the possibility of gas attack and not only gas masks but also anti-gas capes and leggings were available in Normandy and carried ready to distribute by B Echelon transport.

It was at Clacton that the unpopular but necessary inoculations of three doses per man of anti-tetanus serum took place. The following account by Gordon Duffin has been confirmed by a number of men from different battalions:

> At Clacton we queued up outside an empty house, in the snow. Several men faint as they are waiting there with their shirts off and not fancying what is going to happen! Women passing tell off the Sergeant Major and the officer for keeping these poor men in the snow without their shirts on. The officer tells the women to bugger off![35]

This insight shows that throughout the war the military were short of proper camps to house the great increase in military personnel and civilian properties had to be pressed into service. The consequence, as we can see from both the above accounts, was that if the civilian population chanced upon some military activity that they did not appreciate the result could be shouting matches between military authority and civilians. This situation was tolerated in a democratic society but not across the Channel. In this case one can imagine women feeling empathy for men young enough to be their sons or brothers. The loudly barked orders early in the morning and late at night would not endear the military to people living in their own homes in Clacton and who themselves were in the front line of German bombing.

An important piece of evidence showing the importance of 56th Brigade and how far forward its plans had progressed in just a few months comes in an extract of a letter dated 19th March 1944 from General Montgomery to Lt. General Sir Ronald Weeks, the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS). "The situation re reinforcements is not good, as you say. But we must take things as they are and find the best answer. I cannot now give you back 56 Inf. Bde; it is in my order of battle, has been given an important task, and has begun planning".[36] Weeks had obviously asked to use 56th Brigade as some sort of reinforcement unit. The letter later goes into detail clearly appreciating that manpower in the infantry was a critical factor and confirms the worries expressed in 1943 by the South Wales Borderers about the possibility of breaking up 9th Armoured Division.

The basic plan known by now to the senior officers of 56th Brigade was that the Brigade was to be attached to 50th Division for the landing on 'Gold Beach' between Le Hamel and Ver-sur-Mer. The Brigade was then to move west and south and take

Bayeux by the evening of D-Day and pin the forward right flank of the British Army linking with American forces landing on 'Omaha Beach'. They would then transfer to the command of 7th Armoured Division as lorried infantry to quickly exploit a breakout south to Villers Bocage.

Back at Clacton the solders had little knowledge of the wider picture and life continued with training and even a ceremonial occasion to lift the spirits of both soldier and civilian. A major event each year for the Gloucestershire Regiment was the celebration of 'Back Badge' Day on 21st March. The Glosters wore a badge on both the front and back of their berets and this unique distinction comes from a battle against the French in 1801 when the 28th Foot, later with the 61st Foot to become the Gloucestershire Regiment, were fighting the French near Alexandria, holding a ruined fort. French infantry were attacking to their front and both flanks and French cavalry then attacked their rear. The rear rank of the 28th Foot were about faced and gave fire. Although encircled they beat off all attacks and the French took flight. This important regimental occasion was to be celebrated at Clacton in 1944 and in attendance was the Duke of Gloucester, the Colonel-in-Chief of the Regiment. The East Essex Gazette, incorporating Clacton Times and Clacton News and the Frinton, Walton, Brightlingsea and Wivenhoe Times for 23rd March 1944 gives the following account under a large picture of the parade:

> After the parade the Duke of Gloucester visited the men at a church hall for their Regimental dinner. The menu was Roast Beef, Yorkshire Pudding with roast potatoes and peas; followed by fruit tart and cream. An issue of beer allowed the men to drink the health of the Duke of Gloucester. Afterwards he attended at the officers' mess at 'Dunedin' Connaught Gardens, Clacton.[37]

The men of the 2nd Glosters remember that parading and marching on the muddy field was difficult, but on this important occasion it seemed the whole town turned out

to see the Duke of Gloucester and the parade, which must have temporarily brightened a war weary Clacton. However once this important piece of Regimental ceremonial was over it was back to preparations for invasion and on 24th March all the battalions left for Combined Operations training at Inverary in Scotland.

Number One, Combined Operations Training Centre (CTC) was based at Inverary on the west coast of Scotland in the relatively sheltered waters of Loch Inverary. Since 1940 the area had been used to train personnel in amphibious warfare including the use of various types of landing craft, unloading from the larger Landing Ships Infantry (LSI) via scrambling nets into much smaller Landing Craft Assault (LCA) and the tactics employed for landings and developing a landing by troops. Live firing, including the use of aircraft for ground attack, made final exercises very real. The role of No.1 CTC was very important and over a quarter of a million personnel were trained here between 1940 and 1944. Its remote location allowed great scope for training, if little in the way of entertainment for the men training there. With the build up for invasion in 1944 it became a very busy place, able to cope with up to 15,000 personnel at a time. In late March 1944 all the units of 56th Brigade were sent here including those from Brigade HQ. Again it needs to be underlined that the battalions were still not up to full strength and substantial numbers of men were also left behind at Clacton as rear parties. For example we are told that 2nd Essex left 120 men behind.[38] One can only speculate that these were members of 'B Echelon' involved in transport and supply for the battalion or were men already marked down for transfer. However if any of those left behind later took part in the Normandy landings they were the first to miss essential training.

Inverary was remote and outside the experience of most of these young men and they usually describe the scenery as awe-inspiring. Equally they struggled to understand that in some parts of the British Isles aspects of an almost feudal lifestyle remained. Along with many of his comrades Philip Maillou missed his daily paper:

> The main thing at Inverary was that we couldn't have the Daily Mirror! The local Lord said what could and couldn't be sold in the local shops and as far as he was concerned the Mirror was too near the knuckle because of the cartoon 'Jane'. We were fed up about this as sex-starved squaddies and couldn't see the reason why after the long journey by road, rail and steam ship we were denied our 'Jane'![39]

The Brigade did not have the equipment to land trucks or Carriers, so the Support Companies had to sit on the shore and pretend they had been landed. In exercise briefing notes this is known as arriving 'Dryshod'. In fact it appears that in the time at Inverary and during two other landing exercises involving 56th Brigade before D-Day very few transport personnel were able to take part in a practice landing 'Wetshod' and were fed into exercises, usually on the beach. However outside of this at Inverary the Bren gun teams and mortars of the S Companys took full part: "I can remember at Inverary we had to fire the Brens at targets. When ordered to cease-fire I still had half a dozen full magazines so I carried on. I nearly got court-martialed over that, but I certainly wasn't going to carry them back!"[40]

Gordon Duffin remembers that snow still covered the mountains and it was cold. Also in typical Army fashion NCO training staff would still have the last laugh:

> We were put in Nissen huts and tents and it is freezing cold and we sleep wearing everything we have. The sergeant taking us for a road run says, "what's the matter with you lot?" "Well we miss our NAAFI break!" "Oh is that all you want! You can use the airman's' NAAFI if you want. Hardly anyone uses it here. Come on." So we follow him around the corner and up a hill so steep that when we are halfway up its on hands and knees, crawling over rocks. When we

> get to the top there's a stone folly, nothing else! "Well there you are," he said. "Here's the airman's NAAFI, you can do what you like with it!" Caught again![41]

Don Leech from the same battalion has something to say about the way they were transported to Inverary, giving a good insight into how far a group of soldiers could go at this stage of the war if they thought they were not being treated properly. He confirms that there was a real NAAFI. Finally he gives a very good idea of the type of training undertaken:

> The Battalion then went to Inverary for landing craft training. At this time I was still with 15 Platoon. Carriers went to Inverary by train. The rest of the Battalion also travelled by train to Stranraer where they were herded into a cattle boat down in the hold. All the officers had the lovely cabins upstairs and what did we do? We bleated like sheep! The RSM went mad. We had our kit on and we just stood in the hold. It was a Nissen hutted camp at Inverary. The NAAFI building was still standing in the 1980's when I last visited. We trained on assault boats there, loading from the little pier at Inverary Castle and assaulted the other side of the loch. We used bangalore torpedoes to cut barbed wire and we were taught to drop on your back on the wire and let the next bloke step on you to go over. We thought this was stupid, but by goodness it worked. Training also included very physical runs up the surrounding hills.[42]

Bangalore torpedoes were sections of pipe filled with explosive. When screwed together forming a long tube, they were pushed under barbed wire and exploded, usually demolishing the defences.

Maurice Wells also of 2nd Glosters was a member of the advance party and stayed for a time on Lord Lovat's Estate near Stranraer. There he got seven days confined to barracks for playing cards. Later they joined the rest of the battalion at Stranraer and took the ferry to Inverary. As they arrived they noticed a large cliff and hoped they would not have to go up it. They were warned that if a mist came down on exercise they must stay where they were because of the large drops all around. Overall he recalls it as a positive experience because, "We saw another part of Britain we had

never seen before, so journeying like that in the Army opened our eyes. Something we would never have done otherwise."[43]

Nicholas Somerville, IO of 2nd South Wales Borderers, explains that during 56th Brigade training at Inverary an emphasis was laid on getting through wire and attacking pillboxes because if things had gone wrong during the beach assault phase of the landings, 56th Brigade would have been sent in to complete the task. At platoon level training was therefore carried out for storming beach defences. Some units carried ladders to the sea wall to surmount it and destroyed the first line of wire on top of the wall with bangalore torpedoes. Others threw chicken wire over subsequent lines of wire to allow men to cross, then a pole charge was placed against the side of the pillbox and exploded to breach the concrete. Somerville also gives a good insight into how his eyes were opened by the organisation, thought and detail that had gone into the training at Inverary. "There was a huge model of 'A Landing' and for the first time I felt the enormity of Overlord, with the numbers and types of ships and landing craft involved. The authorities were allowing 12% casualties for this type of exercise before calling a halt."[44]

Thankfully the Brigade only seems to have suffered minor injuries. As well as the physical training aspects at Inverary there were also films and lectures as shown by this War Diary excerpt: 'Training includes three films, 'Combined Operations', ' Landing at Salerno and Anzio' and 'RAF in Combined Operations' shown to the whole Battalion. Officers and NCOs saw a further training film - 'The Battalion Group in the Assault'.[45] Officers also received lectures in Communications in Combined Operations and Beach Organisation.

Important changes took place throughout this time. One in particular was a shock for 2nd Essex. On 28th March 1944 Major Higson posted earlier as 2i/c to 2nd Essex replaced their CO Lt. Col. Marriott. As an older man Lt. Col. Marriott was over the age which Montgomery set for his battalion commanders in the coming invasion, but his popularity and loss to the battalion is made clear in the War Diary for March 1944: 'His untiring efforts together with his vast experience have done much to maintain a high standard within the unit. His fairness and tact in all his dealings have contributed much to the good feeling within the unit'.[46] One of his new Company Commanders has this to say:

> Bill Marriott was, I suppose, old enough to be the father of some of us. This was a positive 'beneficial factor' at that time. He was excellent at administration and training and did a very necessary job in educating his young officers and in maintaining the morale of the battalion during three years of uncertainty. He delivered the battalion to John Higson in a very good state ready to undertake the additional and more arduous training necessary for war.[47]

An ordinary soldier from S Company echoes the sentiments of the War Diarist and Major Barrass and gives an example of Colonel Marriott's fairness:

> Col. Marriott was a good CO. He treated you more like a son and while he wouldn't let you get away with anything he wouldn't cane you like some CO's. One of the Sergeants lost his issue watch and he was brought up before Marriott who said, "You will pay £1!" which was a lot of money in those days. But the Sergeant didn't lose his stripes.[48]

On 28th March the Brigade Major (BM) Major Buchanan was admitted to hospital with malaria. Major LB Beuttler replaced him on 9th April. The BM was a very important officer whose job was to run Brigade HQ and had to make decisions when the Brigadier was absent. In a way although change was not good at this time at least it happened nearly two months prior to the invasion and allowed Major Beuttler to make his mark and settle into the job.

With training at Inverary complete by 5th April the battalions moved to the Christchurch area of Dorset arriving on the 7th April. The following day there was a Brigade conference for all CO's. Doubtless this was a briefing outlining the expected training schedule, for the tempo was to be stepped up yet again. Between 17th April and 5th May the Brigade was to be involved in two major landing exercises and later to be moved to camps in the New Forest prior to the invasion. 2nd South Wales Borders and 2nd Essex arrived in the south coast town of Christchurch and 2nd Glosters to Ossemsley Manor. The two battalions in Christchurch were billeted in houses and 2nd Glosters were mainly under canvas, though some were in Nissen Huts. Ernie Partridge had had some short leave. He received a telegram ordering him to report to his local railway station at 23.59hrs and travel to Aldershot. On arrival they were loaded a company at a time into 3 ton lorries and driven to a small village which had tents erected just outside. He was soon back into life in the Army:

> The Sergeant Major said, "Right you bastards, no more sending your clothes for washing, you are doing it yourself! Go and get some hard soap from stores, you will light your own fires and wash your clothes in a bucket!" Someone said "What about the washing line for drying our clothes?" The reply was, "what do you think those bleeding blackberry bushes are for over there!"[49]

The people of Christchurch were living in a town full to overflowing with so many units concentrating around the New Forest area. Bill Speake 2nd South Wales Borders confirms this and also shows a soldiers use of initiative when given the chance:

> At Christchurch the Barracks were full. Many men were billeted on the local populace. A sergeant had the job of knocking on doors and arranging billets for the men. The householders had little choice, the sergeant made his decision on the numbers in the house by its size and noted down the numbers to be billeted. My house was 231 Barrack Road. In the morning parades were held in the streets. When the battalion moved off to the sealed camp at Pennerley, a small party, including myself, stayed behind to clear up. In the cookhouse, which I

> believe was a Church Hall; we found a large bacon slicer machine and bags of sugar and potatoes. We sold them off in the area and spent the proceeds in a local pub.[50]

It was at Christchurch that a means of transport was introduced to make at least one company in each battalion speedier in advance. The use of bicycles had its origins in the First World War and Sir Nicholas Somerville describes their tactical use:

> At Christchurch Barracks one company of the Battalion, (D Company under Major Peter Martin), learnt that they were going to be the 'Mobile Column' and had to learn to use the folding airborne bicycle. This machine appears to have been universally hated by all who had to use it! The idea was to make one company in each battalion much more mobile, which together with the carrier platoon was the 'Mobile Column Group' commanded by Major Barlow, the battalion second in charge.[51]

Two pieces of information from the war diaries give evidence to show that things were stepping up a gear. On an A4 sheet published to the men of 2nd South Wales Borderers: 'Mobilisation Instructions – This unit will mobilize for service overseas by 0001 hrs 5 April 1944. Normal leave will continue until instructions issued later. The unit will be completed to full War Establishment including 1st Reinforcements'.[52] From the 2nd Glosters War Diary for 10th March 1944: 'Postal censorship introduced in the unit'.[53]

From 6th until 13th April, as part of their expected commitment to 7th Armoured Division, 2nd Essex sent Lt. Col. Higson, 11 officers and 20 OR's (mainly NCO's) to be attached to 7th Queens. This battalion was part of 131 (Queens) Brigade who were the infantry for 7th Armoured Division. The idea was to learn the ropes of lorry borne infantry. A similar number of officers from 2nd Glosters were on the same attachment. 2nd South Wales Borderers do not record an attachment, possibly the diarist failed to, or it was decided that because of their previous attachment to an Armoured Division they

were experienced enough. At the same time the battalions were still not up to strength. The 2nd Essex War Diary reports that during April a further 2 officers and 45 other ranks were posted away to be replaced by 65 other ranks taken on strength. The weekly 'Field Return' for 29th April 1944 requested 'the urgent return of eight hospitalised soldiers', apparently spread from Basingstoke to Inverary.[54]

The first of the major exercises for 56th Brigade was to be between Swanage and Bournemouth at Studland Bay. Here a sandy cove replicated about half the beach that 50th Division was to land on in June. Inland the town of Wareham approximated pretty closely to that of Bayeux, which in the final plan was 56th Brigades' objective for D-Day. This exercise was code named SMASH IV. SMASH I had involved 69th Brigade and Smash II, 231st Brigade. They were the two 'Assault Brigades' tasked respectively to take the left and right beachhead by landing first on 'Gold Beach' in Normandy, break the coastal defences and advance inland, thus opening up the way for the two 'Follow Up' infantry brigades, 151st (left) and 56th Brigade (right) to exploit this. The assault brigades had a second practice with SMASH III (69th and 151st Brigades). Smash IV had 231st Brigade (1st Devons, 1st Dorsets and 1st Hampshires) landing in the assault followed up by 56th Brigade exploiting to Wareham. In the original SMASH plans there was a paucity of landing craft and both follow up brigades were to be landed 'dryshod' and fed into the exercise from a flank. The assault brigades would land from craft, in other words 'wetshod'.

Exercise 'SMASH IV' was carried out on 20th April 1944 with the assault battalions landing at 0750hrs. In the end some extra landing craft were made available so that some elements of 56th Brigade managed a proper landing. The dryshod units from 56th Brigade bivouacked near the coast, but away from the landing area that was to

receive a bombardment prior to the landing. The next day umpires fed them into the exercise from either side of the beach. Live ammunition was to be used and so rules were laid down ensuring forward units would stay behind shellfire: 'In order that Self-Propelled Artillery may shoot in exercise SMASH III and IV, no troops will advance beyond the following 'shell lines' within the target area. Not beyond 43 Grid until H+2 hrs and not beyond River Corfe until H+3 hrs'.[55]

An escort of one 'Hunt' Class destroyer and sixteen coastal craft protected the exercise. Three more 'Hunt' Class destroyers and steam gunboats provided wider surface cover in the area. Also there were standing fighter patrols by day and a night fighter on standby at night.

Worries that the enemy might find out about the secret of the DD (Duplex Drive) Tanks that could swim ashore was dealt with in the following order:

> The use to which DD Tanks will be put will in no case be communicated to lower formations or units. A special security warning should be issued to sub districts that exercises will be taking place in their area in which more military devices may be used and that all troops should be instructed to refrain from commenting or speculating as to their use.[56]

Considering the security attached to the SMASH series of exercises, it is odd to look at the exercise maps and note that the beaches were given the same code names as those allotted for the real D-Day. Whether this was by accident or design is not known, however the probability lays with coincidental use, as an order was issued prior to the exercise that the code words JIG and KING for the beaches should not to be used and replaced by GEORGE and HOW.

All the relevant authorities were informed including the police and Home Guard units. There were to be many spectators. For SMASH III on 18th April these included King George VI, Winston Churchill, Eisenhower, Montgomery, the divisional generals and around twenty others of high Army, Navy and Air Force rank. These watched the proceedings from 'Fort Henry', a large observation bunker built during 1943 on the cliffs above the beach and were the 'Class A' observers. All other officers were 'Class B' and out in the open where there was room for 400 in large roped off area including some officers from 56th Brigade: 'Reserve Bde Groups: 56 Bde Tickets for 100 offrs on SMASH IV. These offrs will walk forward from checkpoint and will re-join their units as the latter pass road junc 471029 on their way to being fed in dryshod'.[57] After landing or entering dryshod, 56th Brigade advanced through the assault brigade and eventually 2nd Glosters 'took' Wareham. There was some live firing and dummy guns, minefields and figures laid out, but how realistic an exercise it was is difficult to gauge. It was very useful from the point of view of higher authorities testing the organisation and deployment of the many elements required, but from a tactical training point of view, the troops were just moved forward to timetable and were set few tasks, such as for example suppressing enemy opposition.

For all military exercises there were official observers to report back. One of these, Brigadier Parham, sent in a very mixed response to what he had seen the following day, 21st April 1944. Because of the issues that he highlights, and indeed caused problems on Gold Beach on 6th June, it is worthwhile studying his notes in detail:

> Needed rigid control of exits. Stop tracked vehicles using wheeled exits. Organise man handling by strong willed officers or Sgt. Majors at each exit to see troops really do it – the modern soldier has no idea of the power of 'manpower'. DD's were 16 minutes late and touched down with the infantry six

> minutes late – gap between bombing and assault – get the Navy to deliver on time. Conditions were abnormally excellent. Cruisers and destroyers were effective. No duplicate observers for SP Arty. Tide was high and the beach frightfully congested. Mass of SP Arty and RM Gp. Centaurs jostling other tspt for position from which to fire off beach (since they couldn't get forward to better posns. off beach). Main cause of trouble is the blocking off exits by the Bren Carriers drawn 6 pdrs of Inf. and RA A/Tk. Regts. These have a paralytic cross-country performance. The effect is that these dud vehicles hold up the whole deployment. It is a serious fault.[58]

Brigadier Parham's remarks seem almost clairvoyant as during the real landings parallels can be drawn with many of the faults he found and predictions he made. On 6th June on Gold Beach the tide became abnormally high, the tanks did arrive late and the beach became crowded with vehicles. The Royal Marine Centaur tanks were an important part of the landing programme, as being armed with 95mm Howitzers they could reduce dug-in positions and defended buildings. He later makes the important point that too many units were fed in 'Dryshod' and hence did not get the chance of a practice landing. His final conclusions stating that the German heavy batteries 'will have a marvellous time if the beaches (as they well may) present the Derby Day aspect, which they did today',[59] really should have made the planners sit up and take notice.

At least one member of 56th Brigade, Lt. Dennis Davis, was amongst Brigadier Parham's observers. Wearing his best battledress and accompanied by a small Padre, who was crippled by his new boots, he followed the exercise and took note of any problems. Among them included the tanks bunching badly on the beach showing a forest of aerials easily seen from land above the beachhead. A number of his points were hammered home by Brigadier Parham to avoid similar problems on the real thing.[60]

In his normal procedural way Montgomery teased out the results of this exercise. No doubt the views of Brigadier Parham including the report by Dennis Davis formed

an important part of the conference to discuss SMASH III and IV held at the Regal Cinema, Ringwood at 1000hrs 25th April 1944. No conclusions from this conference have been found, and the reason may be 'All papers concerning Exercise SMASH will be destroyed after the final conference'.[61] Appendix Two on page 285 shows a useful map of Exercise Smash.

Within a few days of the conference on SMASH III and IV a second and more extensive exercise was to take place between 30th April and 4th May. This was Exercise Fabius and was to practice a landing of as many of the British elements as possible. It took place across the following areas: Fabius I at Littlehampton, Fabius II at Bracklesham, Fabius III at Hayling Island and Fabius IV at Slapton. 50th Division with 56th Brigade under command were to land on Hayling Island. There were considerable security worries. The possible intervention of German naval or air forces had to be contained, especially after the disaster to the American 'Operation Tiger' in Lyme Bay. Also if the Germans by spies or aerial reconnaissance realised the scope and type of forces used, they might be able to have made precise judgements about the actual landings. The existence of the DD Tanks was still a secret to them. Another factor for FABIUS, especially coming so hard on the heels of SMASH, was the need for there to be at least four weeks between the final exercise and D-Day, so that sufficient time elapsed for the repair and preparation of landing craft. As well as the careful planning required to launch the FABIUS an elaborate defence and deception plan was put into operation. Appendix Three on page 286 shows the area of Exercise Fabius.

Planning documents tell us a little about the security arrangements and about 56th Brigade. It shows that yet again the transport and carrier elements were not to be part of the landing exercise, but were to drive around. Ferries in and around the Solent

were stopped during the exercise. There were also worries about considerable damage to crops. The exercise was also to be used as an opportunity to practice arrangements with civilian authorities and give the police practice in controlling the vast amount of traffic to be generated during the real invasion phase. '56 Bde (follow up of 231 Bde) Marching personnel will re-embark on D-Day. Vehs will move to assembly area NORTH end of island and disperse from there on D+1. Personnel will sleep on the vehicles'.[62] All units were to be briefed as if on the real operation and no press correspondents were allowed to witness or report any part of the FABIUS exercise.

A second document underlines the fear of detection that by using the south coast it could inform the Germans about plans for the naval part of the invasion, code-named NEPTUNE and the land part, code-named OVERLORD. Also it might help them uncover the complicated deception plan, called FORTITUDE, being undertaken by the allies to persuade the Germans that the invasion would take place in the Pas-de-Calais area. To enable the exercise to go ahead the British minefield off Littlehampton and West Solent was cleared. The outer naval cover consisted of eighteen destroyers with standing air patrols of up to four squadrons of RAF fighters. In the end it was decided to use the exercise as a means, 'to induce the enemy to believe that FABIUS was the first of a series of exercises. OVERLORD/NEPTUNE was to be the second'.[63] German aircraft were shepherded away from the exercise area throughout the time of the exercise.

An Admiralty document concerned with FABIUS shows the concerns and actions about the weather and sea state in this weather report for 2300hrs on 5th May:

'WSW Force 6 in sheltered waters reaching gale force in exposed areas veering slowly NW late in afternoon and decreasing. Showers, moderate to good visibility. Waves 8 feet. Immediate: All craft are to haul down barrage balloons'.[64]

The sea state was to lead to tragedy for 2nd Essex. The Landing Craft Infantry Large or LCI (L) was a much larger vessel than a small assault craft and carried 200 men. It had two side ramps or walkways which when lowered allowed men to disembark from the top deck either side of the bow into the water. These were the ships that 56th and 151st Infantry Brigades as follow up troops used. The procedure was for a naval person to swim/wade to shore with a line and fix a thicker rope between the landing craft and the shore enabling the soldiers to have a steadying handline. Unfortunately with the LCI (L) being a larger vessel its draft precluded it from properly beaching and they ran aground always some way off the shore. This could mean some deep wading for a fully loaded soldier. On Operation Fabius with a little difficulty the soldiers got ashore. When it came to re-embarking on LCI (L) 295 the ship was moved backward from the shore by the swell, the rope was pulled tight and went up into the air with a number of soldiers holding on until they had to let go. Seven were drowned. They were Major Norman Ayres, Corporal Henry Leftly, Lance-Corporal Frederick Edwards, Private Charles Argent, Private Thomas Curtis, Private Ronald North and Private Leslie Tongue.[65] This amounted to virtually the whole of D Company HQ Section.

There was a court of enquiry. As a result on D-Day itself the plan was revised that the Rifle Companies on the LCI (L)'s were to be transferred to shore by smaller Landing Craft Mechanised (LCM) and according to the 2nd Glosters War Diary for 15th

May 1944, 'Part of Bn. transferring from LCI to LCM for beach transfer. This was found to be quite easy to do'.[66]

There is a postscript as follows in a letter of 15th June 1944 to the Under Secretary of State, War Office from Generals Bucknall and Graham:

> On 4th May 44, during a landing exercise a party of troops of the 2nd Essex Regiment were endeavouring to re-embark on LCI (L) 295. The craft surged back from the beach, however, and a number of them were dragged out of their depth by the starboard steadying line and left struggling in the water in full equipment. Although they had already spent a considerable time in the water in the course of their duties Sub-Lieutenant J. A. Gibb RCNVR and Ordinary Seaman M.K. Macdonald V/62175 immediately went to their rescue. By their efforts they were able to save one man. One officer and six other ranks were drowned.[67]

The two generals wanted to recognise the gallant action of the naval men but considered that the appropriate Naval authorities should decide the form of recognition. After a considerable paper chase of over twenty letters between the British and Canadian authorities it was unfortunately decided on 16th November 1944 that the RCN personnel were not to receive an award, but each should receive a letter giving: 'An expression of Their Lordships satisfaction at their determined efforts in saving and in attempting to save life when men from L.C.I. (L) 295 were in difficulties during a landing exercise on 4th May 1944'.[68]

Once the clearing up and debriefing had been completed after FABIUS the Brigade spent the rest of their time left in Christchurch preparing for the invasion. There was street fighting practice in Southampton, 2-inch mortar competitions, a TEWT (Tactical Exercise Without Troops) with the Sherwood Rangers, who were to provide armoured support on D-Day. Major Petre arrived with 2nd Essex to replace Major Ayres. On 18th May 2nd Glosters and 2nd South Wales Borderers moved to their final camps in

the New Forest prior to the invasion. 2nd Essex followed on 25th May. It had been an exceptionally busy few weeks. Little more could be done to prepare the men of 56th Infantry Brigade for action. Still each battalion was short of men. Most officers' report being so busy that they had little time to dwell on the future. Many officers and men genuinely wanted to get to France and see the job done, or get back for 1940. A few men report being apprehensive. Probably most hoped to do their best and not let their friends down.

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[64] TNA: PRO ADM 179/439 Admiralty: Portsmouth Station. Naval implications of Exercise Fabius. May 1944.
[65] Army Roll of Honour 1939 –1945. CD Rom. Pub. in conjunction with TNA: PRO.
[66] TNA: PRO WO 171/1298. 2nd Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment. War Diary 1944.
[67] TNA: PRO ADM 1/29985. Recommendations for awards to 2 officers and men of HM LCI (L) 295 for attempting to rescue troops of 2nd Bn Essex Regiment from the sea in a loading accident.
[68] TNA: PRO ADM 1/29985. Recommendations for awards to 2 officers and men of HM LCI (L) 295 for attempting to rescue troops of 2nd Bn Essex Regiment from the sea in a loading accident.

Chapter Three.

From the sealed Camps to Sailing for Normandy.

25th May – Evening 5th June 1944.

By 25th May all three battalions and the Brigade HQ had moved to camps specially set up for invasion troops in the New Forest. 56th Brigade HQ was at Pennerley Lodge, 2nd South Wales Borderers were at Camp B4, around Pennerley Farm, 2nd Essex at B3 and 2nd Glosters at B7. All the men knew that the invasion could not be far off. This time was passed in a curious limbo for some of the men, although there was plenty to prepare and even small training exercises were held in the forest area.

Lieutenant Dennis Davis remembers taking men out into the woods to zero the Bren Guns and sniper's rifles in his Platoon. He insisted that the spare barrels of the Bren guns were zeroed as well as the barrel fitted to the gun. "We used a small sandpit in the woodland and ranged at around 100 yards. This caused a small forest fire and some altercation transpired between the fire brigade and myself who needed to use the road my men were firing across!"[1] Bill Speake had a similar task and remembers Pennerley Camp for "boredom and rain. By now I had my own sniping rifle and only I was allowed to use it. I could go out (of the camp) with the armourer, Sergeant Bill Boast, to get it zeroed in the surrounding woodland."[2]

Both Lt. Dennis Davis and Pte. Bill Speake were in C Company of 2nd South Wales Borderers. Fire in the New Forest was a constant risk in drier conditions. With thousands of soldiers encamped in the area smoking and engaged in exercises the risk was greatly heightened. In fact on 30th June the War Diary of 2nd South Wales Borderers

reports that a "Warning of extreme fire risk was issued by the AFS and NFS". (Auxiliary and National Fire Services).[3]

The camps were thought to be highly secure Not only was there a great fear of information leaking out, but there was also a danger that some might desert. Brigadier Hargest who acted as an observer for 21st Army Group through the invasion and fighting in Normandy reported: 'In England (before D-Day) there was a lot of resentment by 50 Div about being asked to do the assault on D-Day. 69 Bde call Monty "fling 'em in Monty!" The numbers of men going Absent Without Leave (AWOL) in the New Forest amounted to well over 1000.'[4]

Sergeant Dick Philips in 2nd South Wales Borderers HQ Intelligence Section, was a keen observer of the security effort:

> Beaulieu was completely encircled by barbed wire and outside of that were not Redcaps *(Military police)*, but Green caps *(Field Service Police)* to make certain that you didn't get out. Some men did get out and there was hell to play and the CO addressed the battalion and he was saying how dangerous this was and that those who did get out should have been hanged! This was Lt. Col. Craddock and he was a bit of a fire-eater![5]

One of those who did get out and went home (because he wanted to say a proper goodbye to his parents in case he was killed) was Bill Evans, a recent addition to 2nd South Wales Borderers from the Brecknockshire Battalion:

> After a few days at Christchurch we moved to Beaulieu and the sealed camp. Like many others I remember this as like a prison with rain teeming down, living in tents with duckboards to walk on. At some stage I went 'over the wire' and back home to South Wales in order to say goodbye to my family in case I did not survive the invasion. By the time I got home the local policeman had already visited, looking for me. I went and saw him and promised to be on the early train back. No punitive action was taken on my return, probably the

thought that any punishment at that stage would have meant replacing a rifleman.[6]

On the inside of the wire Islwyn Edmunds remembers: "When I was tasked to make sure that the perimeter remained sealed during one nights' guard duty, L/Cpl Jones advised me not to be too efficient. He said that any men going over the wire would be back in the morning. They were."[7]

Islwyn Edmunds, Bill Evans and Corporal Mel Jones were members of the same section in B Company, 2nd South Wales Borderers, otherwise called 'Rorkes Drift Company' after the action fought in the 1879 Zulu War by B Company. Corporal Mel Jones, known by some as 'Mad Mel' later won the Military Medal for bravery. Although the 2nd South Wales Borderers was an excellent battalion, commended by the GOC Northern Ireland after its service there, it had suffered through its role at home. Many men like Bill Evans had been transferred to the battalion with little warning to make up its numbers and with little integration or training within the battalion to build morale. In his battalion history Major Boon the OC of B Company recorded that even by early May 1944, B Company only had a strength of 50 men instead of 120. 'It reached its full establishment so late that the company never carried out one exercise as a formed body before it went into action. The Battalion can be justly proud of the hard work and spirit which overcame such disadvantages.'[8]

A wartime family tragedy nearly made Don Leech of 2nd Glosters desert. He had just found out in the sealed camp that his brother had been killed in Burma fighting with 10th Glosters. He was initially refused permission to go home by his company commander and he threatened to desert. He walked out into the woods of the New Forest to decide what he was going to do. The orderly Sergeant followed him into the

wood and sat down next to him and asked him to go back with him. I said "Jack I am going home, I don't care what the Company Commander says, I'm going home. I have got to get out of here somehow."[9] When he went back into the office he expected to see his company commander again but some quick thinking on the part of the officers diverted this. He was taken to the S Company OC, Captain French, who told him that as he was a trained reserve Carrier driver he was transferred to S Company. Further he told Don that, "a Carrier is waiting to take you to the station at Southampton from where you can go home, but you must be back by Sunday night."[10] This was the Wednesday. It meant he had Thursday, Friday and Saturday at home.

As ordered he caught the train back early Sunday morning and it went by Great Western Railway to Reading. Then the problems started when he attempted to catch a connecting train. Due to the mobilisation for D-Day the timetable was all changed. Vast troop trains were now moving through and he finished a long way from Beaulieu. Starting to walk back a man with a motorcycle and sidecar offered him a lift and dropped him at Hangman's Cross, a short walk to base. When he arrived back six hours late at six in the morning the battalion was on the move. Captain French saw him and got him a breakfast and sat down beside him. "Captain French was worried I was going to desert and not come back, but I told him that I have been allowed to see my father, which was all I wanted. Captain French said 'forget it now' and he sat and had a friendly sympathetic conversation with me."[11]

The planning and briefings started when the camps were 'sealed' at 2359 hours on 25th May 1944. This meant that only a few men with special permission would be able to leave or enter. Many men make mention of how good the planning and briefings

were. Major Pat Barras, 2nd Essex was one of the men to recall this along with his distaste for the camps:

> When we were locked up in the tented camps in the New Forest the battalions faced a number of problems. Training had to continue in the now limited space. The weather was sometimes poor. But time was also spent looking at the excellent models of their invasion area, which showed detail down to hedges and roads. Also much use was made of the aerial photographs. The French Resistance may have supplied some photos. We could also hear the occasional air raid some way off.[12]

The young Intelligence Officer of 2nd South Wales Borderers, Lt. Nicholas Somerville, was amazed at the importance his post apparently gave him within the battalion. His task was to look after the briefing maps and he was not allowed to leave the briefing tent. The maps had bogus names on them but were to all intents otherwise correct. Certainly a few officers realised their general destination. Moreover, it did not take much to work out that Bayeux would be the objective on D-Day. Among themselves some officers reminded each other not to forget their knitting – an allusion to the Bayeux Tapestry. Few other parts of the coast of France fitted. A large model down to every hedgerow could be viewed. "I asked for an oblique photo of the landing beach and the request went via the Colonel. It was in my hands in 36 hours. The ability for a soldier in my position to ask for such a thing and receive it was astounding."[13]

Sergeant Dick Philips, the Intelligence Section NCO of 2nd South Wales Borderers, equally remembers that: "The briefings were wonderful really. There were these photographs of the area where we were going to land and relief maps showing every cottage and every tree. When we actually landed and got off the beach we would have no problem in finding our way."[14]

The 2nd South Wales Borders Signals Officer became very ill after the camp had already been 'sealed'. This was a very late stage for a replacement as important as this. The replacement was Sam Weaver, trained in the RAC, converted to Infantry and at that moment in a holding unit for officer reinforcements at Aldershot. His only signals experience had really been during Royal Armoured Corps training. On arrival at Aldershot he stated that he had specialised in signals, which was stretching the truth. Arriving to join 2nd South Wales Borderers on 25th May, it was not long before he had to own up to his lack of expertise and learnt the destination of the battalion from his Signals Sergeant:

> When I arrived I was honest with my Signals Sergeant 'Nobby' Cowan about my relative lack of experience, but Nobby accepted me and we got on and worked well together. In the camps everything was secure from the risk of soldiers letting slip any plans. Letters written by soldiers were not posted until after D-Day. In the 'inner sanctum' certain officers were told where we would land and then briefed subordinates on real maps with bogus place names and real aerial photographs. It was on one of these photographs that when using a magnifying glass Nobby Cowan pointed out the name 'Bayeux' to me on a road sign![15]

The messing and recreational arrangements in the camps were looked after by American troops. Football, rugby and boxing matches were arranged on an ad hoc basis and 'Stars in Battledress' put on concert party entertainments. Frank Rosier, 2nd Glosters, remembers his favourite 'racy' novel and interaction with the Americans:

> We saw 'The Inkspots' at one concert party and I was trying to finish a risqué book 'No Orchids for Miss Blandish.' Your kids would read it today but then it was much sought after by us all! The cooks were black Americans and basketball matches took place between us and the cooks. After white American officers objected, they were forbidden to socialise with us.[16]

For B Echelon drivers there were different tasks to complete. George Barker of 2nd Essex explained that they had to waterproof the trucks. Also they did not have

briefings like the Rifle Companies had as they were going over there just after the landing and would be directed to join them. "Our main job was waterproofing the transport and a man called Skinner went and did a course, then he came back and told us how to do it. We covered parts of the trucks with this waterproofing compound and I suppose some of it was never removed!"[17]

Frank Dilworth one of the Dispatch Riders with 56th Brigade HQ gives a very good sketch and insight into life in the camps which is worth quoting in full:

> In the sealed camps we still went out with messages until the last few days. They were like prisoner of war camps all barbed wire. You used to be able to get things in the NAAFI but the biggest worry was that everything would quickly disappear until the next lot came. When we got down there the first day – the Americans were administrating these camps - we went for breakfast and these Yanks were dishing up the breakfast. There were Cornflakes, scrambled eggs, fried eggs, bacon and so on. We had never seen as much as this before. Before dinner time our cooks were back in the job. The Americans had used a weeks worth in one sitting! These Yanks were all right. We played them at cricket one day, baseball the next then rugby and football. We didn't tell them all the rules! We had one camp entertainment, two women and a fella, but I wouldn't have wanted their job for all the tea in China! The women were catcalled all the time and all sorts![18]

Gordon Duffin, 2nd Glosters, also has vivid memories of the camps, food and the higher standards of hygiene as practised by the Americans. His descriptions are again very useful in helping our understanding of what life was like for the short period of time the invasion troops lived in the camps and the culture shock when living and working alongside Americans for the first time. After marching from Ossemsley Manor they entered the camp, which was surrounded by triple Dannert barbed wire. Inside were square American tents about 12 feet by 12 feet, much better than the British army Bell tents. In these tents there was enough room to stand up in them unlike the bell tents. They slept on camp beds with mattresses, blankets and a bolster for a pillow. This was very much better than normal arrangements and seemed almost luxurious. They

were supposed to be refitted, but according to Gordon were hardly given anything new as "Our quarter bloke would make Scrooge look like Father Christmas!"[19] Americans staffed the canteens dishing up American food. The first meal was an eye opener:

> They were shouting, "Come on, chow, chow, chow!" Three long wooden benches, with an American straddled across each bench and he has a great big square Dixie full of food. You go one side of him and he goes dollop! Into your mess tin and if you left it there he would fill it up until it overflows. About four men had been served when an American voice shouts "stop, stop! Don't issue any more food, what the hell do you think you are doing?" He was an American MO and very concerned about the state of all the mess tins. "You can't eat out of them you will die of food poisoning! Throw them all over there." He orders our QM to arrive. "I have condemned all these mess tins, each of these men need a new set of mess tins." The QM says, "that's impossible Sir I haven't got any." "I don't care, get them new mess tins." The QM goes away and comes back with a new mess tin for everyone.[20]

The new mess tins were a bit greasy so the men were moved to a series of containers for cleaning the new mess tins. They had to wash, rinse and sterilize in separate tubs. More normally they were used to 100 men dipping their tins in a bucket of greasy lukewarm water. There was a canteen in the camp where they could get free coffee and doughnuts and free magazines like Yank and Picture Post. "You could buy the better American cigarettes, Camels and Lucky Strike for about shilling for 50. The lads smoke themselves silly. So we are in these tents and we have no training."[21]

Still men were arriving and leaving. The 2nd Glosters seemed to have reached their establishment figure. According to their War Diary report of 23rd May the Battalion now consisted of 39 Officers and 794 Other Ranks. However the 2nd South Wales Borderers War Diary of 27th May reports still being short of 32 Other Ranks and NCO's. 2nd Essex War Diary reports on 22nd May that 8 Other Ranks were drafted as unsuitable, on 25th May 6 Other Ranks left the Battalion, on 28th May 1 Sergeant and 2

Other Ranks joined and finally on 29th May 19 Other Ranks joined. It was one week to D-Day.

A number of men from A Company, 2nd Glosters had to deal with an accidental shooting with tragic consequences. For stretcher-bearer Ted Castle it was not a good introduction to his Army job:

> One man accidentally shot himself. He had just come back off guard and hadn't unloaded his rifle or put the safety catch on. He threw himself down on his bed then his gun went off and he was killed. I was about a yard from him when it happened. He was the first casualty I ever dealt with; he was next to me in the tent you see. He had dropped the rifle on the floor and it had gone off, the bullet going through his chest and out of his back at point blank range. There was nothing you could do. Major Lance was there immediately."[22]

Ernie Partridge of the same company was outside the tent, "I was talking to another chap outside and he said, "What's that Ernie?" I said, "It's a bloody rifle gone off!" I had to help carry him (Kenneth Townsend) and bury him in the little village church.[23] 14656343. Private Kenneth Townsend. Died on 29th May 1944 and is buried in Boldre Churchyard not far from the sealed camp.

So these men waited cooped up in the sealed camps doubtless wondering when the order would come to move off. Overall one gets the impression of boredom or impatience to get on with it, well trained, fit and ready, but still held on the leash. Finally they were all briefed on the 'Bogus' maps and mock up models. On 27th May the Platoon Commanders were briefed, then the next day the 'other ranks' were briefed, a Company at a time. When these tasks were completed Brigadier Pepper lectured each Battalion in turn.

Part of the address to the 2nd Glosters by their CO was circulated as a Special Order of the Day on 29th May 1944.

> From: Lt. Col. Biddle. To: All Ranks - "The Sixty First are about to re-enter France. The task before us will be hard, but we have a debt to pay off towards those of this Battalion who defended Cassel towards the end of May 1940. We shall now have the opportunity of demonstrating the fruits of four years waiting and preparation. As the commanding officer of the 6th Battalion said at LEDRINGHAM "up Glosters and at 'em!"[24]

This was probably typical of the sentiments expressed by the various CO's to boost morale and keep the men going while the tedium of waiting continued. By the end of May all the men had been briefed in both large and small groups, and seen the models of the landing areas and the photographs taken by plane. The officers were all properly briefed as to the role of 56th Brigade and their battalion, although only a very few knew the final destination. Only on the landing craft would maps bearing the correct place names be issued. At this point it is worthwhile examining in detail the topography of Gold Beach, the existing German defences, 56th Brigades' part in the planned landings and the hoped for outcomes in the first 24 hours.

'Gold Beach' is on the Normandy coast north of Bayeux, a town most famous for its ancient tapestry chronicling an invasion the reverse of 1944. The landing areas were between, and inclusive of, the coastal towns of Asnelles/Le Hamel in the west and La Riviere in the east. Since January 1944 the Germans under Rommel had been frantically improving the defences all along this coastline. The 50th Division plan divided the landing beach into two parts code named 'Jig' in the west and 'King' in the east. Both Jig and King were further sub-divided into 'Green' (west) and 'Red (east). The next landing beach to the west was the American 'Omaha' Beach, over fifteen kilometres away. To the east and three kilometres away was the Canadian 'Juno' Beach.

The Gold Beach landing area is approximately six kilometres wide. It consists of a very wide sandy beach at low tide leading to a low bank, behind, which is marshy ground known as ' Le Marais'. This area is two hundred metres wide at La Riviere and seven hundred and fifty metres wide at Le Hamel. At high tide the sea comes near to the bank on normal tides. In the middle of the beach two small streams join and exit to the sea, La Gronde Ruisseau (the word 'Gronde' is transcribed as 'Grande' on some maps and led to some confusion on D-Day as to its size) and Le Hable de Heurtaut (spelt Heurtot on 1944 maps). Behind 'Le Marais' on the La Riviere side of the beach the land rises fairly steeply to 50 metres running across the back of 'Le Marais' for four kilometres where it turns inland and south west above the small village of Meauvaines. This feature dominates the eastern side of the valley running inland and is called the Meuvaines ridge. Behind the far western side of Asnelles/Le Hamel the ground rises to 55 metres and where it reaches the coast forms a cliff for over 1 kilometre until it reaches Arromanches to the west. This feature forms another ridgeline running from the sea to the southwest parallel to the Meuvaines Ridge. Between the two lies a fairly flat valley some 2½ kilometres wide dominated by both ridges. Once landed 56th Brigade had to advance inland initially for 3½ kilometres with its axis of advance following a road on the west side of the valley through the hamlets of Buhot and Ryes. Then it had to turn west with various objectives for the battalions to gain. The Germans had open positions containing mortar, machine gun and heavier artillery up to 105mm along each ridge. Appendix Five on page 288 can be used to identify the main features and towns of the landing area.

Both Le Hamel and La Riviere were heavily fortified and included a heavy anti-tank weapon, 88mm at La Riviere and variously reported as 75mm to 88mm at

Asnelles. These guns dominated the length of the beach with crossfire and were positioned in concrete emplacements with a thick wall facing seawards impervious to gunfire from the sea. Between these were two 'Wiederstandnester' or 'Resistance Nests' each constructed of a number of concrete bunkers. The one nearer Asnelles at La Cabane des Douanes was armed with a 50mm cannon and 37mm cannon, while the second near Le Hable de Heurtaut had a 50mm cannon. Each of these 'Wiederstandnester' contained machine guns, were wired in and surrounded by mines. Between the two in the centre of the beach was an open machine gun position. A partially completed heavy gun emplacement; the Mont Fleury battery of 4 x 122mm cannon; stood one kilometre inland above La Riviere. Two further Wiederstandnester were positioned well behind the beach on rising ground dominating the beach. The first near the lighthouse above La Riviere consisted of 1 x 75mm and 1 x 50mm cannon, while the second was a kilometre west of the Mont Fleury battery and consisted of machine guns with possibly a light gun.[25]

A War Office report by the Army Operational Research Group published in 1945 discussing Gold Beach states:

> Elsewhere there was only a thin chain of infantry strongpoints extending inland to a depth of 200 to 300 yards, with plenty of local support weapons but weakly backed by artillery. The normal infantry strongpoints which were strung along the coast at intervals of 1,000 to 2,000 yards were roughly of platoon strength. Weapon pits within these strongpoints were normally sited for all round defence, though the greatest weight of fire was towards the sea. Guns in the beach defences were often sited to enfilade the beach. It was found during the assault that many of the guns were protected by concrete walls that rendered them almost invulnerable to 4.7-inch fire from the sea and could not fire directly seawards.[26]

Designed to rip the bottom out of landing craft or blow them up, underwater obstacles were of five types. Firstly rows of wooden stakes, often with a shell attached,

then wooden ramps with a shell attached. Finally iron 'Tetrahedra' with a single shell and Hedgehogs with Teller mines or a single shell. There were also obstacles of 'Element 'C' type. These were metal constructions with the aspect of a field gate. All these obstacles were generally in the upper half of the tidal range and were covered at high tide. The density varied from one every 2 yards to one every 3 yards of front. Beach wiring was usually in zigzags, and all obstacles were sited so that the weapon pits could enfilade them.

The Gold Beach landings were to be accomplished by 50th Division and for this phase 56th Brigade came under their command. Two Brigades were to lead the assault, break the coastal defence crust and push inland. On King Beach the assault brigade was 69th Infantry Brigade with the 5th East Yorkshires, 6th Green Howards and 7th Green Howards who had all served in France, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, North Africa and Sicily and were highly experienced. Equally famous were 231st Brigade landing on Jig Beach comprising the 2nd Devons, 1st Hampshires and 1st Dorsets. They had all served in Malta, Egypt, Sicily and Italy. The I51st Brigade and 56th Brigade were to land two hours after the assault phase and push through the assault battalions. 151st Brigade landing on King Beach comprised 6th Durham Light Infantry, 8th Durham Light Infantry and 9th Durham Light Infantry and had served in France and Belgium, UK, Egypt, Cyprus, Iraq, Libya, N. Africa and Sicily. 56th Brigade was to follow 231st Brigades assault. Both 151st and 56th Brigade had to be prepared to assault the beach area if the assaulting battalions failed. Otherwise they would only be landed when the beach was secure. The 8th Armoured Brigade of 4/7 Dragoon Guards, Nottinghamshire Yeomanry and 24th Lancers supplied armour for the landings, some of it comprising DD tanks. The 12th Kings Royal Rifle Corps were the infantry battalion working with this armour. Of this brigade the Nottinghamshire Yeomanry were experienced, having fought at

Alam el Halfa, El Alamein, Medenina, Tebaga Gap, Akarit, Enfidaville and Tunis with 8th Army.[27]

It is interesting to note and compare the experience of the infantry brigades to that of 56th Brigade. 56th Brigade must have been something of an unknown entity and despite being made up of regular battalions from famous regiments there must have been a question mark over how it would perform in battle. Interestingly when interviewing former officers and men of 56th Brigade they largely exude an air of confidence about this period and certainly those who had already served for some time with the battalions show a pride in their regiment and a marked degree of team spirit.

Other armour to be used in the assault included specialist Armoured Vehicles Royal Engineers (AVREs) from 81st and 82nd Assault Squadrons, Royal Marine Centaur tanks and three field regiments of Sexton self propelled 25-pounder guns. Also landing was 47 Royal Marine Commando who had to push westwards inland alone across country for over sixteen kilometres and take Port-en-Bessin from the land. There were many other units landing who had to perform various tasks. Not the least of these were the Royal Navy demolition teams or Landing Craft Obstacle Clearance Units (LCOCU), who were among the first to land. They had to disable or demolish the obstacles placed in the sand. Amazingly Royal Navy frogmen had already reconnoitred the beach in December 1943. The long list of units makes the point well that 50th Division had a very large number of units attached to it for the assault phase. The Germans expected a high tide landing, as they thought this would give an advantage to any assault force of not being exposed to direct fire while crossing the sand. The Allied plan envisaging landing at low tide to ensure that at least there was a good chance of putting the infantry and armour down, without exposing the craft to underwater devices. Many of the landing

craft involved had to be preserved because they were expected to make a number of trips between shore and supporting ships at sea.

Now that the geographical nature of the ground and the German defences in the area have been examined a closer look can be taken at the 56th Brigade plan. '56 Infantry Brigade Operation Order No.1' runs to over forty pages of instruction and plans. Carrying on its front cover the emblem of the Sphinx, it was marked 'BIGOT NEPTUNE TOP SECRET'. Further it is marked at the bottom 'TO BE DESTROYED **BEFORE** LANDING'.[28] Bigot was the highest order of security classification for D-Day, Neptune being strictly speaking the naval and landing operation although this order continues to be operational well inland. The first phase of Operational Order No.1 took place in the final days in the sealed camps by certain officers having to finalise the landing craft loading arrangements. This was complex, as the rifle companies and some HQ elements of each battalion, would land together and be put ashore as a brigade. But the Carriers and some jeep transport would go by Landing Craft Tank (LCT), while the rest of the soft skinned transport would go by the much larger Landing Ship Transport (LST). Sir Nicholas Somerville, explains what this task meant for an officer of each battalion:

> An important and worrying task for me was to organise the loading scales for the landing craft. All the transport went on an LCT, but the rest of the Battalion had to be split between three LCI's. Which meant one of the four rifle companies would have to be split and the command, signals and medical staff had to be split in case one ship was sunk.[29]

The Brigade landing plan required that Landing Craft Mechanised (LCM) capable of carrying a platoon at a time were to be used to trans-ship from the Landing Craft Infantry (Large) LCI (L) to shore. This was the change brought about by the drownings during Exercise Fabius. Secondly the tracked vehicles of the battalions were

to land at the same time as the rifle companies from LCT's'. Later spread over two tides would come the rest of the transport. The Brigadier and half his staff were carried on a LCH, which stood for 'Landing Craft Headquarters', and carried better signals equipment than a normal LCI (L). This was to be LCI (L) 255, and hasty arrangements were made to cut away part of the interior to carry the extra radio equipment. Originally another craft – LCI (L) 302 was to be used, however it could not be made seaworthy in time and as late as 13th May LCI (L) 255 was substituted.[30] Appendix Four on page 287 is taken from 56th Brigade Operational Order No.1 and shows the planned order of beaching on D-Day. An explanation of the craft numbers is required at this point. For 48 hours over D-Day each craft carried a number written white on black for easy identification. This was called the 'Landing Table Index Number' or LTIN. These numbers were usually carried at an easily seen point such as the bridge structure. The LTIN number allowed each soldier to recognise his craft when tied up. However these craft also carried two other numbers on the bow. The top number indicated which flotilla each ship belonged to and the bottom its unique identification number. For example one LCI (L) carrying the 2nd Essex bow number was 264 (Flotilla) 305 (ships number). Its LTIN was 2905. A problem for modern historians is that in landing photographs the LTIN is rarely decipherable and that number is the one used in the planning. The landing tables for the whole invasion appear to have been worked out in April 1944 and through enemy action, damage or breakdown a ship may later become unavailable. It would be easy enough to swap an LTIN and not cause any confusion. Also in April 1944 there was still a frantic effort going on to procure enough landing craft. A final amended list of craft for 50th Division was issued on 4th May. Even so, it can be seen that changes still had to be made as a final decision on the craft carrying the main HQ of 56th Brigade was not made until ten days later. In the event Frank Clarke, 2nd Glosters remembers: "On the LCI (L)'s at Southampton we could recognise our own

landing craft easily by the emblems like Mickey Mouse painted by the crews on the funnels and gun shields!"[31] At Appendix Four can be seen a copy of the original diagrammatic plan showing the order and type of craft used, as published in 56th Brigade Operational Order Number 1.

On page one of Operational Order No.1 there is a basic briefing as to where and when the Brigade will land, including the map references for 1st US Division at Omaha and the 3rd Canadian Division at Juno. "INTENTION 3, 56 Brigade and att trps (attached troops) will be prepared to land on JIG Sector at any time from H + 2½hrs onwards and adv to and secure the high ground from inc 7781 – MONUNIREL 7777 – inc GUERON 7876."[32] MONUNMIREL is a misspelling and should read Montmirel.

In the light of what happened to the Brigade on D-Day it is worthwhile examining what this meant in some detail. The Brigade was to land and push up to 17 kilometres inland, taking Bayeux and establishing itself 3 kilometres south of Bayeux and 1 kilometre west of Bayeux, thus holding the forward edge of the battlefield and the extreme right (west) flank of the British Army in Normandy. This seems a bold expectation following a sea crossing and landing and shows the extent to which the Allies were confident of quick success and that their intelligence expected weak German resistance. It also shows some trust in the ability of 56th Brigade. The movement of 56 Brigade in carrying out its task was in three phases. Phase A (Codeword GRAPE) covered the landing and assembly. Phase B (Codeword PEAR) was the advance to and capture of the high ground north of Bayeux including the bridge at Vaux-sur-Aure. Phase C (Codeword STRAWBERRY) was the capture of the high ground to the west and the feature south of Bayeux around Montmirel and link with the Americans. Phase A took the Brigade from the landing beach 2 kilometres inland to the

orchards just southwest of the farm at Buhot, where it was to meet and reorganise after the landing. Phase B moves them to take a line dominating the high ground 2 kilometres northeast of Bayeux, while finally Phase C should have taken them south of Bayeux. Appendix 5 is the planning map showing the expected Phase Lines to be reached by the end of D-Day by the Gold Beach units.

The way to Buhot was to be marked by Unit Landing Officers (ULO's) who landed on the heels of the assault brigades with a jeep and three ORs/NCOs and marked the route from the beach with blackboards, signs and chalking on walls to show the way. Although very simple this was an effective way of marking a route for units. Under the command of the Brigade was a Machine Gun Company of 2nd Cheshires (Vickers Medium Machine Guns), less one platoon; a heavy mortar platoon of 2nd Cheshires (4.2 inch mortars), a troop of 208 Battery Anti-tank 6 pounder guns, 147th Field Regiment, less one battery, tanks of the Sherwood Rangers and 203 Field Ambulance unit which had been under command at Lymington since 23rd April 1944. The areas were to be secured as follows: 2nd South Wales Borderers were to advance to Vaux-sur-Aure west of the landings and secure a junction with the Americans advancing from Omaha, the 2nd Glosters would take the centre of Bayeux and move south and west of the town; while the 2nd Essex would skirt the town and push south. The ground east of the 56th Brigade area of operations was to be taken by 151st Brigade.[33]

The tasks are then further defined. On advancing 2nd South Wales Borderers were to be led by their forward body of one rifle company on airborne bicycles, the Carrier platoon less one section, the mortar platoon less one section and the anti-tank platoon less one section. Their tasks were to 'mop up' a Radar Station near Pouligny

and a 105mm four gun position at Vaux-sur-Aure (by D-Day this had been reported as empty). Then, leaving a detachment at the bridge at Vaux-sur-Aure, they were to advance 2 kilometres west and block the Sully road, also block the main Bayeux to Cherbourg road just west of Bayeux and patrol into Bayeux. They were further to make combined posts with American troops at bridges at Sully and Vaucelles. 2nd Essex had to have a forward body ready to lead from Buhot, advance to Ryes (with the rest of the Brigade) then move southwest and seize the high ground between Sommervieu and St. Sulpice and then patrol in strength into Bayeux. Then 2nd Essex was to move south of Bayeux and establish links with 2nd South Wales Borderers to the west and 151st Brigade to the east. Meanwhile 2nd Glosters were to advance with Brigade HQ and establish themselves at St Sulpice north of Bayeux. It appears that the plan was to keep 2nd Glosters in reserve until support was needed by one of the other battalions. In the case of Brigadier Pepper becoming a casualty Lt. Col. Biddle, OC 2nd Glosters, would take over command of the Brigade. In fact in many respects the plan mirrored Exercise Smash. If 2nd Essex could not complete their tasks 2nd Glosters would pass through them and take the high ground south of Bayeux.

There was a contingency plan in case Bayeux was strongly held on D-Day. This was to either push on to Bayeux on D + 1, or meet an enemy counter-attack. This envisaged the possibility of a whole brigade size attack on the town. Appendix J to Operational Order No.1[34] gave a number of installations that were to be preserved and these included the hospital, sanatorium, post office (PTT), reservoir and bridges. Further notes stated that the destruction of civilian communication installations were to be avoided if possible, that other medical and monastic buildings suitable for medical purposes were to receive particular care. In addition damage to power cables was to be avoided. A further part of the Appendix was concerned with preserving the following

antiquities: the Cathedral, Maison du Gouvernment, the library and tapestries (including The Bayeux Tapestry), and the picture gallery in the Palais du Justice.

A considerable emphasis was placed on hygiene and disease prevention. This underlines the fear that the British soldier once in Normandy would be under threat from more than just the enemy:

> Appendix D to Operational Order No. 1. Disease Likely to be encountered.
> (a) Enteric Fevers are endemic, food poisoning, dysentery and diarrhoea of the gastro-enteritis type occurs.
> (b) Respiratory diseases, cerebro-spinal, Diphtheria, Scarlet Fever as in this country with reported epidemics assuming large proportions in the years of the German occupation. The incidence of Pulmonary Tuberculosis in the civilian population has also risen due to malnutrition following on occupation.
> (c) Skin disease – Scabies and septic skin conditions due to campaigning.
> (d) Infective Hepatitis, smallpox, Typhus and Polio-mylitis all occur with higher incidence due to war conditions.
> (e) Venereal disease is widespread.[35]

In the paragraphs that followed on preventing sickness, emphasis was laid on unit officers as well as Medical Officers pulling their weight in order to prevent disease. A considerable paragraph was given over to the prevention and treatment of Venereal Diseases. Brothels were out of bounds; units should have available supplies of condoms. Units would treat fresh cases of Gonorrhoea and at Corps and Army level VD Treatment Centres would be established at the earliest opportunity. 'Men who contract VD immediately before embarking or in the opening phases will embark or remain with the unit under treatment by the unit Medical officers.'[36] It is an interesting sidelight on events that soldiers partially incapacitated through VD would remain and potentially fight with their units. Strict rules were laid down regarding water supply and sanitation including the digging of latrines in the field.

After being briefed on the above one is left wondering at what the ordinary soldier thought about the country he would soon invade. He was given a pamphlet prepared by the Political Warfare Executive and issued by the Foreign Office called 'Instructions for British Servicemen in France'.[37] If he read it he would find that it informed him on all aspects of civilian life in France and dealing with the civilian population. As well as learning about the French way of life and the proper way to behave towards the people of France, he would also learn that his unit Medical Officers warning about disease was in no way overstated. The pamphlet told him that because of the German occupation, as many as one in twelve Frenchmen was a victim of tuberculosis. The incidence of Venereal Disease in French towns supporting German soldiers brothels was estimated as many as one in eight. He also learnt about the deprivation of food and that a Frenchman was shot for active resistance every two hours – over 5,000 a year. Plus the number of French people deported for labour to the Reich was estimated to be one million and over 150,000 French persons were in prisons or concentration camps. Finally one and a quarter million French soldiers were held as prisoners of war.

A very thorough intelligence briefing covering eleven pages of close typescript forms over a quarter of Operational Order No. 1. It is interesting to note within this that the German 716 Infantry Division is identified as the main opposition on Gold Beach. This unit is often referred to as being a very much second rate 'static' division with a mix of eastern Europeans as well as German soldiers within it. Operational Order No. 1 though, does not hold out much expectation that this unit will be an easy adversary:

> It is a low category division. The average age of the personnel is 32-40 yrs. Of these only 50% are German, the remainder being Poles, (30%), Czechs and Russians. Their equipment includes French, British and Polish weapons. It is difficult to estimate the reaction of these foreign elements when faced with

> invasion, but it will be unwise to be too hopeful. Similar troops fought well for the Germans at Dieppe and it should be remembered that however strong their desire may be to desert and surrender or even fight against the Germans they would be given few opportunities to do so and escape with their lives.[38]

Intelligence had not picked up the very important fact that a first line field division – 352 Infantry Division- had taken command over coastal and inland defences from Cabane des Douanes west. This was to have a considerable impact on 231st Brigades' assault and the timetable for the development of operations by the follow up units of 56th Brigade and 151st Brigade. In the event German units in the first 72 hours after D-Day were to prove highly resilient and effective.

Each of the battalions of 56th Brigade published a similar operational order copying much the same information, except tailored where necessary to reflect the role of that particular battalion. Indeed 56th Brigade's Operational Order Number 1 merely reflected 50th (Northumbrian) Division, Operational Number 1. It meant that from Division down to battalion, those who needed it had been able to read and digest a common plan. Only officers received a copy, and this was to be collected in before leaving the sealed camps.

On the naval side equally difficult preparations had been going on. 56th Brigade was to be transported by Force G-3, part of Force G (Gold). We learn from the official naval summary that over the last few months Force G when forming had been at a disadvantage to Forces S and J as these had been formed earlier and had had more time in training. Force G was not formed until 1st March 1944. The Force G commander was Commodore Douglas-Pennant and he had established his HQ at Weymouth on 14th March 1944. Thus the Royal Hotel, Weymouth became for a short period HMS Purbeck. The commander for Force G-3 (56th and 151st Brigades) was Captain Dolphin

on the Destroyer HMS Albrighton. After Exercise Smash on the 28th April 1944 the force transferred to the Southampton/Solent area. A meeting on 1st May 1944 was held to discuss the extension of landing obstacles in the invasion area. Here it was decided that these needed dealing with 'dryshod', in other words when they were standing in less than two feet of water. After taking everything into account; including adjusting 'H-Hour' for the tide to be at an appropriate state in each area; Admiral Ramsey took the decision that practical dates were 5th and 6th June, with 7th June being used as a final resort only in extreme necessity. This was communicated to Eisenhower on 8th May 1944 and it is worth noting that important operational decisions were taken so close to the invasion date. Already there had been considerable worries about damage to craft and wear and tear especially after the rough weather of Exercise Fabius in early May. Many craft had been operational in the Mediterranean in the previous twelve months and later heavily used in training. Despite this by D-Day 97.6% of British craft and 99.3% of US craft could be used, which reflected great credit to the crews, maintenance and repair organisation.[39]

The majority of craft for 56th and 151st Brigade were to come from the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and an excellent picture of their problems is given by a Canadian report which tells us that the LCI's used by the RCN for these Brigades were Mark I's. The Americans had given them 24 craft and the Royal Navy 6, to make up the number for the required three flotillas. They had been heavily used since the landings in Sicily and their crews had had little training in operating landing craft, neither had there been time to properly train all the engine room personnel in Grey Diesel engines and using variable pitch propellers. Parts and tools had been hard to get.

> When they reached the United Kingdom in the autumn of 1943, the LCI's were in a shocking condition. Repair yards were already hard pressed with landing

> craft by the hundreds, and tools and spares were still in short supply, and such vital items as tachometers and temperature gauges were scarcely obtainable. The R.C.N. Flotillas maintenance parties accomplished wonders. Through the winter and spring, working to an unknown deadline, no efforts were spared to clean up and re-equip the LCI's and get their engines running well again.[40]

At 2330hrs on 25th May 1944 the Naval holders of sealed operation orders were directed to open them. On 28th May 1944 a further signal named D-Day as 5th June 1944. This order also specified the different 'H-Hours' for the five landing forces. For 'Force G' the HQ ship was HMS Bulolo, which carried the Gold Beach senior officers on board included Commodore Douglas-Pennant, Major-General Graham and Group Captain Simonds. All personnel had been 'sealed' in their camps from 24th May 1944. All mail was impounded, telephone and cable facilities forbidden. In cases of emergency, special permission of a CO was required to send telegrams. Like the Army the Navy were ready to go.[41]

Back in the New Forest the waiting had ended and according to the various battalion and 56th Brigade war diaries during the evening of 3rd June the Rifle Companies and any other personnel who were to land with them loaded into lorries and still under strict security travelled to Lymington to load onto the LCI (L)'s which then took them round to Southampton docks. The War Diaries show that 2nd South Wales Borderers left their sealed camp at 1430hrs and loaded at Lymington on three US LCI (L) at 1730hrs of the 70th US Division, the only US LCI (L)'s reported as landing on Gold Beach on D-Day, and they were the heavier Mark 2 type of LCI (L). By 1900hrs they had sailed around and were tied up at Southampton Docks in the Atlantic Liner Dock. 2nd Essex were next on the move leaving camp at 1700hrs. The 2nd Glosters followed at 1930hrs and we know that they took refreshments on the way and were loaded as follows; A and B Companies on LCI 2906, part of Battalion HQ and D and S Companies on LCI 2907 and the remainder of Battalion HQ and C Company on LCI

2908. Their craft sailed for Southampton at 2100hrs. Finally the Brigadier and his staff loaded at 2200hrs on LCI 255 (Craft not LTIN number).[42]

Peter Giggens, 2nd Essex Mortar Platoon Sergeant, was to travel with the Unit Landing Officer (ULO) to mark the route from the beach to Buhot, the Brigade forming up point. They helped with the final loading at Lymington. Then Captain Chell, a signaller, 'Titch' Holden (Mine detector from the Pioneer Platoon) and Peter left to be the advance party. They boarded an LCT carrying a mix of vehicles from 6th Green Howards, including their HQ Carrier, jeep and FOO (Forward Observation Officer) with a 25pndr Sexton and their jeep. "We were to land earlier with all that was necessary to sign the route to the forming up point at Ryes. Some of our ammo pouches were full of chalk to write on walls/boards. There were ready-made sign boards on the jeep."[43]

For Charles Benford, the 2nd Essex Carrier Platoon Sergeant, "What amazed me was seeing all those landing craft, different colours denoting a different stream to go across the Channel. It was like a Regatta, it really was. If the Germans had had an Air Force they would have had a field day!"[44] Charles was to land with the Rifle Companies and re-join the Carriers later.

Philip Maillou was with 2 Essex Anti-Tank Platoon. They were split up in case of loss of a ship:

> When we finally loaded a few days before D-Day we had our six-pounder anti-tank gun loaded onto a DUKW (An amphibious lorry). They hauled the gun up onto the DUKW with about five of us. Our Carrier and driver went off on an LCT and our DUKW was loaded onto a LST. All six anti-tank guns were spread out on other craft. We were split up into sections of two guns, Nos. 1, 2 and 3 Sections.[45]

Gordon Duffin remembers while waiting at Lymington in a field to board their landing craft: "Mustangs and Thunderbolts were flying over continuously. Then 'come on!' We march down to the landing craft and load up and sail round to Southampton Docks. The wags are saying, 'We're not going to go anywhere, its just another exercise!'"[46]

His friend Ernie Partridge 2nd Glosters adds this: "we got some smashing grub and then orders that we would parade at 1200hrs with full kit, everything you could carry, spade, full size packs. Then we got on these lorries and drove down to Lymington."[47]

Most vehicles in the Brigade drove from the New Forest and were loaded at Southampton mixed with other similar units and were to land later. Final checks were made on all vehicles and some vehicles had to be replaced by spares standing by. 56th Brigade vehicles had a brown square painted on the mudguards and white numbers painted on these, 69 denoting 2nd Essex, 68 2nd Gloucesters and 67 for 2nd South Wales Borderers. All the vehicles also had big white stars across the width of the vehicle for identification and a Sphinx on a yellow background on the other mudguard. Because they were an independent brigade they did not carry the TT signs of 50th Division.

Driver Syd Hampton, 2nd Glosters, vividly remembers that they took a very long route to get to Gosport, travelling over ninety miles. They were breaking normal driving rules because the engine was sealed up with waterproofing. One Gloster Carrier broke down with a driver named George Easter. He just got left. Every few yards there was a Military or Field Security Policeman. When they got to the outskirts of Gosport they halted under some trees for a long time and kept under armed guard. People were going

to church and it seemed like another exercise and that they had been fooled. Eventually they drove to the loading hard. By this time D-Day had started and a staff car arrived carrying Montgomery's Chief of Staff, Freddie de Guingand. He addressed them and told them what was happening. To replace the broken down Carrier there was one from a Staffordshire Regiment waiting - and he came ashore as a 2nd Glosters.

> About ten days after D-Day when we were in France and creeping along in a big traffic jam, lo and behold I saw 'our' Carrier, now part of 43rd Wessex Division! We were loaded on LST's, three being loaded at a time. We were on LST 519, which was an American ship. As we were backing on we had to go on the top deck. This chap with an Austin did a half shaft in. They pulled him out with a tractor and he was given twenty minutes to load this RN vehicle with RN and an Anchor painted on the side rather than 56 Brigade signs! He took that ashore and it stayed with us. We took all the top deck up with Gloster vehicles, while the tank deck was loaded with Jerry cans of petrol. We thought if this gets bombed there will be no swimming away![48]

Brigade HQ Dispatch Rider Frank Dilworth had his motorcycle put into the 2nd South Wales Borderers Signals M14 Half-track and they were loaded up from Southampton. On every corner was some type of military police. They went through Southampton about quarter to seven and at the time people were going to the pictures. At one big cinema going into Southampton there was a big queue and no one took any notice of them. They had seen so many troop movements that they thought it was just one more exercise. The only difference was that they had ammunition on and the vehicles were waterproofed. It was a quarter to ten at night when they went on the boat. They went on first, reversing and being pushed up the ramp by a truck. When loaded they went out into the Solent, where the storm blew up and they spent a very rocky night and day there as the flat-bottomed craft were slipping all over the place. "We were fed these tins of self-heating soup. There was no shelter and we had to sleep where we were in the vehicle. Facilities were limited, only a little wash place and small toilet. Some of the vehicles were shifting so they lashed them together."[49]

Tony Atcherley, also of the Brigade Signals unit, approached the day with some emotion and finally learnt their destination:

> I wrote what might have been my last letter to my mother, which started "By the time you read this I shall be in France". We knew that this batch of mail would be held back and from now on our mail would be censored. On 4th June we drove the short distance to the harbour and embarked. We embarked on quite a small landing craft; it had enough room for a number of vehicles. On board we reported to a lieutenant of the Glosters a quiet thoughtful man who did all he could to keep us all calm and cheerful, except on one occasion when he forlornly reflected it was a Sunday and people would be out in London in Kew Gardens enjoying themselves. With a genuine beach assault map he now showed us that we were to land in Normandy between the villages of Le Hamel and La Riviere about eight miles north east of Bayeux which we were to take. Of course we knew all about the famous tapestry from schooldays and now Operation Overlord was to put Williams conquest into reverse.[50]

Lt. Nicholas Somerville, 2nd South Wales Borderers, remembers the time spent with the rifle companies in Southampton Liner Dock and some amazing sights on the journey:

> Embarking at Lymington and moving round the Solent to Southampton the sheer number of ships, Mulberry harbour sections and PLUTO was amazing. Expecting to go next day a Welsh concert on deck took place. Singing much of the night. In the morning a Royal Marine Launch was touring the docks with a signaller using semaphore, postponing Overlord by 24 hours. As an ex-signaller I could read the message and was appalled by this apparent breach of security. Later I realised that the area was pretty much sealed and this array of shipping could no longer be hidden. Everyone was allowed ashore and letters home were written. Officers (despite the youthfulness of some) helped those who had difficulty. "Try to get the word 'love' in somewhere!" This type of contact between officers and men helped to establish an even closer relationship.[51]

The singing by the South Wales Borderers while the craft were tied up at Southampton is remembered by many with emotion even those outside of 56th Brigade and it was an established tradition within the battalion to sing before a battle:

> Dusk began to fall and small knots of men gathered on the decks. Someone started a song and the others joined in. It was a typical Welsh scene. Soon an informal concert developed. The soloist sang from the bridge while the audience in the shadows of the deck took up the choruses. The songs echoed across the water and troops on other craft, less happy in their land of birth, leant against the nearest rails, silently listening.[52]

But with the poor weather pushing the landing day back by 24 hours men were allowed to leave their ships and go into the large Customs Sheds on the quayside where sandwiches, tea, newspapers and writing paper was provided. Outside a 'circus' of both Allied and captured German aircraft flew to allow men to differentiate between types. Not surprisingly this noise got on the nerves of some men, doubtless feeling the tension. At least for the Brigade rifle companies they had the relative luxury of leaving their ships and using the quayside NAAFI, those already loaded on the LCT's had to sit it out in the Solent at the mercy of wind and sea. Then that afternoon of 5th June the men returned to their ships and were told that shortly they would be leaving. Around quarter past seven that evening the ships gradually formed a line and left harbour.

Gordon Duffin, 2nd Glosters, was not a good sailor but had to go up on deck to watch although he found it cold and chilly. Men were lining the sides of the LCI waving and cheering. An officer appeared whom he did not know and asked Gordon his name and then introduced himself. The deck was stacked with 14-man composite (compo) ration boxes and the officer invited him to help himself. "I wasn't hungry. I said "do you like peaches?" "No thank you," he said. I got out this 2lb tin of peaches from a box and ate them. Then as it was cold went below and went to sleep."[53]

Major Pat Barras, 2nd Essex, remembers it as:

> First a general stir, then the ships disentangled themselves and sailed sedately down Southampton Water, then into the more choppy water of the Solent. The

> Isle of Wight was on the left. We saw a lot of RN large ships full of sailors lining the rails giving three cheers as each of our ships passed. This was inspiring and really dinned it into us the size of the operation.[54]

Ted Castle of 2nd Glosters equally remembers the scene as they sailed down the Solent at around 7 o'clock. "I remember us steaming out with warships on each side cheering us as we steamed out and we cheered them back. As we passed the Needles it started getting a bit choppy and overcast, some of the lads were violently seasick, I decided to stay on deck until later."[55]

The short ten-day period spent by 56th Brigade in the sealed camps is remarkable because it shows how well the Brigade had quickly settled down to the idea and practicalities of being an important part of the invasion force and the 50th Division plan. During interviews, the veterans of 56th Brigade do not appear to see this period as particularly special. This should not be surprising. Most were ordinary men, serving their country and prepared to follow orders. New insights are given by the South Wales Borderers interviews of this period, showing on the one side how the natural response of men to see their parents prior to sailing, perhaps for the last time, was dealt with by junior NCO's in a very humane way. On the other hand officers with so many things still to organise might not have had the time to think carefully about such issues. At one stage the South Wales Borderers Commanding Officer in one fire eating speech threatened deserters with hanging.[56] In fairness this should not be seen as a surprising response by a man in his position at such a time.

Particularly for 56th Brigade, the sources show how near to the invasion many things were finalised and even many new soldiers brought into the battalions. Despite previous landings in North Africa, Sicily and Italy it can be seen that the higher staff were unsure about the process and made changes to landing procedures up to the time the sealed

camps were entered. Finally the anecdotal evidence from the veterans of 56th Brigade brings to life a period prior to D-Day not often expanded on in the available literature.

The invasion force was on its way. Many men remember being cheered in turn by each naval vessel as they passed and that they cheered back. According to many men the Brigade vessels left one behind the other in line, with the Brigadiers Pennant flying from the leading craft. Once past the Needles though, the rough sea forced most to retire to the cramped conditions below and wait for the morrow.

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Chapter Four.

Smashing through the German defences and achieving objectives.

D-Day to Midnight 7th June 1944.

This chapter will follow the progress of 56th Infantry Brigade as they proceed towards landing on Gold Beach. It will explore how the British plan became modified due to unexpected German resistance on Gold Beach during D-Day and the effect this had on the original 56th Brigade plan during the first 48 hours of the invasion.

During the night of 5th to 6th June 1944, Convoy G-3 was shepherded towards the Normandy coast through the swept channels. For the men of 56th Brigade being transported by the various types of craft, it was a rough night. Both the LCT and LCI (L) had a shallow draught and it felt to the men that they were slipping sideways as much as moving forward. Frank Rosier of 2nd Glosters felt that "The flat bottomed boats were all over the place. I have never felt so ill in all my life!"[1]

On the LCI (L)'s carrying the rifle companies of 56th Brigade the accommodation was cramped to say the least. Each landing craft was carrying around 200 men below deck, who had with them their webbing, packs, entrenching tools and weapons. The LCI (L) was 158 feet long and only 23 feet wide with an all welded steel hull. For armament they carried 4x20mm and 2x0.5inch Browning machine guns. The crew consisted of 3 officers and 21 men and the ship could maintain around 16 knots. The accommodation for troops was arranged in three compartments with drop-down bunks. The normal exit to shore was from the top of

the deck via two gangways, 28 feet long, each side of the bow. The ships would beach in nearly 5 feet of water and the gangways extended forward, hopefully enabling the men to land in shallower water. It will be remembered that after the drownings during Exercise Fabius the plan was to tranship in deeper water to the smaller LCM allowing these to drop the men in shallower water.

As British shipyards were fully extended the LCI (L) were built in the USA from a British sketch. When completed they were sailed unescorted to the UK, proving their seaworthiness. In British shipyards plastic armour was added around the conning tower and guns. The armament was light by US standards, but considered adequate by the Royal Navy. Because of crowding, their effective operational time when loaded was 48 hours. However they had a considerable range. The US LCI (L) used by 2nd South Wales Borderers were slightly larger, being a later model.[2]

Some men managed to stay well despite the rough sea, while others became very seasick. Gordon Duffin and Ernie Partridge of 2nd Glosters were typical passengers:

Well of course after eating the tinned fruit I woke up later at night and was violently sick. Ernie pipes up in the dark, "Are you all right kid? What did you do with your bully sandwich?" It's in me mess tin. "Can I have it?" he said. He managed to get down, find my bully sandwich and eat it! The engine noise altered then stopped. "Ah we are going back!" They kept on saying that! There was row and noise all the time, blokes shouting and banging, ships firing and so on. All this had become normal on exercise.[3]

Issued with bags (Vomit), that quickly became full, the rudimentary toilets hanging over the stern were difficult to use in the rough seas. The smell and noise in

these cramped and enclosed spaces must have led to a very uncomfortable journey. The knowledge that if the craft was hit, there would be little chance of escape must also have made it a worrying journey. Maurice Wells of 2nd Glosters was on one ship that had a near escape:

During the night there was this almighty scraping along the side of the ship. We all thought what the hell was that! "It's all right. It's only a mine!" If it had gone off none of us would have survived. It was bloody rough on the ships. You got in wherever you could. It was very uncomfortable.[4]

Some officers were quartered in the more comfortable surroundings of the ships officers' cabins in the conning tower. Self-heating cans of soup, usually described as tomato flavour, were given out and appear to have been enjoyed by all those who could keep the contents down. Many tins made it to shore for later use. They were thought to be something of a marvel. Also on the decks were stacks of extra rations to be taken ashore. Those men going on deck during the night noticed the lines of buoys that had been laid marking the channel swept free of sea mines. Men also describe the constant noise of aircraft flying over the convoy. As day broke they were allowed on deck and saw that the Normandy coast was in sight.

On arrival in front of the French coast I was impressed by the bombardment from the Rocket Ships and HMS Ajax and also one of the Field Artillery Regiments going ashore firing from their landing craft, as was an Infantry Battalions' 4.2inch Mortars. These last two were good for morale but probably quite inaccurate due to the bucking waves. The coast was wreathed in smoke and dust. I also saw the smaller LCA's making their way in. To our far right much heavier fire seemed to be occurring on Omaha beach.[5]

Some men of 56th Brigade were already on their way in. The Unit Landing Officers (ULO's) had loaded with their men and jeeps onto the LCT's of the assault brigades and landed with 69th and 231st Brigade first line vehicles, close behind the

initial assault. Peter Giggens, the 2nd Essex Mortar Platoon Sergeant, went ashore led by Captain Chell, with Titch Holden from the pioneer platoon and another signaller. They had ready-made boards on their jeep to put up, and their ammunition pouches were full of chalk to write on walls to sign the way to the forming up area. As they came in two sailors in front lowered the ramp, but the LCT hit a mine. This blew off the ramp and the two sailors and the first jeep disappeared. The LCT slewed around parallel to the shore. Titch Holden thought that if he could drive the jeep off as fast as he could he might clear the ship and be able to continue. Not surprisingly the jeep nose-dived and sunk. It was salvaged and rejoined later. They got off up to their chests in water, and waded ashore. They had of course lost all their direction boards and the chalk had got soaked and was useless. The noise was terrific with shelling and mortaring still hitting the beach. They managed to get off the beach and struggled to get up inland to Buhot. Titch stayed on the Beach under the control of the Beach Master. Reaching Buhot and identifying the RV spot, Captain Chell and the signaller went back to the beach to try and help the battalion and brief Colonel Higson when he landed. Peter remembers that although there were other soldiers about, he felt pretty lonely.[6]

Sergeant Dick Philips, of 2nd South Wales Borderers HQ, landed with their Unit Landing Officer on Jig Beach with the 1st Hampshires assault battalion transport. There were the four of them including Dick, Captain Talmadge, a jeep driver and one other soldier to help with the battalion signs.

The sea was quite rough; we had these wide bows that made it worse. I was still going up and down from the voyage. During the landing we saw these young chaps with the Africa Star lying in the surf. I thought these poor buggers; they have been through North Africa. They didn't even get up on the sands you know, and I thought

that was terribly unfortunate. When we landed there was a lot of shelling and it was a bit hairy. I said to the driver to get behind that knocked out tank for protection, but we drove into the hole where a shell had exploded behind the tank and the jeep went down and we had to leave it. Captain Talmadge and I grabbed hold of the battalion signs and took them towards the rendezvous area. As we were leaving the beach there was a chappie going up the bank and a shell exploded at his feet in the sand and we saw his body coming toward us in the air. We got away with this, and then there was a farmhouse surrounded by a high wall with double gates, and there was an elderly lady outside there and she was jumping up and down, clapping her hands as these fellows were leaving the beach.[7]

Captain Talmadge and Sergeant Philips carried on marking the route. The shelling continued fairly heavily and at one stage a Spandau opened fire quite nearby and a section of British assault troops went down in a field of high corn while Dick Philips and Captain Talmadge were on the road to Buhot. Later they came across a car with four dead German officers in it. In one field near the RV at Buhot they saw many German bodies blown to bits, probably by naval gunfire. They had come ashore where they had expected and had little difficulty in locating the RV. Their exploit has been described in the 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers History: 'The route had been marked in a most gallant way by Captain Talmadge and Sergeant Philips who landed with the assault wave and while there was still fighting on the beaches they penetrated half a mile inland'.[8]

On Jig Beach DD Tanks were supposed to land first, but due to the poor sea state a decision was taken to launch the tanks closer inshore or direct off the landing craft. The effect of this was to make them late, and the first assault battalions landed without armoured support. Also some of the assault battalions on Jig Beach were not landed at their intended place. The Germans at La Riviere and Le Hamel/Asnelles proved tougher nuts to crack than supposed, particularly on the Jig Beach side of the landing, where the defenders of Le Hamel were from 352

Division. Partly the problem had been the low cloud base that caused the early bombing to miss these targets completely, as well as the improved defences at Le Hamel.

A good description of the problems on Gold Beach that morning is provided by the Admiralty Battle Summary, showing how the obstacles, sea and weather state, meant that the sailors really had to work hard to get inshore. Because of the conditions it was decided to launch the DD tanks 'dryshod' off the LCT's:

Also obstacle clearance was presenting much greater difficulties than expected. Obstacles were considerably thicker and heavier. The tide was higher than expected. The clearance teams landed first ashore and were virtually unsupported. H-Hour on Gold Beach was at 0725hrs. This village (Le Hamel) proved a very tough nut to crack and held out until 1600hrs at least. It caused the landing of 56 Brigade to be held up and repositioned. It cost the 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment over 200 casualties. The 75 tons of bombs planned to be dropped on the town were dropped 3000 yards to the south on fields due to the low cloud cover. The Self-Propelled Artillery of 147 Field Regiment were to fire on it during the run in. Their navigational MTB and Control LCT fell astern due to the weather. They concentrated their fire with that of the regiment on their left and Le Hamel was not fired upon. Three destroyers engaged Le Hamel, but the low trajectory of their guns had little effect on the concrete bunkers and slit trenches. No calls for RN support came from the Hampshire's ashore due to the CO and 2i/c becoming early casualties. In the end a concentrated bombardment of the position took place by LCG, (Landing Craft Gun), LCF (Landing Craft Flak), and destroyers as well as the use of Petard firing tanks from land to demolish German positions.[9]

This explains why 151st and 56th Brigades were held up and had to circle at sea causing more seasickness to the waiting infantry. Despite the hold up to the rifle companies the LST's and LCT's carrying 56th Brigades vehicles seemed to have moved ashore on time as evidenced by Philip Maillou, 2nd Essex. He was put ashore with his 6-pounder anti-tank gun loaded onto a DUKW that carried them from their LST to Buhot. He remembers how rough it was and that as they approached shore

they could see the aircraft going in bombing and strafing and some Landing Craft firing rockets.

About half a mile from the shore the Captain decides it was time to let us go and the ramps are put down. All the tankies and that shouted, "Good luck lads!" I was sitting right behind the driver and I said to him, "I hope this will float mate!" He replied "So do I, it's the first time it has been in the water! Never been in empty, let alone loaded!" The blokes are all shouting "Good Luck! Good Luck!" and there's all this stuff falling into the water, probably not picking us out, we, were too small a target. We were going in there and just off shore we could see mortar bombs landing, which didn't make us feel too happy. We came out and up to turn right on the road to Ryes and Buhot. We landed about 11.30am. We had a map reference to make the rendezvous. There were some wounded and dead lying about there from the first wave, but we had been told not to stop for anything, just press on. There was thick acrid shell smoke. We thought it was gas at some time. When we got up to the RV the DUKW lads said "righto! We are going to leave you here. We said, "What do you mean? We haven't any transport!" Off comes the gun with a few rounds and we had the Bren gun. We had to stay there on our own for about an hour. There were bangs and crashes and bullets whistling. There was still fighting going on close by above Buhot. Then people started arriving, and the Carriers turned up.[10]

Philip does not remember bumping into Peter Giggens who was already there alone. Charles Benson from the 2nd Essex Carrier Platoon had different problems:

I was on an LCT carrying only Essex vehicles. We were very lucky we had few casualties on that day. The taking of Le Hamel was not straightforward and we were landed in a different place than planned. Getting the Carriers off the beach was quite a job. We had to break the sea wall down with tools. When we got to drive onto the track there was an 18-inch drop and you had to be careful not to bury the nose. In actual fact we just had enough clearance to get onto the track and spin the Carrier around. Once we were onto the track and we were moving round the back of Le Hamel I could still see fighting going on.[11]

Both of the above landed nearer to Le Hamel than the rifle companies and clearly earlier. From their descriptions, it seems likely that both ended up on the Cabane des Douanes road leading via Les Roquettes to Buhot. The Beachmaster

had already closed the beach between Le Hamel and the Cabane des Douanes as the Germans in Le Hamel could easily observe and fire on the area. The infantry had now been at sea circling for an extra three hours. Because of the situation at Le Hamel and the fact that La Riviere had not been finally cleared, General Graham in the HQ ship Bulolo, decided to send 151st and 56th Brigades in at the centre of Gold beach at Le Hable de Heurtot.

However there were added problems. The tide was now much higher than at the planned landing time, and the sea state was rough, causing a much higher tidal surge than expected and many more difficulties were to be encountered by the troops when they landed. This included the fact that now offloading onto the LCM's was not an option, due to the considerable losses by the smaller landing craft in the assault phase. Many of the LCM's had had to turn back in the rough seas and according to the Admiralty, landing craft losses on Gold Beach were 34 LCT's, 52 LCA's and 3 LCP (L)'s. Most of these were lost in the first wave of landing craft. Sailors operating the landing craft were reluctant to use the kedge anchors and many craft broached sideways in the surf filling with water and blocking parts of the beach to other landing craft. In spite of the brave work of the LCOCO, mines fixed to posts caused half of these landing craft casualties.[12] According to an Operational Research Report shortly after D-Day, the Germans had placed nearly two and a half thousand obstacles across the Gold Beach landing areas.[13]

So now between 1200hrs and 1230hrs the rifle companys of 56th Brigade came ashore. It is worth considering the after action report of the 264th Canadian Flotilla which carried them to the beach:

At 0940 the LCI's had arrived at their waiting position off Jig Green. The tide was already falling when, at 1150, the Reserve Group Commander in HMS Albrighton ordered the LCI's to beach on Jig Red because the obstructions on Jig Green were almost impenetrable. They beached in precise flotilla formation, in line abreast, within five seconds of each other at 1159, nearly two hours after their scheduled time according to the operation plans. In the special case of LCI 255 carrying Brigadier EC Pepper and his staff with signals equipment, an LCM was allocated to facilitate the safe disembarkation of the Headquarters Unit; LCI 255 therefore did not beach. There was a heavy surf running, which piled up dangerously on the shallow beach across which the troops had to make their way. Although the distance from the LCI's to shore averaged only 12 feet and the depth of water at the ramps was less than 3 feet; the surf caused some of the troops to hesitate up to 15 minutes before disembarking. The delay made unbeaching more difficult, but there was hardly any firing by this time and it was not until after unbeaching that bullet holes were found in the super-structure of two of the craft. No casualties were suffered by army or navy personnel during the landing.[14]

Landing Craft 295, (The craft involved in the 2nd Essex drownings during Exercise Fabius), damaged propellers in collision with an LCM and was also twice holed by obstructions. LCI 288 was damaged by beach obstructions and 288 and 302 had ramps torn off by the surf. 302 and 310 had their kedges fouled by obstructions and the three heavier US landing craft were stranded until the next high water. The tide was already falling. Despite all these ills though, they had safely delivered two thousand men to their destination. In the Naval and Army documents there are discrepancies between times of landing, but these depend on whether the time is concerned with the moment the ship touched the shore, or the moment when all men from the ship were ashore. Certainly by 1230hrs all ships were unloaded. Again there are some discrepancies, but it is likely that the 2nd Glosters landed on the east of the flotilla, 2nd Essex in the middle and 2nd South Wales Borders to the west. The timings given in the Battalion War Diaries give 2nd Glosters as landing at 1158hrs, 2nd South Wales Borderers at 1200hrs exactly, 56th Brigade HQ at 1215hrs and 2nd Essex at 1230. According to their War Diary the 2nd Glosters "quickly

cleared King Red beach area and advanced along the coast road."[15] The Brigadier and HQ Group went via the village of Meuvaines to Buhot, the 2nd South Wales Borders moved along the sandy beach towards Le Hamel, before moving to the coast road and Les Roquettes, and 2nd Essex similarly followed the planned 'Yellow Route' via Meuvaines.

In 1944 the development of the modern coastal road had been abandoned. George Church of the 2nd Hertfordshire Battalion, Beach Group, reports that in June 1944 it was a rough track used mainly for moving farm animals, but was driveable with care. Within a week of D-Day the Royal Engineers had established it as a proper carriageway.[16] The original coastal road bordering the shore had been lost in places to the sea, but parts can still be traced today.

Syd Lee was the Brigadier's signaller, and his experience of landing in the LCM after being violently seasick was:

We drove off the landing craft and had a dry landing in the jeep. I was sitting in the back with the 22 Set. As we drove off the beach I remember driving up this dirt track with the infantry plodding up either side. The Brigadier was driving at the time and I remember the infantry were pushing bicycles and he ran into one of the bicycles as he was driving past![17]

The various descriptions of the landing provided by the men of 56th Brigade give a slightly different emphasis on the landing than that of the Royal Canadian Naval report above. 2nd South Wales Borderers and some of the 2nd Glosters faced extreme difficulty when landing.

Bill Speake of the 2nd South Wales Borderers, as a man of reasonable height, describes how on leaving the US LCI he disappeared below water and managed to save himself only by pulling on the hawser rope to shore. This had been swum ashore by an RCN navy rating, and fixed by iron bars hammered into the sand on the beach. He went under a number of times, his equipment dragging him down as he struggled along the hawser. His abiding memory of this incident is that of the 400 cigarettes he was carrying, only the 20 in a sealed tin in his helmet survived.[18] Islwyn Edmunds of 2nd South Wales Borders explains that the men of B Company were expected to be a mobile force, so that as well as their 80lb packs they had to carry a collapsible bicycle. The CO Colonel Craddock led the way off down the narrow gangplanks into the sea with a "follow me". He was wearing his soft hat and carrying a swordstick and pistol as personal weapons. He disappeared under the sea. Following a little way back, Islwyn was sure he was drowning as he went under a number of times, but was saved by Lance Corporal Melvyn Jones picking him up and thrusting him forward. Islwyn lost his bicycle and rifle but there was a dump of cycles just off the beach and he had to pick another. He replaced his rifle by picking up one of many "laying around on the beach".[19]

Lieutenant Dennis Davis helps solve how a bicycle dump came to be on the beach. He was a Lieutenant in C Company 2nd South Wales Borders and not one of the cyclist Company. His platoon were one of the last off the American LCI (L) and he decided to put back on the large waterproof waders they had been issued with, as the tide had receded somewhat. Hence he landed ashore fairly dry. He recollects that he probably said, rather than ordered, his platoon something like "I am putting mine on, so you can if you like". He and his men carried bicycles ashore and put

them in a dump on the beach.[20] The 2nd South Wales Borders Signals Officer, Sam Weaver, was festooned with all sorts; codebooks and frequencies in a haversack and held this over his head when entering the water. Colonel Craddock went first and Sam followed having a terrific struggle with water up to his chest and the waterproof anti-gas overtrousers filling up with water. Looking back he realised not a man had followed. One of his signallers Higgins said later, "We weren't going to follow you seeing you up to your neck!"[21]

Meanwhile B Company 2nd Glosters had their own problems. Firstly Major Basil Stephens had to persuade the captain of his craft to get in closer. Some bad language ensued but as the Major was holding a sten gun he won the day. To be fair to the Navy man the ship was in his charge and any accident to the ship or men was his responsibility. Doubtless the view from the ship's bridge when running in and seeing so many craft foundered at the tide's edge had a sobering effect on the officers in command of the craft. On the same craft B Company Sergeant Frank Clarke was faced with a major problem. The portside gangway of the LCI had twisted on the way in by grounding. Frank wanted to get his men off the other gangway, but they were persuaded by some very blue language from the bridge to continue disembarking off the twisted gangway.

At the bottom of the gangway there was a gap and Frank tried to lower himself gently into the sea, especially as he had no idea of its depth. Also as his platoon was the assault platoon, each was carrying a bicycle as well as the normal 80lbs of kit. He half jumped down and went up to his waist in water. His waterproof over trousers split and filled up and he dropped his bike and had to feel around the

bottom to retrieve it. Luckily while this unloading was taking place they were not under direct fire, only the odd shell landed in the sea pushing up geysers of water.[22]

Ted Castle, A Company 2 Glosters, only imagined he was in trouble: "Then we piled down this bloody gangway and I slipped into the surf and it came up to my chest and I thought I was drowning! When the Sergeant Major pulled me up it was only up to my knees!"[23] Whereas Maurice Wells, 2nd Glosters had good reason to think it was the end:

We came in to land off the sea; I went into a shell hole. All you could have seen was my tin helmet and PIAT above the water! With the anti louse (this was in fact an anti-gas preparation) powder and everything, it took three weeks to dry out properly. With a PIAT and Sten gun and all my other kit I was pretty loaded down.[24]

Ernie Partridge, a quite tall soldier only just coped. When he got off into the water it was up to his chest. A Lance Corporal in front of him was only 5'2" tall. "I'm holding him up and got all my bloody gear on, B Company in the boat next to us had all their bicycles as well. Chaps on the beach shouting come on lads! Come on Glosters! Follow this path."[25] While Gordon Duffin, also of A Company 2nd Glosters, recounts that in retrospect the scene held a certain amount of comedy:

Then a sailor type would shout 300yards! 200yards! 100yards! Prepare to beach! Down door! We were thrown forward as the crew had promised us a dry landing. The bad sign when you got up top was if the chains holding the ramp were tight. They were! That meant it was deep water and we have to jump in off the ramp, I do and weighed down go under then stand up, so I am completely soaked. To give us a dry landing we had these waterproof trousers tied above our waist with string. If the string got wet you couldn't undo the bow. So I had a sheath knife ready on top of my pack. As the water gets shallower my legs get heavier. So I get my knife out and slit open the legs to let the water out. The officer says, "Do mine Duffin" so I had to go and slit his then another and another. So I did a few expecting to get shot hanging about.[26]

By this time it is probable that all the forward elements of 56th Brigade were ashore, the rifle companies, Battalion HQs and support company Carriers. The senior officers had scanned their maps for confirmation of their exact location as they had been landed as much as a mile and a half away from the planned beaching point. The men were hustled off the beach as quickly as possible following the few established tracks, or the flailed routes made by the mine clearing tanks. With the beach still being sporadically shelled and mortared and being the spot where the expected counter-attack would leave troops at their most vulnerable, men were moved inland as fast as possible.

It was during this part of the assault, as explained by Tony Mansi, 2nd Essex, that men who had not been in action before were shown their first graphic examples of the meaning of war:

> Getting onto the beach I noticed that there was a photographer taking pictures of our landing. From the beach up onto the road a flail tank beat the ground exploding mines and engineers put iron stakes into the ground and put white tape on them to mark a safe pathway to get up onto the road. Once we got onto the road there was a lot of firing going on. When we looked further down the beach we could see houses. Also there were German prisoners being taken down to the beach and dead bodies lying about. Sergeant Chandler being an old soldier made everybody stop and look at these dead German soldiers. There were chaps there who had their stomachs blown out and very gruesome to look at. It was the first time many had seen anything like this. He said, "Come on, I want you to have a look at these, as you will see a lot more of this".[27]

2nd Glosters, A Company, moved up a track just east of Le Hable de Heurtot. At its top had been one of the smaller German positions, Wiederstandnester 35a, its defenders obviously killed in another graphic illustration of firepower:

We moved inland and were amazed that the Germans hadn't fired at us, but we had landed further down. As we came off the ship I remember seeing some casualties. About three badly wounded Devons huddling up under a groundsheet. Then we went up this sandy lane. At the top of the track we saw Germans hanging in trees having been blown out by our guns. There was not a mark on them they had been blasted up into the trees. Some of our chaps opened fire on them thinking they were snipers.[28]

Experienced soldiers from 1940, who had spent much time with the battalions in the UK, soon reacted with second nature to danger. The younger and inexperienced men were lucky to have them near in the first few actions. Bill Robinson was a 2nd Glosters driver who landed with the rifle companies and picked up his transport later. He remembers that the track up from the beach was only wide enough for a half-track. They dumped their inflated Mae Wests at the side of the track. When the half-tracks went by they had to stand on the bank by the side. The half-tracks ran over the Mae Wests and the noise they made when they burst frightened the life out of them!

On D-day I was fortunate in one respect that I had been under fire and knew what to expect, most others hadn't. So when we got to the top of the track we were in open country and the grass was really high. We were on top going down and from the left a shell whistled down and there was a puff of smoke where it hit. It was a smoke marker. Some of the eight or so with me said, "What was that?" I told them that another one would be coming in a minute on the other side and we should get down and wait. While we were looking the Germans shelled the area and hit a couple of Bren Carriers. If we had gone on we would have been in it. This was only about half a mile from the beach.[29]

From the top of the rise, men looked back and felt that they could walk back to England on the number of ships they could see. Perhaps Gordon Duffin was in the area being hit in the action described above:

Down comes about twenty shells or mortar bombs right across our track. So we all get down. The Sergeant Major, who had been at Dunkirk, shouted, "Take cover, but

get ready to move when I tell you and bloody well move!" Then another load came down. We thought, "we can't move through this lot." But he knew better. Almost before the noise had stopped, he shouted, "Run, move your bloody selves, follow me!" So we all got up and followed him. He knew enough to get up and move over this little crossroad before they had reloaded. Jerry still shelled the crossroad behind us.[30]

The Brigade moved along the coast and inland to Buhot. As late as 1400hrs 1st Dorsets were still fighting for control of the area around Buhot and captured a company of German pioneers, including horse transport, there. It was a slow process for the rifle companies from 56th Brigade of stopping and starting, with sections of ten men spread out thirty yards between each section. The roads were covered in debris, not only from abandoned equipment, but civilian telephone lines were down and caused problems for bicycle and jeep alike. At the start of the move they were under fire from both the Meuvaines Ridge and the opposite hillside above Buhot and Ryes. Frank Dilworth gives a good account of the confusion from a Dispatch Rider's point of view:

The rest of the day was very confusing, not sure where you were. I went firstly with the South Wales Borderers HQ, then had to find the Brigade Tactical HQ. They had an ACV lorry as an armoured office, which were very hard to handle, just a big steel box on four wheels. I found them in the end. Linemen were running out telephone lines, and then they were broken and they had to do it again.[31]

The units gradually turned up at Buhot and the War Diary of 2nd Glosters report that before 1600hrs Marine Commandos finally cleared the area, enabling the Brigade to assemble in the orchards south of Buhot. At least one Brigade signaller was involved with the Commandos in clearing this area, joining them and becoming useful, when he discovered on landing that his signal set was smashed with shrapnel. In the 2nd South Wales Borders assembly area were about half a dozen horses and cows killed by shellfire and the scene and smell was disgusting. By

1735hrs the village of Ryes was reported clear of enemy by 231st Brigade and at 1745hrs Brigadier Pepper ordered the Brigade to advance as prearranged. The 2nd South Wales Borderers advancing via Ryes and La Rosiere to Vaux-sur-Aure and 2nd Essex to St. Sulpice via Ryes. 2nd Glosters stood firm as Brigade reserve with Brigade HQ. By 1930hrs Ryes and La Rosiere were reached and the 2nd Essex and 2nd South Wales Borderers were moving into unknown enemy territory. Prisoners captured at Ryes proved a surprise, for they were members of I Battalion 916 Grenadier Regiment from the 352nd Infantry Division, the unit not picked up by Allied intelligence. Still sniping was being carried on in the rear areas and as the forward units advanced they ran into trouble, as Tony Mansi, 2nd Essex, recalls:

We were split up into platoons and we were the first leading our company. On the open ground we kept quite close to the tank for protection really. As we got into more dense countryside with hedges and where there were copses and trees, the tank commander asked us to go in front to scout out if there were any German 88mm guns around. Some places we stopped when we came under sniper fire. Then the platoon officer had a couple of our own snipers sent forward to try and spot them. They were mainly up in trees. They held us up for quite some time. At one place there was a small village and I remember seeing this long brick wall and of course we couldn't see over this wall. Sergeant Chandler said, "Right over you go! When you get to the other side start giving us covering fire." When we got over the wall there was nothing but green fields and trees in the distance. He shouted for covering fire and as it was our first day in action lads were just firing off their weapons into an area to see if we could attract fire back. That's how it went the rest of the day until finally we arrived at St. Sulpice where we stayed for the night. I don't think we felt frightened it was just the unexpected, not knowing what was in front of you.[32]

2nd South Wales Borderers met more determined resistance and one of their objectives on the way to Vaux-sur-Aure was the German Radio Direction Finding (RDF) station near Pouligny. The leading Company came under Spandau fire just past La Rosiere. Captain Josh Wickert, firing from the hip in the lead Carrier, promptly knocked out the German post. The RDF Station gave some brief resistance, but the Germans set fire to it and abandoned it as D Company attacked.

In the gathering darkness the exploding ammunition from the RDF Station lit up the sky. Earlier in the action a 2nd South Wales Borders Carrier had blown up on a mine in the verge. After this Major Peter Martin, who was leading the forward party, was talking to a Forward Observation Officer (FOO) in a tank. As the tank moved, it set off another mine in the border of the road. Peter Martin caught the full blast in the stomach and was badly wounded. A stretcher carrying jeep immediately evacuated him.[33] By 2350hrs the 2nd South Wales Borderers forward party were able to report the capture of the bridge at Vaux-sur-Aure and they held it until the main body arrived. During the night "Bn established defensive locality Vaux-sur-Aure. Active patrolling by enemy during the night twelve prisoners taken".[34]

In fact 2nd South Wales Borderers were one of the units of the whole British invasion force who advanced furthest on D-Day. They had lost four men killed, two by mortar fire on the way to Buhot, Sergeant Reynolds and Private Price and two from sniper fire, Privates Massey and Parr. Ivor Parr was killed in the locality of Magny and initially a local French family buried his body. Later as things calmed down he was re-interred by locals at the church of Magny, where his grave remains today. The other three are buried at Bayeux. The Battalion also had about twenty other men wounded.

After the overnight crossing of the Channel, and a day spent keyed up or on the move, carrying a heavy load, and many of them under fire for the first time, the men must have been very tired. Dennis Davis remembers that upon reaching Vaux-sur-Aure, he counted about ten Panzerfaust anti-tank rockets abandoned around the bridge, then had to lead a quick patrol into the woods. They did not find any

Germans, but did come across German horse lines including wagons from a nearby abandoned 105mm gun emplacement. In one wagon Dennis shot the padlock off a locker and liberated two bottles of Benedictine. Returning to his slit trench near the bridge, Dennis fell asleep sitting up cleaning his Sten gun.[35] Nick Somerville remembers feeling that they had been extremely lucky, and was also very concerned at the non-appearance of US units that 2nd South Wales Borderers were supposed to link with. Lieutenant Nick Somerville had been very lucky himself, as twice during the day, the man behind him had been killed.[36] Private Bill Evans remembers that the very narrow roads had high banks. When they stopped he simply got in a hollow covered by a low tree and improved his position by breaking the branches down to cover him.[37] At one stage during the night two of the South Wales Borders Companies exchanged fire, luckily without harm being done. Sergeant Dick Phillips of the Intelligence Section provides this picture of his first night in Normandy:

> At Vaux we were in a farmyard and the little Padre, who was about five foot tall, was soaked to the skin. There was a lot of firing going on between two of our own companies, but there was also an attack. We were quite safe inside the actual farm. This firing had been going on between the two companies and then this lot (Germans) came with automatic weapons, but we were safe and sound where we were. Probably they came from the west. They came in, did a quick burst and withdrew.[38]

The 2nd Essex War Diary reports that by 2130hrs the forward body had secured the St. Sulpice crossroad and the rest of the battalion moved in. Civilian sources said that the Germans had left hours earlier and they had probably left Bayeux as well. During the night with tanks of the Sherwood Rangers for support, patrols 'felt' towards Bayeux and the anti-tank ditch to the north west of the town but returned after resistance was encountered. The War Diary reports only four men wounded on 6th June. Phillip Maillou, reunited with the Carrier for his six-pounder

anti-tank gun, had to set up ready at St. Sulpice in case the expected counter-attack developed:

We run into St. Sulpice, We went into the fields on the right. We were getting into Bocage country. We sighted the guns to cover the road and a bit of the village in case they came at us. We pulled about twenty yards off the road and had to cut down some of the hedgerow to get a field of fire. We were all chopping away. We heard a bit of firing away to our left. A German motorcycle and sidecar came down the road and the Vickers (Medium Machine Guns, 2nd Cheshires supporting 56th Brigade.) opened up and got them. It shows you how close everything was to have the Vickers up with the Battalion. A little later a staff car came up and they copped it as well. I think they were German War Correspondents. We spent the night in the ditch there. Next morning one of the older members of the gun crew was sent back. Probably aged about 35, he looked an old man to those of us aged 18! His knee was all swollen and that was the last we saw of him.[39]

Major Pat Barrass, Officer Commanding C Company, 2nd Essex, had had a busy day. That evening he remembers that:

As dusk was falling you could see the spires of Bayeux beguiling in its closeness. Junkers 88 were taking off from Carpiquet near Caen and turning over our position to go and bomb the shipping. If you had a long stick you could touch them they were so low. Later you could see the AA fire in the sky. There was background noise, but quiet where we were so I caught up on some sleep. The nights were short. 'Stand to' was before dawn.[40]

Back at Buhot at 1940hrs, Brigadier Pepper decided to move forward to Magny with Brigade HQ and 2nd Glosters. On the way 2nd Glosters ran into German opposition and took 31 prisoners and had four men wounded. They arrived at Magny near midnight and dug in around the church. Brigade HQ was established in a farm to the rear. Patrolling was carried out and a troop of 105mm guns was captured. Brigadier Pepper had concluded that as it was so late, he did not wish to get his battalions tangled up street fighting in Bayeux, so he decided to send them in

the morning. What the Brigadier did not know was that there were hardly any Germans left in Bayeux since much earlier in the day.

Starting at 0400hrs that morning Obersturmfuhrer Peter Hansmann of 12th SS (Hitler Jugend) Panzer Division, with two armoured cars, had carried out a long reconnaissance from 12th SS HQ at Chateau le Quesnay via Caen and Bayeux to Magny and St. Sulpice to report by wireless on the situation. At Bayeux he found:

> Older soldiers who could have been our fathers were standing at the garden fences talking with the civilians. The closer we came to the centre of town, the larger grew the crowd of people. There were supply vehicles, VW-Kubels, motorcycles, uniforms of all the different services, only the Kriegsmarine were missing.[41]

He reported that the military police were trying to restore some order and was told that artillery had already fallen into the town. They could hear heavy fighting to the north. Travelling carefully to Magny, they observed and reported from here at 0745hrs the landings, and stayed long enough to see most coastal defences finally suppressed. At this time British infantry and tanks were advancing only three kilometres from them. Realising 12th SS was 100 kilometres away, Hansmann knew there was little hope of relief from Bayeux as, "Those we had seen there were mostly members of the national labour service and administrators".[42] They may have been observed as they watched the landings as they only just escaped a salvo of naval gunfire falling around them. They then returned to HQ via Ryes, Bazenville, and Creully. Finally having to travel south of Caen to get back, shocked by the size and force of the allied landing and the impotence of the German Army to repel it.

In fact on the morning of D-Day the best hope of reinforcement for the Germans on Gold Beach was Battle Group Meyer of 352 Division. This force was made up of two infantry and a reconnaissance battalion and included self-propelled guns, infantry gun and anti-tank companys. However by 0530hrs on 6th June this group was travelling from its positions south and east of Bayeux in the opposite direction, towards the American parachute drop zones on the Contentin Peninsular. Too late the German commanders ordered its return and concentration against the British landing on Gold Beach. Short of an infantry battalion, sent to Omaha Beach, it did not return until late in the afternoon. Only some elements were in action by 1600hrs, although at 1630hrs they did capture Brigadier Senior of 151st Brigade at Bazenville, just over two kilometres south east of Ryes. He later escaped, wounded.[43]

Despite the decision to hold fast, and being behind the forward two battalions, 2nd Glosters were not to have a peaceful night. A number of Germans in Magny had been lying low and now under cover of darkness tried to get away. A few ran past the Battalion HQ where Sergeant Davis of the Pioneer Corps shot one with his sten gun, thus winning the £5 for the first person to bring down one of the enemy. Then Lieutenant Tucker, a B Company Platoon officer, was walking along the road near the slit trenches by the church, and started to engage a figure in conversation in the gloom thinking it was his own men. Realising suddenly it was a group of Germans; he fired on them at the same moment as they fired at him. Both missed, and the Germans ran for the hedge across the road and up some steps cut in a bank. The whole platoon blazed away but missed. Sergeant Frank Clarke was particularly annoyed, as this lack of fire discipline had soldiers firing over their

mates in front, putting them in danger. Later Lt. Tucker was ordered to take two men and find the 2nd South Wales Borderers and check they were at Vaux-sur-Aure. Arriving at the 2nd South Wales Borderers outposts on bicycles they were challenged, a grenade quickly followed and all three were wounded.[44]

This meant Sergeant Frank Clarke became platoon commander, possibly the first in the Brigade to have to do so. Later, due to heavy officer casualties, sergeants and corporals would command many platoons. As with the other battalions the night was spent dug in, a genuine expectation was a major counter-attack and clearly there could be German troops anywhere. Some German soldiers were lying quietly among them. As Private Duffin came back to his Company after a few hours spent in a forward position, four Germans - a whole Spandau team - jumped out of a hedge with their hands up. Next a sniper in the Church tower fired on the men below. Some of his bullets disturbed Tony Atcherley in the Brigade ACV signals truck as he was contemplating his 19th birthday. Luckily the armoured sides of the vehicle protected Atcherley. Frank Rosier on the orders of Lt Nordbruck opened fire with a Bren gun on the church tower, a tank trained its gun on the tower and the sniper eventually gave up. The bullet splashes on the church tower can still be seen.[45]

Brigadier Pepper now decided to move on Bayeux. First 2nd Essex were to move, going east and south of Bayeux centre. 2nd Glosters would advance on a line approximately parallel and half a kilometre to the west, to take the central part of the town. 2nd South Wales Borderers would leave a force holding the bridge at Vaux-sur-Aure and advance west towards the small village and chateau at Sully.

Still no contact had been made with the Americans. 2nd Essex and 2nd Glosters encountered little difficulty. Although there was some sniping most Germans who were still in Bayeux melted away. The Sherwood Rangers troop of tanks supporting 2nd Essex added muscle to deal with any sniping. Initially the town seemed deserted and deathly quiet as the leading 2nd Essex men passed through, but soon French people thronged the streets. There was some firing around the railway station and German mortar fire, but the hold up was only brief. Once the progress of 2nd Essex was clear, 2nd Glosters entered the central part of the town and pushed on to the Cathedral square, being mobbed as they proceeded. Both battalions lost a Carrier on the way in due to mines. Arthur Dyer, a Lance Corporal Brigade signaller attached to 2nd Essex, explains what happened in his 'illegally' kept personal diary:

Moved off about 0830hrs to follow Carrier in our M14 (Armoured half-track radio vehicle). Carrier went ahead out of view; we went along and pulled up to negotiate trip wire across road. This done we again moved forward speeding and ran into a lot of bumps in the road. George (the driver) steered his way through the maze just in case they were mines. By a miracle we missed every one. A Carrier behind us hit one and it turns out they were mines. The Signals officer was seriously hurt. We had gone ahead looking for the leading Carrier and stopped short of a corner and sent the DR to investigate, he returned immediately saying there were Jerries around the corner. We had taken the wrong road and arrived in Bayeux before our troops.[46]

They managed to turn round and returned to find the 2nd Essex Signals Officer. Here they waited for some time before proceeding. The Signals Officer, Captain Hearn, had survived though badly wounded. His excellent written account describes following the M14, which went out of sight. Captain Hearn had an increasing premonition that something was wrong and had the Carrier slow down to check the map. As they turned a corner they hit a mine that blew off the Carrier track with a "shattering explosion."[47] The driver and signaller in the back climbed out and ran for cover, Captain Hearn found he could not move and his leg was badly

injured. In fact it is likely that he was saved from further harm by following orders and previously lining the floor of the Carrier with filled sandbags against such an event. He put the handbrake on and switched off the ignition. Everything was quiet and he called for help. An old Frenchman appeared and had a long conversation with him. Then his sergeant turned up, followed by the Medical Officer. He was removed from the Carrier by which time the M14 had returned. From his stretcher he could see the Carrier had a smashed track and sprocket and a large hole in its side. He could also see two mines, which the Carrier was resting against when the explosion threw it across the road and saw two more laying on the road within touching distance. He was safely evacuated to the UK.

On the way to Bayeux 2nd Glosters also lost a Carrier in similar circumstances. Moving forward to investigate the anti-tank ditch it blew up with another shattering roar, on a Teller Mine, and the shocked crew staggered away as it burst into flames. A double row of mines was unearthed to clear the road and a bulldozer pushed the remains of the Carrier into the anti-tank ditch.[48]

But by 1230hrs the 2nd Glosters were in the centre of the town and were caught up in something of a very large party. However there was still the odd German at large, and the following description of just one small action in the town gives a good idea of events. Sergeant Frank Clarke and his platoon had to break away from the festivities as they received information from a Frenchman that there were some Germans in a house near the Cathedral. A high wall with a bolted gate surrounded the house and Frank got two large privates from Bristol to give him a leg up, so he could peer over the wall. The men were overly enthusiastic and shot

Frank over the wall, were he fell into a large rhododendron bush. Taking cover by the bush, Frank observed the house, noticed a large window at ground floor level and a door and what, in the sunlight, appeared to be sandbags with a machine gun barrel poking above. Quickly moving to unbolt the door in the garden wall, he let half the platoon into the courtyard. A Lance/Sgt. was sent to cover the back and Frank entered by the unlocked front door, the two Bristol lads by the window, which they shot out. The house appeared empty including being bare of furniture. A check was made upstairs with nothing found. As they were leaving Frank noticed a low doorway leading down to a cellar. He got the Bren gunner to start at one end of the room and slowly fire down through the floorboards. This produced a lot of shouting from below and ten Germans came up to surrender. Lining them up outside by the garden wall, a large number of French people appeared and began to get very ugly with the prisoners. Only by the threatening use of their weapons did the Glosters get the prisoners away for escort to the beach with only the odd black eye and kicked backside. Afterwards Sergeant Clarke realised he had not searched the prisoners or checked the cellar.[49]

The report in 56th Brigade War Diary, shows that by 1800 hrs, as planned, 2nd Glosters completed clearing the centre of Bayeux and moved through to the southern outskirts of the town reporting the railway bridge on the St. Lo road as destroyed. 2nd Essex had moved through and around Bayeux and both battalions were well established on the high ground south west of Bayeux, between St. Loup Hors, (2nd Glosters) and Montmirel, (2nd Essex) with the valley of the River Aure to their east. They were thus in a position to block any counter-attack from the south or west. It is an interesting point that the War Diaries of 2nd Glosters and 56th Brigade

disagree slightly as to the exact location of Battalion HQ and the rifle companies on this evening, although in a broad sense the units were located as described above. It may be that the Diaries were written at different times of the evening and positional adjustments were made later.[50]

Meanwhile 2nd South Wales Borderers were out on the extreme right flank of the British Army and advancing to contact. After leaving a six-pounder anti-tank gun and rearguard of one platoon of A Company to cover the bridge at Vaux-sur-Aure, they moved to the farm at Le Parquet and sent patrols into Bayeux. The personal diary of the Intelligence Officer gives a broad but compelling picture of events: "We moved at 0430hrs to get onto the high ground NW of Bayeux. We arrived to find the whole area full of snipers in the orchards. They were very well camouflaged and most were up trees. The battle developed into section stalks in the orchards."[51] Bill Speake of C Company was directly involved in events to get one sniper who had shot and wounded his Company Officer, Major Gillespie. Gillespie was passing a gate into a small orchard when he was shot and wounded. The cry went up for company snipers and Bill and Jarman, the two Company snipers, were briefed to get into the orchard and get the German sniper. Bill crawled up the lane and carefully through the hedge into the field. He then crawled and rolled into a good vantage point in the field. Satisfied he had got there unobserved, he cut a stick into a Y shape. He had just rested his leather bound sniper scope onto the Y, when a great bang deafened him and the scope flew up in the air and came down on the back of his helmet. Bill grabbed the scope and exited the orchard pretty quickly. The scope had a bullet score down the side. Bill had escaped death by inches. Returning to Company HQ he found Jarman already there. They suggested that a

Bren Gun Carrier and two Brens taken into the field would sort the sniper out and this was thought to be a good idea. By taking out the tops of the trees with the Bren guns, the Carrier crew killed the German. He was found to be attached to the tree by his belt.[52]

Meanwhile, (passing the above action on the way), Lt. Davis had been ordered to carry out a reconnaissance with four men into Bayeux, where he established at the outskirts of the town that the Germans had gone. He explored a few roads back and set about returning. When at a cemetery on the edge of Bayeux, they were forced to hastily take cover as a trigger happy Bren gunner, probably from 2nd Glosters, opened fire and bullets ricocheted off the tombstones. Moving on they were fired on from the direction of Sully Chateau. A French farmer was working apparently unconcernedly in the next field moving his cow with its peg from one area of grass to another. As Dennis explains "the Bocage was so dense that just moving into the next small field made you invisible to the enemy."[53]

2nd South Wales Borderers also had to deal with the Germans at Sully and capture bridges there and at Vaucelles further south. Major Dauncey with A Company were sent into action. However as well as having to carefully move through sniper-infested territory, they discovered that Sully was strongly held, and after a sharp firefight withdrew to the Battalion firm base around Le Parquet.

Overall on this second day of invasion the Brigade had reacted well. The first major French town across the whole invasion front, Bayeux, had been captured with very little damage or casualties. The area of the 50th Division bridgehead had

been expanded and consolidated. A great worry was that still there was no contact or junction with the Americans from Omaha Beach, and it was obvious that the German Army were still in force on the right flank. The movements of all three battalions had been difficult. Initially 2nd Essex and 2nd Glosters advanced not knowing how much opposition lay ahead, through roads sometimes heavily mined. 2nd South Wales Borderers had moved into, and taken, a large area of difficult Bocage type countryside, apparently infested with snipers. By that evening a number of German snipers had been killed and a dozen captured.

Major LF Ellis on Page 210 of the official history – Victory in the West - has criticised the speed of the advance of 56th Infantry Brigade on D-Day. On pages 212 and 213 he also levels similar criticism against 50th Infantry Division as a whole. The fact that the Germans were fighting from well-prepared emplacements of concrete shelters and reinforced buildings on Gold Beach must be taken into account. The main aerial bombardment was dropped wide, and therefore did not touch the two most heavily armed positions at either end of the landing area. These both held heavy anti-tank guns that covered the length of the landing beach. The tough German resistance caused heavy casualties to the assaulting brigades. As well as the bravery of the men, the use of specialist armour was an important reason for the success of the assault. More than one beach pillbox position was neutralised by a petard-firing tank. Even so many tanks were lost to bogging down or hits from the German guns. Once ashore the soldiers pushed into the unknown against prepared positions, both on the ridges lining either side of the broad valley, and in the few villages along its length. Snipers and individual Spandau teams could hold up a whole battalion until they were dealt with. Also there was an expectation of strong

counter attack. Even by the evening of the 7th June commanding officers were awaiting a German onslaught.

They were not helped by the misreporting that that Panzers were speeding to the scene, or on the other hand wildly optimistic reports that had, for example, 56th Brigade War Diary reporting Caen being taken by 3rd British Division at 1000hrs on 7th June. There is also very clear evidence that although some of the German coastal units were weak or of mixed value, all four of the British infantry brigades landed on Gold Beach, advanced against Germans soldiers not afraid to fight individually and in small teams whatever the cost. Although universally described as snipers, it is not logical that so many snipers existed in the German Army. They must have been ordinary trained and determined soldiers, prepared to stand and fight against overwhelming odds, in a contest which usually ended in their death or capture.

Despite the advance of all Gold Beach infantry and armour on 6th and 7th June 1944, some German soldiers were left roaming almost at will in the rear areas between the British forward positions and the landing beaches. For example the War Diary for 1st Hampshires reports for the morning of 7th June that a number of snipers were reported in the area of Buhot. A patrol of 4 jeeps was sent to winkle them out. As late as 10th June, 6th Border Regiment of 10 Beach Group were reporting on the prisoner of war cage situated on their beach: "A party of P.W. in LE HAMEL was 210 strong one evening and 232 strong next morning; all Germans wishing to join 10 Beach Gp must send written application to the Adjutant." Despite the jovial nature of the report, it is not known what these 22 German soldiers were doing for the three days they were at liberty in the area.[54] Whatever was going on

behind them though, for the men of 56th Brigade, from 8th June 1944, the fight against the enemy was going to get distinctly tougher.

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Chapter Five.

Fighting in the Bocage. Chateau Sully to Tilly-sur-Seulles.

June 8th to June 20th 1944.

By the morning of 8th June, British forces landing on Gold Beach had a well-established bridgehead from the coast to three kilometres southwest of Bayeux. 231st Brigade had taken Arromanches, the Longues battery and controlled the ground to Bayeux. 47 Commando had extended the British occupied area as far west as Port-en-Bessin on the coast. To the southeast and east of Bayeux 151st and 69th Brigades held the ground and had linked with Canadian forces. 56th Brigade held the flanks southwest and west of Bayeux. Meanwhile the first units of 7th Armoured Division were landing and by 10th June, 49th Infantry Division was to land. Many men and much material were landed directly on the beach, and the Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches was under construction. Despite this the rear areas remained far from secure. The second line of transport for 56th Brigade came ashore from D+1. Even at this stage their landing and journey inland was often far from straightforward. Landings were already 12 to 24 hours behind schedule. This was due to the German resistance at Le Hamel and La Riviere, and the increasingly poor weather in the Channel. This weather eventually culminated in a three-day storm from 19th June, totally wrecking the US Mulberry harbour and badly damaging the British Mulberry harbour at Arromanches. 'No such June storm had been known in the Channel for over forty years.'[1] This continuing poor weather seriously impeded the allied build up in Normandy and affected the plans for advancing out of the bridgehead. Appendix Six on page 289 is useful in showing where the actions south of Bayeux described in this chapter took place.

Syd Hampton, a driver with 2nd Glosters, described how they were loaded onto the top deck of LST 519, an American LST. All the vehicles had large white stars across their width for identification, and a Sphinx badge on a yellow background identifying them as 56th Brigade vehicles. "We didn't carry the TT sign, as we were an Independent Brigade. We took all the top deck up with Gloster vehicles, while the tank deck was loaded with Jerry cans of petrol. We thought if this gets bombed there will be no swimming away!"[2] They were unloaded onto a Rhino ferry, three lorries abreast and six deep, off Gold Beach in the early morning of D+1. They observed cruisers and destroyers still bombarding targets inland. Then the engines of the ferry broke down and they drifted for three hours before it was repaired.

> We came up by a merchant ship landed high and dry, and Jerry bombed this, and you could see men running about on deck with hoses. I had never seen cannon shells before, and it was like a line of torches going along. I can tell you my knees were knocking and I couldn't do anything about it! We eventually hit the beach broadside on. I was about third off and turned right, while the others, for some reason, turned left. Everything in the back was wrapped in tarpaper for waterproofing. We eventually got off the beach and ended up in a field that night. Jerry seemed to be bombing everywhere.[3]

They had harboured in a field near Courseulles in the Canadian sector. Next morning, as it got light, they got going and drove through the adjacent field, observing too late the Achtung Minen signs and some Canadian lorries already blown up. Syd and two other lorries carried on. Passing some infantry, and driving quite fast, they carried on until soon they were stopped by French people shouting and pointing, "Les Boches, Les Boches!" So they turned round and went back to the infantry and stopped to talk to the officer.

> This Lieutenant said, "I thought you knew something I didn't know! We have been sent to clear this area!" So we carried on and found a few more wagons, the Sergeant Major was there organising it. We pulled off so they could get some tanks past. The bloke behind me went sky high on a mine. All the side of his cab

was gone; his second driver was blown out, into the back of my wagon. So overall we had a pretty rough landing! We caught up with the Battalion in Bayeux. Only half of us had made it off the LST and the others got in the next day.[4]

George Barker, a veteran of Dunkirk from 2nd Essex, had an equally pressing time. Their LST on D+1 could not get in very close, so the ramp was let down in deeper water. George was last off:

We had done our own waterproofing, and we had a groundsheet fixed top and bottom of the radiator to protect it from water pushing through. The drill was, you got off the boat, and as soon as you got on the beach you stopped and ripped this off, to stop the radiator boiling over. Well they dropped the ramp and these 15cwt lorries went off, and two of them were swimming! When it was my turn I went down, and my wagon was under the sea! I was praying, please come up, please come up! I got off and I missed these floating wagons and reached the beach. I stopped and this beach bloke said, "Don't do that. Get on! Get on!" I said, "We have to get the waterproofing off". He said "No keep going!" So I had to stop when we got off the beach. That's when I saw a line of casualties and it hit me, and I thought, Oh Christ![5]

They drove straight through the middle of Bayeux to join the Battalion. On the way a sniper in a church tower fired on them, and the convoy drew up until a tank put a shot into the tower and stopped the enemy fire. They got just south of Bayeux and into a meadow that had a little brick building at the entrance. This was the guardroom. The cooks' wagons were there as well. The battalion were a mile or so down the road. "There were a lot of chaps walking about dazed really".[6]

For 2nd Glosters and 2nd Essex, the next two days were spent on consolidation and sending reconnaissance patrols forward on foot and by Bren Carrier. Although there was little direct contact with the enemy, they were not necessarily far away. In hindsight it may well have been the time to push forward fast; German reinforcements were gradually making their way to the scene. In the 50th Division area, the powerful Panzer Lehr Division was approaching as quickly as it could, trying to avoid the dominating

allied air cover. But the cause of the delayed British advance was twofold. The build up through the beaches was much slower than expected because of the weather, and there was still no contact with the American forces to the west. The fact was that the men ashore were already thinly spread, and the plans laid in Britain for a rapid armoured thrust, by at least a brigade of 7th Armoured Division supported by 56th Brigade, was impossible.

2nd Glosters had lost two men killed in the taking of Bayeux and were dug in south of the town. Contact was made with the locals and bartering took place. Men began to get used to living in slit trenches dug in the fields or gardens of houses. A regimental magazine article[7] reports that it 'was pleasant to be situated in civilised surroundings which made it difficult to turn houses in the front line into strong points as thoroughly as might be done, with a friendly French family looking on'. Battalion HQ was in a school, A Company HQ near a large garage, which supplied the MT with Ford spare parts and two vehicles, and D Company HQ were in the main square by the undertakers. In a minor action Corporal Penn was killed on 9th June. Fired on from the other side of a football field on the outskirts of Bayeux, this Welsh Rugby player charged across the pitch firing his Sten and was killed. "He was the biggest and toughest bloke we had. So we thought if he's dead, what chance have we got?"[8] The railway line was guarded in the expectation, (of the men at least), that a train full of armed Germans soldiers would appear. Unable to dig in because of the stony nature of the embankment, and feeling quite exposed despite the darkness, Bren gunner Gordon Duffin heard rustling and clinking noises. Just about to fire he heard an English voice "where is everybody, I aint' half cold!" It was a drunken member of the battalion. An officer had him marched off under close arrest.[9] Unusually, A Company temporarily

acquired horse transport, courtesy of the 105mm German Army battery they had captured at Magny, and invented their own 'Horse Transport Officer':

> We got a German horse and cart and loaded all our kit onto it. We wanted a chap who could handle a horse, and there was a Gloucester chap, a real old Swede basher! He had been in India with the mules, so they made him horse transport officer. He gets on the cart and starts shouting at the horse and its not going anywhere. Old Jack is shouting and swearing, and Major Lance came up grinning and said, "The horse you're shouting at does not understand English, does not understand any other language except German, and it certainly can't understand Gloucestershire!" The horse and cart disappeared after Tilly. We reckoned Jack had flogged it to a French farmer![10]

A little to the south of the hamlet of St. Loup d' Hors, 2nd Essex were similarly waiting for the next move, although one long reconnaissance by the Carrier platoon led by Captain Harrison nearly ended very badly, as Charles Benford explains. "We went out miles on reconnaissance. We eventually drove into one village, which was full of Germans. We had to spin round quick and get out of it. If they had had an anti-tank gun covering the road we would have had it!"[11] Major Pat Barrass had C Company HQ in a typical Norman farm, with the Company forming a defensive position on the road to Tilly-sur-Seulles. Their first enemy was a grey van coming down the road. Major Barrass went up with the forward section and they fired a shot. The van stopped dead and "a German with the biggest fat bottom you have seen jumped out the other side and disappeared into the bushes and got away!"[12] The next Germans to arrive were a motorcycle combination with two men. The forward platoon let them through, and at the farm entrance a sentry stepped out and signalled them into the farmyard. This they complied with and were captured. Out of this, Major Barrass swapped his Sten gun for the Germans' *Schmeisser* machine gun. This weapon could take the Sten gun 9mm ammunition, and was reckoned to be a much more effective weapon than the Sten.[13] Similarly a German Press correspondent drove into C Company position and was

captured. 'It seemed to us that the Boche were badly disorganised and some of their units could have little idea where the front actually was'.[14]

But on 8th June, while the other two Battalions were situated near Bayeux, 2nd South Wales Borderers took part in 56th Brigade's most significant action since the landing and taking of Bayeux. To their west a Chateau at Sully was still fully occupied, and barring the way to a meeting with the American forces gradually pushing south from Omaha Beach. It was decided that they had to clear this situation up. A conference took place back at the bridge at Vaux-sur-Aure at 1030hrs between Brigadier Pepper, Lieutenant Colonel Craddock of 2nd South Wales Borderers, and representatives of 5th Royal Horse Artillery, 90th Field Regiment and 2nd Cheshires.

The chateau was a difficult building to attack. It was a substantial late 17th Century building, surrounded on three sides by trees, in close bocage countryside, and built on rising ground. It had to be approached via a narrow bridge, after which followed a sharp left turn allowed an advance on the Chateau. Before this at the bottom of the hill, after the bridge, was the small village of Sully. This was likely to contain Germans in strength. It was thought that around 100 men held the area. It was suspected of being a regimental headquarters, which would suggest a more heavily manned area, as a German regiment was the size of a British Brigade. In fact this proved to be the case and the chateau was the HQ of 726 Grenadier Regiment from 716 Infantry Division, but under command of 352 Infantry Division. However, there was a hurry to take the position, and A and B Companies of 2nd South Wales Borders received their orders to attack at 1100 hours, and were expected to put in their attack as close to noon as possible. This gave very little time to get these two companies briefed and in position, reconnoitre the area, and liase with supporting units. It has been pointed out,

that later in the campaign when the Battalion was more experienced, they would have demanded more time for preparation.[15]

There was a great deal of support promised, including a squadron of tanks from 5th Royal Tank Regiment (A Squadron), a field regiment of artillery (90th Field Regt.), a platoon of 4.2inch mortars (2nd Cheshires), and the fire of a 6 inch naval cruiser, directed by a Forward Observation Officer (FOO), Captain Noble from 5th Royal Horse Artillery. This support list provides a good example of the firepower available to troops in Normandy, certainly in these early days. It also gives an example of the complex planning and liaison that was needed. However as the action progressed, some of these arrangements broke down, not least because of the lack of training and co-operation between arms in this type of terrain. 'As so often happened in Bocage fighting, no one saw the battlefield until he got there'.[16] The cruiser was to shell the chateau, the tanks give covering fire from the right flank, and the artillery to put down concentrations of fire on the road in front of the advance, the bridge, and finally on the chateau itself.

A Company were to advance and establish a firm base, B Company pass through and take the village. Then A Company was to leapfrog them and take the chateau. The first problem was that due to the terrain, the FOO could not find anywhere to observe the chateau properly. So because of the danger to 2nd South Wales Borders from the naval shells, this part of the plan was not put into effect. Secondly, the Germans put up a staunch defence from the beginning. The lead Carrier blew up on a mine and was then fired on by an 88mm gun. However Sgt. Babcock in the second Carrier managed to eliminate the 88mm crew and extract the rest of the Carriers. Then A and B Company became crowded on the initial access road and the supporting artillery fire was too

close, some shells exploding in the trees and wounding several men. 5th RTR had only landed the day before and found the terrain very difficult to operate in:

> The country proved to be very close in this area allowing Boche infantry to get very close to the tanks. On one occasion a tank under command of Lieutenant Garnett was boarded. Prompt action by the officer using his Sten gun and the operator his revolver saved the situation.[17]

Over the bridge the hedges and ditches were lined with Germans, who were supported by an 88mm gun and 20mm Flak cannon. The Germans were also employing a light mortar and grenades. B Company Commander, Major Boon, took a few men, and going through a hedge they stalked the 88mm. Bursting back through the hedge they captured the crew of the 88mm tracked vehicle, then Major Boon attacked the gun crew firing bursts from his Sten gun and throwing a grenade. The remainder of B Company soon joined and captured a further 20 Germans from adjacent fields. At this point during a lull in the fighting Lieutenant Colonel Craddock armed with his swordstick and in company of his IO and Signals Officer, walked up to the chateau. (Using the battalion signals officer as a personal signaller was unusual, and took the officer away from his duties co-ordinating the signals net.) Momentarily everything was quiet, until a grenade was thrown at them and the defences opened fire. All three made it back. Then A Company, reinforced by a Platoon of B Company, made an attack. There were now apparently many Germans out in the woodland, and the fighting became confused and desperate, including some vicious hand-to-hand fighting. It was now clear that this area was heavily defended. Ringed by wire and with well-hidden snipers, the Germans were operating from deep bunkers within the chateau grounds, and had further 88mm guns located around. There were many acts of heroism in this fighting.[18] The Brigade War Diary at 1700hrs states, 'On reports being received that the situation at Sully Chateau had deteriorated, Bde Comd went forward to investigate'.[19]

But the situation got worse. Lieutenant Colonel Craddock was wounded in the shoulder. Craddock would not be removed from the scene, but an enthusiastic Brigadier Pepper now supported him. More Germans seemed to be reinforcing the chateau defenders. In fact these were soldiers retreating from the American forces now advancing from Omaha Beach. German Self Propelled guns appeared and destroyed a Sherman Firefly and blasted some of the 2nd South Wales Borderers positions.

Bill Evans, of B Company, remembers that the attack was mounted in very close country, which seemed infested with snipers. His Section turned left up a lane. 36 Jones, was hit by shrapnel and his cheek laid open. Bill took out his own field dressing to cover the wound but was told that he should have used Jones own dressing. Then was screamed at to "leave him for the stretcher bearers!" The following day Private Jones died of wounds and is buried at Ryes CWGC. (14478536 Private Frederick Jones. As there were many Evans, Jones, Williams etc. in 2nd South Wales Borderers they were known by the last two digits of their number and surname). Moving up the lane, B Company came under fire from two machine guns and an 88mm firing on its lowest trajectory. The order was screamed, "B Company do a right flanking". The idea was to get round behind the chateau. The bank was over a metre high with a near impenetrable hedgerow on top was barged through to come out into a field. Looking through a second hedgerow, that hid the chateau, Bill saw three German tanks firing on them. Also the Germans were firing heavily from the dugouts around the chateau. The tanks were down by the river where a bridge of railway sleepers allowed them to cross. This still exists today. When they opened fire, one tank was already on the B Company side of the river, and two on the other. Then came the cry, "Recall, recall."[20]

The German tank on the 2nd South Wales Borderers side of the river knocked out three more South Wales Borderers Carriers, an anti-tank gun and Brigade jeep. This tank now covered the bridge. Taking in the situation quickly, Brigadier Pepper decided that with no hope of reinforcing the two engaged companies with more infantry, and with the onset of night, (it was 2000hrs) they must start to withdraw to avoid darkness and further confusion. This was successfully accomplished being covered by smoke fired by the artillery although the men were still under heavy fire. Some were lucky to make it, others not. The Brigadier was put in a tank, and the last officers out were five officers crammed into the CO's Carrier. The IO, Nick Somerville, was lying on top of the Battalion 2 i/c Major Barlow, when the Carrier took a hit behind. An 88mm shell splinter punctured Lieutenant Somerville's helmet, cut his head, and broke the barrel of the Bren gun.[21] On the bridge the FOOs' tank toppled into the water, accidentally driven through the bridge parapet, drowning Major Noble.

By now the firing was dying down, and C Company was brought up from Bayeux to patrol the village northeast of the river. Later that night C Company were able to patrol into the chateau and reported it empty. They took possession of it the following morning. It was beginning to burn, and either the Germans had fired it, or the actions of the previous day had caught it alight. Bill Evans, of B Company, remembers moving up the drive flanked by a lawn each side to the front door. The roof of the Chateau was on fire, and on one lawn Bill saw up to nine dead from 2nd South Wales Borderers laid out in a line, including his friend Private Blackett. On the other lawn was a Spitfire fighter plane with a placard proclaiming the unit at the chateau shot it down. Alert to booby traps, doors were pushed open gingerly, by use of the bayonet attached to the rifle. Moving through the hallway and turning into a huge empty room on the right, they carefully opened cupboard doors and the cardboard boxes they held. All they

found inside was a regimental supply of condoms. There was some comment regarding the size of these![22] That afternoon at 1600hrs (9th June 1944) patrols of 2nd South Wales Borderers, C Company, finally made contact with US forces.

Probably over 250 members of 726 Regiment, at best equalling, and possibly outnumbering the attackers, had in fact held the chateau. The position was well wired in and defended by three 88mm and one 20mm gun. It had deep, prepared concrete dugouts from which underground passages radiated out to pillboxes on the perimeter, each connected by slit trenches. The 2nd South Wales Borderers captured over 85 prisoners and all the German artillery. The HQ and Intelligence Section appropriated typewriters and map cases from the chateau. The action at Sully cost 2nd South Wales Borderers two NCO's and eleven men killed. The armour support lost four killed and at least six wounded. They had lost three tanks. There were numerous 2nd South Wales Borderers of all ranks wounded, including Lieutenant Colonel Craddock, who was evacuated to England, and Major Barlow was given command of the Battalion. Major Barlow ceased the practise of using his signals officer as his personal signaller.

Brigadier Hargest, Official Observer with 50th Division, says that the battalion suffered 100 casualties. Also he compares the strength of Chateau Sully with the Radar Station at Douvres La Deliverande. This held out, surrounded by British forces, from 6th June to 17th June 1944. Hargest states 'It (The Radar Station) was not comparable in strength with the Chateau at Sully'.[23] When considering 2nd South Wales Borderers casualties, it must be remembered that these came only from two rifle companies totalling less than 250 men, plus some men from the Support Company. Therefore the casualty rate was very high, and this became the norm for infantry in the Normandy Campaign.

This was the first major action by a unit of 56th Brigade, and is worth exploring for that reason. There is no doubt that the men had fought well and been well led. At critical times officers, NCO's and men had stepped up to the mark when needed. A number of awards were given for this action. Four officers received the Military Cross, - including a member of the Royal Army Medical Corps attached to the Battalion - seven NCO's and men received the Military Medal, and Colonel Craddock was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. The terrain, lack of reconnaissance and planning, poor intelligence, and the availability of only two of the rifle companies, caused both infantry and armour to face severe problems. The other rifle companies were engaged in holding bridges over the River Aure and the Battalion firm base, tasks of primary importance. Expected to prepare and execute an attack so quickly, the Battalion did very well under the circumstances. What is interesting is that the men engaged did so well, despite most of them being new to combat. The fact is they stuck to their task until called off, in circumstances that were clearly mounting against them. What is unfortunate is that above the level of battalion and brigade, these harsh lessons were not quickly learnt, and in their turn both 2nd Glosters and 2nd Essex in the coming days, were to suffer high casualties due to similar problems. The chateau - one of three around Sully, and properly called 'Chateau Le Petit Sally'- no longer exists having been so badly damaged it was later demolished and the German bunkers filled in, although modern aerial views clearly show the entrance drive to the Chateau.

Finally a British plan to rapidly expand the bridgehead was being put in place. After attending a conference at 7th Armoured Division HQ during the afternoon of the 9th June, Brigadier Pepper issued the following orders, 'that from 0800 hrs 10 June, 56 Inf Brig comes under Command of 7th Armoured Div.'[24] Use was being made of 56th

Brigade infantry to support 7th Armoured Division as 131st (Queen's) Brigade, had not yet been landed. 131st Brigade was the infantry brigade normally attached to 7th Armoured Division. The plan was to advance to the south on two axes: southwards on the east side of the River Aure and south eastwards down the road to Tilly-sur-Seulles and on to the hamlet of Juvigny. This was a distance of some 14 kilometres. After taking this area the front line was to be consolidated along the east to west road between Juvigny and the village of Hottot-les-Bagues. The start line was the level crossing just south of Bayeux, beginning at 0830hrs 10th June. 2nd South Wales Borderers were to provide a guard of one anti-tank gun at each bridge over the River Aure as they were reached. 56th Brigade was to provide protection for the armour, consolidate on the final objective and provide flank protection on the River Aure. A large tract of land would therefore be occupied and a significant advance made to bring pressure on the continued holding of Caen by the Germans to the east, and to allow a quick further thrust south to Villers Bocage by 7th Armoured Division.

There were some problems with this plan. Firstly the enemy had not been sitting idly by, and now the Panzer Lehr Division of over 14,500 men, 237 tanks and assault guns, including 89 Panther and 8 Tiger tanks and over 650 armoured half-track personnel Carriers, were moving into direct opposition to 50th and 7th Armoured Divisions. Their journey had not been easy and although reported numbers vary, they had lost over a hundred vehicles and a number of men. Their Commander, Generalmajor Bayerlein, had orders on 9th June to take Bayeux, although initially he had to deploy his men with little information to help him. However by the morning of 10th June some of his units at least were established on a line from Jerusalem through Ellon and back to Trungy between Bayeux and 7th Armoured Division objectives.[25] Further

east they were joined by 12 SS (Hitler Youth) Division another powerful unit with over 20,500 men. These were two very significant armoured units.[26]

The second problem was that the British were moving into the type of countryside that had caused so many problems for 2nd South Wales Borderers and 5th Royal Tank Regiment in their attack on 8th June at Sully. Close, often Bocage type countryside, with substantial stone built villages and farms dotting the landscape at regular intervals, were ideal for defence. Also the Germans were determined not to allow any of the main east to west road axes fall into British hands. These were to become vital lines of communication for the German Army between Caen and the Contentin Peninsular and beyond to Brittany. Important road junctions down the Tilly road were at Jerusalem, Bucceels, Tilly itself and Juvigny.

Promptly at 0830hrs on 10th June, 56th Brigade moved past the level crossing start line. But by 1100hrs it was reported, 'Both columns held up one mile south of Bayeux.'[27] 56th Brigade, 22nd Armoured Brigade and 8th Armoured Brigade were to have to fight hard making slow progress against determined opposition from the tanks and Infantry of Panzer Lehr. Each village, farm and the monastery at Juaye Monaye, became centres of resistance, and in the narrow lanes lined with high banks and hedges, in a countryside interspersed with woods and orchards, the situation was often confused.

Charles Benford, in the leading Carrier of 2nd Essex Support Company, dealt with an early problem approaching the village of Ellon: "we came round a bend and I spotted a tank. I stopped my driver immediately and shouted to him to Back up! Back up! We got down from the Carrier and crossed the road. I took my PIAT Gunner with me."[28] Cutting carefully down the hedge until they got to the turning leading to Ellon,

he realised it was a disabled British tank. Feeling relieved, they were returning to their Carrier, when another tank was heard approaching from the village and they prepared to engage this with the PIAT. "Lo and behold a tank appeared over the brow of the hill, I got my PIAT Gunner down behind the hedge and I said to him you have got one shot, get his track and he's disabled." But it was yet another British tank with a "Johnny-go-lightly chap with his beret on" sticking out of the turret. Holding up a bright orange fluorescent recognition panel Sergeant Benford got the tank to stop. "The tank commander said, "Who the hell are you?" I said, "vanguard of a battalion." He replied, "Well get the hell out of it I'm in the middle of a tank battle!" The Essex officer was fetched on the Don R's bike and agreed to get the Carriers to turn round. "We couldn't do this in the road, as it was too narrow, so we drove through a five-barred gate into an orchard and out the other end. The farmer was there and doing his nut!"[29]

By 1800hrs, 2nd Essex had got as far as the monastery at Juaye Monaye, where 'D Company attacked under a fierce concentration of British artillery, followed by A Company, constantly harassed by snipers and *Spandaus.*'[30] Corporal Toni Mansi of D Company remembers that:

> We were told that the Germans were using the monastery as an observation post. There was a high brick wall surrounding part of the monastery and also, the entrance to the monastery was like a long driveway with a high wall on the right hand side and a short wall on the left, and then it opened out to where the monastery was. What we did was set the Bren gunner up at the entrance to cover us as we went to the monastery. As we got closer to the monastery, we could hear voices in the cellar, it had windows open to give light and we were hearing French people down there for protection. But there were snipers up in the roof, so we went forward and some of the chaps behind us went into the monastery, which they cleared. I don't know whether they captured or killed them. Then I remember we stopped in a deep hollow. There were shells screaming overhead.[31]

The War Diary reports the Monastery cleared by 1930hrs, but that fighting forward towards Bernieres Bocage was still confused, and 5th Royal Tank Regiment lost two Cromwell tanks here. They had advanced seven kilometres that day. An hour later 2nd South Wales Borderers had moved to concentrate their battalion around Ellon, a kilometre and a half to the rear of 2nd Essex. But during the day, they had captured and had a guard of infantry and anti-tank guns, on each of the four bridges they had been ordered to take. The last two bridges were south and to the west of 2nd Essex, and required some fighting for. Taking them cost officers and men killed and wounded in the bocage countryside.

Meanwhile 2nd Glosters had been on the left axis of advance down the Tilly road, and supporting the armour by mopping up snipers and machine gun posts. The advance had been made by pushing a company down each side of the road while the remaining two companies made a firm base. Their War Diary reports that the progress was very slow, although by 1910hrs they were clearing woods in the area of Jerusalem, seven kilometres from the start line. Frank Clarke from B Company describes how when opposition was met at Jerusalem, the armour was called up to shoot up the village and poured "scores of HE and A/P shells into every likely looking building. The place was a shambles."[32] Later that night, B Company moved further south and occupied St. Bazire capturing a German tank and crew. In the early hours of 11th June in support of 4th City of London Yeomanry, B Company were put in to clear Bucceels only two kilometres from the centre of Tilly-sur-Seulles. It had been a busy day and the Glosters had been fully employed supporting the armour. Ernie Partridge has this memory from south of Jerusalem:

> We had some tanks come past and I said, "I should look out. There are German tanks down there. I would keep your eyes open down there mate!" It was a busy

place. Lots of firing, bursts of machine gun fire and shells and mortars and lots of prisoners were passing through as well. One of the sergeants in C Company knocked a tank out with a PIAT.[33]

After a slow start the combined forces of 56th Brigade and 22nd Armoured Brigade had made better progress during the latter half of 10th June, and a large tract of land south of Bayeux had been wrested from the enemy. Both formations were learning all the time. For many soldiers of 56th Brigade it was their introduction to battle, and the more experienced 22nd Armoured Brigade learnt that fighting here was to be very different than in the desert. The following day the advance was to continue in similar terrain, except that the Panzer Lehr were getting ever more to grips with the British, and were consolidating their own positions. By 1000hrs on 11th June more German Mk. IV and Mark V (Panther) tanks were being met, and in the close terrain the British armour was at a disadvantage, coming forward onto well-camouflaged German positions, and the more powerful guns of German armour.

On the right flank 2nd Essex now held the hamlet of Bernieres Bocage. Ahead of them 5th Royal Tank Regiment, moving forward supported by a Company of 1st Rifle Brigade early on 11th June, suffered casualties, and some sections of 1st Rifle Brigade were shot up in the orchards approaching Lingevres. The War Diary for 5th Royal Tank Regiment reports that:

The large open space between FOLLIOT and LINGEVRES was crossed by 'A' Sqn. On reaching the woods near LINGEVRES enemy tks opened up and two CROMWELLS and a FIREFLY were KO'd. 'A' Sqn in cooperation with 1 Pl, I Coy 1RB was ordered to proceed south through the woods to LINGEVRES. Good progress was made up to about 300x when Rifle Secs who had got too far ahead of Tk support were ambushed and suffered a few casualties. At this stage 'A' Sqdn halted, 'B' Sqdn took up a posn on the right, 'C' Sqn taking posn in high ground in the rear. It was impossible to get through the wood. Lieutenant HEYNES was on the right flank of 'A' Sqdn close to the wood and was suddenly hit by a presumed Mk V Tk, which had crept up along a sunken road unobserved.[34]

The view taken by the 1st Rifle Brigade infantry supporting the tanks was slightly different, and they report that the tanks were slow in keeping up with the infantry, who themselves were rushed by a group of forty Germans. The Germans had got a tank (described as a Tiger, but undoubtedly a Mark V Panther) into the middle of the wood, 'Which our own tanks were unable to locate and dislodge; in fact he rather saw them off, and so they had to pull back a bit bringing our people with them.'[35] In view of how 2nd Essex were next to be deployed and the effect on the battalion, the above action is of great significance.

At midday a decision was taken that one person could not easily control the advance on two axes, so Brigadier Pepper and his HQ took command of the left axis attack towards Tilly-sur-Seulles with 2nd Glosters and 2nd South Wales Borderers under command; while Brigadier Hinde of 22nd Armoured Brigade was to control the right axis outflanking Tilly-sur-Seulles to the west, with 2nd Essex under command.[36] All three of the 56th Brigade battalions' were to play an important part in the developing advance, but 2nd Essex were to suffer particularly badly.

On the left flank, 2nd Glosters had cleared Bucceels by 1300hrs, held up by the need to provide a further crossing for armour to get forward to Tilly-sur-Seulles. At this point a battalion attack supported by tanks could be put in on the town. On the right side of the road A Company with B Company mopping up led the advance. On the left flank D Company led with C Company mopping up. B and C Companies were to pass through A and D for the final assault into the town. All went well, and in a dip at Pont de la Guillette, 1,000 yards from Tilly, a halt was made to give the final orders for the attack. From here the village of Tilly could not be seen, but on the hills to the east some

tanks, which looked German, were observed. The advance continued to contact, using the cover provided by hedges and orchards either side of the road. Gordon Duffin describes contact by A Company with the first Germans holding the ground in front of Tilly:

> We were advancing through this orchard, thick banks topped by hedges, hiding a sunken lane. Its peaceful, its quiet. The sun is shining. We get so far and then there is a forward slope. I think, "I don't like the look of this," because at the bottom is another thick hedge, hiding no doubt a sunken lane with a thick hedge on the other side. So we get halfway down this forward slope and a *Spandau* opens up from the middle of this hedgerow. So down we all dive in the grass about a foot and a half high. This *Spandau* keeps spraying the field we are in.[37]

A Sherman tank is brought up and the following interchange, reminiscent of an earlier war and reported by Gordon Duffin, takes place between the 2nd Glosters officer and the tank commander:

> The lid is up on the tank and there is a head sticking out. Then our officer, Wakefield, has stood up and is throwing a salute to the Herbert in the tank! I thought, "I don't believe this!" "Hallo. What seems to be the trouble here?" Says the tank. Wakefield says, "We are in a spot of bother. See the hedgerow immediately in front? There is a *Spandau* in that hedgerow. Can you help us out?" The bloke says "Just a minute. Ah! I've got the bugger!" Well I can't believe this! How they were both not shot to pieces, but they are not![38]

The tank fires its machine guns into the hedgerow and No. 8 platoon charge with fixed bayonets. "Firing like mad and shouting our heads off. At the hedgerow the machine gun has gone. The tank had fired two or three shots from its 75mm over our heads, BOOM! BOOM! Someone says "is he going to do that at every bloody hedgerow?" The advance is continued and soon halfway across an orchard they are showered with mortar and artillery fire and have to get down.

> When this stonk is over its dark. I think, "Have I lost my sight?" But the dust and the smoke have turned it into night. This slowly clears and what was a nice tidy orchard is an absolute wreck. Every tree is shattered, the ground scarred by shell and bomb bursts. There is a ditch with a bank and hedgerow in front and we dash forward and get into it. There we stop. The Sergeant Major, who was at Dunkirk, says, "for Christ sake get into a firing position, or they will walk up and bayonet you where you lie!"[39]

On the left flank Frank Rosier of 14 Platoon, (Lieutenant Nordbruck), remembers advancing in open order, and their first problem was a wounded bull in a field! As the Platoon seemed inclined to run away from it, the officer shot it. But then the same stonk that caught A Company hit them and caused casualties. Frank remembers screaming with horror as a detached hand hit the ground in front of him.[40]

As C Company went through D Company into the town, Maurice Wells was with them. His lasting memory is of being in a house and a German tank pushing its gun through the window. "We scarpered taking our weapons but left our kit. We went back the next day to collect it! What I remember vividly was how rough it was with house-to-house fighting. As soon as we cleared one house and went on, Jerry came in behind us and we had to do it all again."[41] A German tank near the village centre fired and shattered houses around the men of C and B companies. Lieutenant Evans trying to get to this tank with a PIAT was killed. Lance Corporal Rhodes knocked out a German half-track at close range with a PIAT. The infantrymen though, had little answer to the German tanks without armoured support, which dared not enter the village. Two AVRE tanks with spigot mortars helped out, but eventually lost their tracks to anti-tank guns and the crews set fire to them and joined the foot soldiers.

The village was impossible to fight through, and although the cross roads at the centre had been reached, the Glosters could go no further. In the vicious house-to-house and street fighting, lone men and small sections stalked each other with Sten, rifle and

grenade. Section leaders and platoon commanders found difficulty in maintaining a grip, as in the close confines of the village wireless reception was poor. With ever increasing German artillery and mortar fire raining down, the village was turned into a shambles. Eventually, around dusk at 2200hrs, it was decided to withdraw the battalion and firm base on the high ground between Pont de la Guillette and Tilly. Some men had a difficult time extricating themselves from the situation, including 14 men from A Company, led by Lieutenant Levine, who laid up during the night and withdrew in the early hours from under the German noses. As in all battles the stretcher-bearers did great work, and Ted Castle working in Tilly remembers, "picking a lad up and we got him on the jeep on the stretcher racks, and got back up the road to the aid post, but when we unloaded him we found he had been hit again on the jeep and killed."[42]

The following day the infantry from 131st Queen's Brigade (now landed) attempted to take Tilly but met with little success. A Company from 2nd South Wales Borderers reinforced 2nd Glosters and they even patrolled into Tilly. But the Glosters had to withdraw to the reverse slope during 12th June because of heavy enemy mortar and artillery fire. The Queen's withdrew through the 2nd Glosters and then 2nd Glosters withdrew back to St. Bazire, through 2nd South Wales Borderers at Buceels. The Glosters firm-based for two days to rest, but even so the Battalion had to continue active patrolling. Tilly was to be held by Panzer Lehr for more than another week, despite further efforts to take it.

At Buceels until the 15th June, 2nd South Wales Borderers were at the forward edge of the battlefield, and carried out many useful patrols, some up to a company in strength went into Tilly, but the Germans remained fortified in the town, despite heavy air and artillery attacks by the British. In their turn 2nd South Wales Borderers came

under accurate mortar fire, and on 13th June their new Medical Officer from 203 Field Ambulance Unit, Captain Hearne, was killed and the Padre wounded by a 15cm artillery shell. Another Royal Army Medical Corps member, Private Abbot, was also killed. Seeing the Regimental Aid Post in some disarray the Battalion cooks set to and helped Sergeant Harrison, the Stretcher Bearer Sergeant, to restore the situation.[43] Dick Philips sergeant of the HQ Intelligence Section remembers Buceels as a desperate place:

> The shelling was really hairy there. We were crouched in this slit trench and a mortar landed two yards in front of us and we got away with it. The reaction of people is strange; chaps were laughing saying bloody hell that was close. Despite the area being devastated by shelling there was no mark on the crucifix, so many times I have seen that. I was glad to get out of that place.[44]

Typical patrols included one carried out by Lieutenant Davis southwest of Bucceels, making a reconnaissance forward with a section at night. Advancing with the section along a lane, he halted them and went on further alone. He looked through the hedge and saw a large body of Germans digging in. He sprinted back down the road and called down artillery fire on the area. He remembers Bucceels as "a nasty place."[45] Their stay at Buceels cost 2nd South Wales Borderers around ten dead and many wounded.

Over on the right flank on 11th June 2 Essex were at Bernieres Bocage. It was decided after the withdrawal of 5th Royal Tank Regiment and 1st Rifle Brigade, that 2nd Essex would be employed to take the woods near Verrieres Farm. The War Diary records that at 1200hrs the Battalion were ordered to take the wood. It is clear that the timescale for the attack gave no time for proper reconnaissance, and Colonel Higson was unhappy. The Battalion 2 i/c at the time, Major Elliott, states that he was not sure if the village of Lingevres, a short distance further southeast on the main east to west road was included in the plans, but that this was key to the position. The Essex were given

further time to prepare their attack. The Battalion 'O' (Order) Group drove hastily to higher ground near Folliot to observe the area, but the trip was not worthwhile as 'the tops of all woods and orchards look alike in this country at a distance of 2000 yards and in this particular case the line of orchards to our south were on a slight reverse slope.'[46]

Having not been helped by this reconnaissance, they returned to the Battalion who were being formed up to the east of Bernieres Bocage. A Company (left), and C Company (right), were to lead with B Company and D Company in the rear. Lieutenant Colonel Higson went forward between the leading companies with a Tactical HQ, and Major Barlow went forward between B and D Companies. The ground they were to attack over was the only open ground in the area, consisting mainly of cornfields. The supporting artillery fire 'was comprehensive.' Tanks were supposed to follow as soon as the orchards were cleared.[47] Obviously the lessons of that morning were not lost on the armour. There was reluctance too, in moving up the Carriers of the anti-tank and mortar platoons over the open ground. There was over a kilometre of open ground to cover before the orchards were reached. Charles Benford's view, Sergeant of the Carrier Section was:

> They knew there were German tanks in the village, (Lingevres) beyond the wood. My particular brief was on the right flank at the rear and if there was enfilade fire from that direction, I had to try and contain it. In actual fact there wasn't anything there. Everything was out in front. Going across the cornfield the troops were more or less exposed. What surprised us was that the attack took place without armoured support.[48]

Major Pat Barrass, C Company, remembers that they moved forward in open order, 2 platoons up with the Company HQs in the middle of each set of three platoons. They had to cross very open ground, a cornfield and a smaller green field before reaching the wood. Moving forward through a cornfield in front of the wooded area

nothing happened until halfway across. Then "all hell broke loose".[49] Artillery, mortar and *Spandau* machine gun fire landed amongst the troops. A fair number of casualties started to be taken. The men ran at and into the woods, firing from the hip and with bayonets fixed. At the edge of the woods they started to take cover, as the Germans had run from the area. Looking back men saw upturned rifles stuck in the ground, showed the position of the dead and wounded. Eric Watson Commanding 'B' Company was wounded in the leg.

> A couple of us put him in a ditch for the stretcher-bearers to collect. Incidentally I cannot speak too highly of our stretcher-bearers; mature ex-bandsmen. They carried out their often-dangerous duties, magnificently throughout the Campaign. I noticed a sergeant walking around, less his helmet organising his men. At the back of his neck, beneath his dark hair, I could clearly see two bullets embedded in his neck. I hope he survived.[50]

Tony Mansi, a Corporal with D Company, explains his view at the start of the attack, and how at first everything went well. "The corn was waist high, and as you looked across you could see the whole battalion. We were lucky enough to be in the rear, as you looked you could see what looked like a lot more men than there was, as we were all spread out."[51] Two Me. 109's flew low across the Battalion, one crashing the other side of A Company. Suddenly there was firing from in front of them. Through the corn Tony noticed the Germans had cut what looked like two or three tracks and on them were firing a fixed line machine gun. "You could hear the bullets as they whizzed across and see a few men going down."[52] They finally got through the cornfield to a track, which separated the wood and the cornfield and got into the wood at the right hand side. They were told that B Company was in trouble and were to go in and help them. "The wood had some dips and hollows in it for cover and was not too thick, not really like an orchard either. Our way out was to be down this track."[53] As they made their way back onto the track they were heavily mortared by six barrelled moaning

minnies. "There was nowhere to go, you could dive into the cornfield where there was no cover or this ditch at the edge of the wood. That's where I went and dived straight in."[54] The mortar bombs exploded all along the track and when the explosions had stopped Corporal Mansi looked up and saw that Lieutenant Cannon and four or five others had been killed. The Padre, Father William Thomas used his own body to shield the wounded out in the open as best he could. His brave and unselfish actions over the next 24 hours were to win him a Military Cross. Lieutenant Colonel Higson too went forward under fire and brought back wounded men. Corporal Toni Mansi gives an excellent account of how this close and deadly fighting continued:

> We made our way down this ditch spreading out and starting to dig into this dry ditch to get ourselves lower. There was a lot of noise, a lot of firing and I moved further down the ditch as it was getting crowded as chaps; feeling more comfortable in the company of another soldier; bunched together even though told to spread out. In moving down that's where I found Major Petre (OC D Company, replacement for Major Ayres drowned on Exercise Fabius) who was on top of the bank. So I pulled his body down into the ditch so that it wouldn't get hit any more, although he was dead. Suddenly small arms fire came along the ditch. A bullet passed in front of me and went into the leg of a chap third along, and at the same time some bullets went behind me, and into Sparrow who was sitting next to me, through his pack and through his mess tins. There was nothing we could do, even when we saw the tanks we couldn't fire a rifle at it. We could hear the tanks and saw them. Lieutenant Cooper as I remember was standing up, and saw the tanks and called for a PIAT gun, but we never had a PIAT gun or chap! Then I remember seeing Lieutenant Cooper making his way back up the track.[55]

At least two Mark V Panther tanks engaged the Essex men out in the open. They are likely to have retired back into the woods, as their own infantry didn't support them. A Company seem to have been the initial target of the tanks and they found that their PIATs were inadequate and quickly ran out of bombs. The tanks seemed to be firing solid shot, not the high explosive that was more dangerous to infantry. In a sang froid way it was reported, 'it was often necessary to side step to avoid being run over.'[56] The Germans sent in another counter-attack and Lieutenant Colonel Higson purposefully

brought down British artillery fire on their own position. He believed his men in slit trenches and ditches would survive, and the Germans in the open would not. When darkness fell they were attacked again. "Half-track flamethrowers came up close with their terrifying weapons. One was knocked out and the Germans retired. I remember they were quite near, their lurid colours lighting up the trees."[57] Private Albert Daines of D Company recalls the fear of attack by this awful weapon:

> Then they had a tracked flamethrower after us. If it wasn't for Lieutenant Price I reckon we would all be dead. He picked up a PIAT and knocked this flamethrower out and but for him God knows what would have happened. Before you wouldn't have thought he was the type to do such a thing.[58]

By 0100 hrs with no armour support, and many wireless sets smashed, contact could not be established between Battalion and HQ 22nd Armoured Brigade, or their own rear link at Bernieres Bocage. So the 2i/c, Major Elliott, was instructed to find HQ 22nd Armoured Brigade at Jerusalem and request armour support by first light. Arriving at Jerusalem on foot, Major Elliot found they had moved. Purloining a jeep from a junior officer he went across country to Bernieres Bocage and made contact with the Adjutant of 2nd Essex, Captain Townrow. Townrow had been worried that the rifle companies had been completely overcome by the enemy, and had already sent forward the anti-tank guns. From here Major Elliott went back and eventually found Brigadier Pepper, at 56th Brigade HQ at Folliot and explained the situation to him. This is reported in the Brigade War Diary as being at 0700hrs, but may have been earlier.

Brigadier Pepper immediately set about organising more support, and later four M10 self-propelled anti-tank guns added to the 2 Essex defence. Finally Major Elliott anxious to return to the Battalion went direct by Jeep down a track from Folliot and under observation from the Germans. 'There were still several of our wounded lying out

with the many dead round the NE corner of the orchards. The enemy probably mistook me for a medical attendant, there was no firing.'[59]

After gaining what sleep he could during the night, and escaping the "venomous flame-thrower that seemed to go towards B Company,"[60] Corporal Tony Mansi tried to find out how many men in his platoon were left. "One chap came along and said they wanted the platoon leader to report to HQ. Well that was me, because although I was only a corporal, Lieutenant Cannon and the Sergeant Major were dead and Sergeant Chandler was wounded."[61] Colonel Higson was only a couple of hundred yards back in a hollow and asked him what the situation was. Mansi had only counted nine soldiers and himself out of 36. Higson put him in charge of the remains of the platoon and they were later told they were to withdraw under the cover of a smokescreen.

In the meantime the Padre came around asking for volunteers, as there were a large number of wounded out in the wood, including Germans, and he wanted help to get to them. "As far as I know where we were laying, no-one went with him."[62] Two Germans came into view quite early in the morning and a Bren gun team from another platoon killed one and wounded the other who was left, "there for hours shouting help, or Kamerad, until the Padre went out there. There was no telling when you went out to help them if you would be shot at. It was in most chaps' minds to stay put. If they needed help that was hard luck."[63]

Phillip Maillou was with the anti-tank guns and remembers being suddenly ordered to go forward that evening:

> So we all lined up, six guns on six Carriers and followed the Platoon Commander down by the side of these hedges and straight across some fields.

> Down by the wood a Sherman tank commander, (*probably one of the M10's sent in as support*); reported to the 2nd Essex Carrier commander that a German tank was close and he had backed off. We all got the guns spaced out. It was pretty horrible; we could hear the shouts of the wounded in front. The next morning we made sure we were in a decent position with the guns and camouflaged the area up and not a lot except shelling going on. The guns were left as a shield while the Battalion withdrew, and then the guns completed a textbook tactical withdrawal, with each Carrier and gun pulling back through the guns in an orderly way. We were last to leave. You can bet your life we had everything ready to go bar hooking up the guns! Anyway we were just finally hooking them up when some solid shot came flying over. The Germans were firing in our general direction when we started up the Carriers. We moved back with our heads pulled right down under the rim of the Carrier and passed one of our Carriers stuck in the ditch, which we eventually got out.[64]

Before 2nd Essex withdrew a surprising change had taken place that morning, as Major Elliott was placed in command of the Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Higson seems to have been removed from command for not bringing up the anti-tank guns with the initial advance. One could ask if this is fair? The 2nd Essex were sent forward without armour support, over open ground with their objective on the reverse (unseen) slope. It would have been a great risk to advance the Carriers and anti-tank guns. Carriers were only lightly armoured and open topped. Even German mortar fire might have destroyed them, let alone the powerful tanks and artillery of the Germans. There remains the question of what happened to the armour support that was promised? None materialised. Without armour support the attack on this wood by infantry only -already reported as impossible by 5th Royal Tank Regiment that morning- seems unjustified.

The lack of direction and help during the attack from 22nd Armoured Brigade that had 2nd Essex under command is unfathomable. The moving of the Armoured Brigade HQ during the day, without apparent attempt to inform Lieutenant Colonel Higson, is evidence of a lack of grip from above. The most likely explanation is that 2nd Essex were just left to get on with it because at this time, after a deal of dithering, a plan was being hatched to launch 7th Armoured Division, including 22nd Armoured Brigade,

in a wide right hook west then south to Villers Bocage and on to Everecy. The dedicated supporting 131st Infantry Brigade was now available and this plan fitted the original concept of an armoured thrust capturing Villers Bocage by the end of D-Day.

Doubtless the plan appealed to the 'dash' of the armour. Secondly quick exploitation south, through Tilly-sur-Seulles, by 7th Armoured and 50th Division was by now clearly impossible as Panzer Lehr continued to block the way. Finally a weakness had been identified by intelligence in the German lines that an armoured thrust could quickly exploit, between American units and the 50th Division front. Even so it seems to have taken the direct actions from General Dempsey to get this exploitation of German defensive weakness underway. In any event once underway it took a mere four hours on 12th June to get 7th Armoured Division on the move. This whole exploitation was stopped in its tracks around Villers Bocage, famously due to the efforts of 101st Heavy SS Panzer Battalion. From this time Generals Bucknall (30 Corps Commander), Erskine (7th Armoured Division Commander) and Brigadier Hinde (22nd Armoured Brigade) star waned in Normandy leading to their eventual dismissal within only a few weeks.[65]

The 2nd Essex lost at least 150 men killed, wounded and captured from the approximately 500 that made up the rifle battalions. A memorial to the action has been raised on the main road just west of Lingevres and immediately south of where the action took place. Three markers outline the actual battlefield area, which today is called 'Essex Wood.' The Essex withdrew under orders at 2030 hrs on 12th June to Folliot, where they arrived by 0030 hrs on 13th June. Despite needing rest and reinforcement urgently they were still within artillery range of the enemy and even rifle fire occasionally came close. The pity was that they had taken the wooded area near Verrieres and by withdrawing them it allowed the Germans to re-occupy the wood.

Within a few days the re-taking of this area was to cost the Durham Light Infantry very dear.

By the afternoon of 15th June 2nd Essex were in Buceels relieving 2nd South Wales Borderers. 2nd South Wales Borderers went back to Ellon for ten days of rest. Meanwhile 2nd Essex came under temporary command of 151st Brigade. At Buceels the shelling was still bad and 2nd Essex lost their second Signals Officer of the campaign on 16th June, when Lieutenant Fradin was killed at Battalion HQ, along with two attached signallers from 151st Brigade and Brigadier Walton of 151st Brigade, who was visiting, was wounded. Germans were reported having returned to Pont de la Guillette, and 2nd Essex snipers kept a watch on the bridge area. During this time (13th – 16th June) only 28 replacements appear to have been sent to the battalion.[66]

Also under temporary command of 151st Brigade on 14th June were 2nd Glosters, who were needed to help 6th and 9th Battalions Durham Light Infantry, who had taken heavy casualties, fighting for the area of Verrieres and village of Lingevres. Between them the Durham Light Infantry battalions had lost a total of around 80 men killed, and their armour support from 4/7 Dragoon Guards had lost 12 men killed. Despite a heavy air attack on Lingevres, including rocket firing Typhoons, one battalion of the Durham Light Infantry were reported to be nearly surrounded and something of a tank battle took place in the narrow village roads. 2nd Glosters were sent in to relieve the pressure, and their A and D Companies formed blocking positions southwest and southeast of the village.

B Company, led by Major Basil Stephens, was approaching on their bicycles along a road with two Sherman tanks for support. The company laid down their bicycles

before a slight rise in the ground. Moving across country now, the two Sherman tanks were knocked out going through a hedgerow by an 88mm gun. Frank Clarke had the signallers' radio and asked for more support. More tanks appeared to help, together with an artillery barrage. Also three Typhoons flew in and rocketed two German tanks, to the delight of the Glosters.

B Company HQ now came up, and the Company dug in and firm based in this area. Suddenly Frank Clarke thought he noticed movement in a gateway in the hedge. Observing closely, a second German dived across the gap. Alerting Major Stephens, Frank's platoon was ordered to investigate. Upon carefully approaching the hedge, two German soldiers supporting two wounded Durham Light Infantrymen appeared and offered surrender. Altogether forty other Germans appeared from the hedge to give up. Basil Stephens's surprised remark was "where did you get them from!" At the end of the action when returning to retrieve their bicycles they discovered a further problem; the Sherman tanks had flattened them all! That was the end of cycling in Normandy for the Glosters![67]

Half a mile to the east of Lingevres the youthful high spirits of Frank Rosier, 2nd Glosters, could have caused calamity. His section had to approach the village and had orders if attacked not to fight, but to report and return to their lines. Approaching across country to reach a roadside Crucifix, half a mile east of Lingevres, the section took shelter behind a wall. There were a small number of buildings in this area. Frank decided to dodge across the road and into a shop. He came out pleased as punch with some booty, but a German tank, which promptly shelled and destroyed the shop, had noticed either him or his section. Franks' sergeant, George Frame, got them to move in no uncertain terms, and when in a slightly better position reminded Frank forcibly "we

are not on a bloody scheme any more. Grow up!"[68] On 15th June the Battalion returned to the Ellon area to rest.

At Buceels on 16th June, 2nd Essex were being pushed forward to attempt another hard task – the taking of Tilly-sur-Seulles. Patrols sent forward late in the day reported no enemy movement on the slopes south and southeast of Pont de la Guillette. It was a miserable time there, and Phillip Maillou of the anti-tank platoon, remembers they needed an armoured bulldozer to get them through the bank and off the Bayeux road where they dug in the guns. It was pouring with rain and the German barrage was constant.

> We were really keeping our heads down. It was a miserable time. I can remember an issue of rum. We did a guard of two on and two off. I remember my turn was at 4 o'clock in the morning and when I got up there was no one on guard! If an officer had come along we would all have been shot at dawn![69]

On 17th June orders were given to take Tilly, with the attack starting at 1600hrs. Helped by a troop of AVRES tanks and the usual artillery, the battalion advanced on either side of the road and dug in that night in a crescent covering the northern approaches to the village. The following day C Company got into the village followed by the other Companies, and were involved in house-to-house fighting and clearing for most of the day, and throughout the night. A feature of this was the extensive use made by the Germans of different mines and booby traps. Even as far back behind the Essex at Pont de la Guillette, Germans still infiltrated back. Charles Benford of the Carrier Platoon tells how they lost their officer Captain Harrison. "A four man section of Pioneers were sent out onto the bridge to lift mines. On the other side of the bridge was a German sniper. The sniper killed two and pinned the other two down."[70] Another section went out to try and get them back, but dared not approach, and they got pinned

down. Finally it seems Captain Harrison decided he could get the men and went onto the bridge. The sniper killed him. "He was a bit of a daredevil."[71]

In Tilly itself, Corporal Harry Conn moved forward towards the crossroads with his platoon, house clearing as they went. A *Spandau* opened fire causing a brick splinter to cut Harry's temple. Throwing a phosphorous grenade into the *Spandau* team, they shot some down as they ran away screaming. A German tank appeared and opened fire. Corporal Conn asked for a PIAT, but it was confessed that they had all been left behind due to weight. They stayed in the ruins all night. The morale of some of the men was dropping and Harry punched one man who panicked trying to get out. Harry sent a Lance Corporal to get help but he stood on an anti-personnel mine.[72]

Corporal Toni Mansi did not get far into Tilly. His section was carrying out a flanking attack on a house on the outskirts of the town, with another section doing a frontal assault. An AVRE fired three bombs into the house, and on the third bomb the section moved in. Corporal Mansi was patted on the back to go by the Platoon officer. Mansi got up and went over a little hedge with some wire, and could see the house with one or two trees in front and slit trenches in the garden:

> As I got to the slit trench I remember firing down the trench. As I went to fire all I remember is an explosion, a terrific blast and that was it. I knew no more until it was late evening time. I think that we had been left for dead. When I came to, I was face down. The sleeve of my jacket and legs of my trousers had gone where the blast had taken away the material. As I lay there I could see my arm was all covered in blood, there were leaves and grass all stuck to it. I had no helmet, and as I came to I tried to look around, and I could see a pair of boots and hear a voice calling out for help. As I moved around I could see it was the chap following me as I moved in. I had caught the blast from an anti-personnel mine that leapt out of the ground and caught me up each leg, one arm and buttocks, he was behind me and he got it full face. He was calling for help and I joined him. It seemed ages but suddenly a medic appeared and I said, "don't come in its booby-trapped," and you could see some of these wires. He said, "we'll get you out" and he dragged me back and got me up. He cut stuff off me,

> and shook white powder over my wounds and bandaged me up. They did the chap next to me and he had a very bad face, terrible, and then after that a jeep appeared. I said to this medic "did we capture the house?" He told me yes and that everything was OK. I told him to take rations etc. out of my pack as that wasn't going with me. The two of us were put on the jeep and taken back.[73]

By 0800 on 19th June it was being reported that the enemy had withdrawn from Tilly, but the Germans were shelling it heavily, and mines were proving a deadly problem. But the town had finally been taken from Panzer Lehr. From 1400hrs on 20th June, 2nd Essex were gradually withdrawn and went for rest to Ellon. The last of B Company was withdrawn under cover of darkness. Units of the Durham Light Infantry took their place.[74] It has been written, "the lyrical name of Tilly-sur-Seulles became a synonym for fear and endless death."[75] All three of 56th Brigade's battalions had fought hard and suffered terribly in this area of Normandy just a few kilometres square.

50th and 7th Armoured Divisions had taken eleven days from Bayeux to cover the twelve kilometres down the Tilly road and capture the town. Units had also advanced to the west, and the lateral road from Tilly to Lingevres and on to La Belle Epine was finally in British hands. But the initial target of 10th June was still a kilometre and a half south of Tilly. The next lateral road from Le Pont de Juvigny to Hottot and beyond was firmly out of reach. However the Panzer Lehr Division had been badly mauled by the men of 50th Division and 7th Armoured Division and the German threat of a drive to the coast wrecked. The commander of Panzer Lehr, General Fritz Bayerlein, wrote after the war:

> The British counter-attacked next day (10th June). They massed an unbelievable concentration of heavy artillery and I was glad when we finally were out of it. We pulled out of Tilly on 15th June and the British filled the gap. My chance to drive to the sea was lost. We pulled back south of Aunay to regroup. We had lost about 100 tanks to the British. Half my striking force was gone.[76]

It was more than two weeks since the landing craft were loaded in England, and for the first time all three Battalions of 56th Brigade were out of the line, able to rest. They had each lost many men killed and wounded, while others had been taken out of the fight shell-shocked or 'bomb happy' - a term often used. How had they fared as untried units in their first major actions? Firstly it can be appreciated that in each major battle the men stuck to their tasks, despite the shocking scenes and loss of comrades around them. Secondly it is clear that in each major confrontation, the units often attacked without adequate reconnaissance being carried out, and often without sufficient prior planning and preparation being possible. They often had tremendous artillery support, but final assaults took place close in, and a determined enemy came out of his slit trench or building and fought back hard. In these initial contacts the men often fought without close armour support. Had both arms, infantry and armour, been proficient at working together as the German army did, casualties among both infantry and armour may well have been lower. Finally, they often faced an enemy that equalled, or possibly on occasion outnumbered them, and the important point here is that it was 56th Brigade doing the attacking, when it is often considered that an attacker needs a superiority of three to one at least over the defender. As time went on, it was increasingly and inevitably the German defender, behind earth bank or building, who knew and had prepared the ground. Brigadier Pepper seems to have had a good grip on situations as they arose, and this is borne out by his leadership, and examples of his immediate action during the battles at Sully, Essex Wood and the attacks on Tilly-sur-Seulles.

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Chapter Six.

Holding the Right Flank – Desperate Fighting in the Bocage.

June 21st to 8th August 1944.

By June 21st 1944 all three Battalions and Brigade HQ were concentrated in the area of Ellon for rest and refurbishment. That day the Brigadier visited the battalions between 1700hrs and 1900hrs and the War Diary reports that he 'gave a talk on the present situation on 2nd Army Front.'[1] Casualties sustained by 56th Brigade up to this time were as follows: Brigade HQ: 2 other ranks, 2nd South Wales Borderers: 9 officers and 144 other ranks, 2nd Glosters: 3 officers and 53 other ranks and 2nd Essex: 8 officers and 195 other ranks.[2] The Brigade War Diary just gives the list as casualties and does not distinguish between dead and wounded or different categories of wounded. The War Diary of 203 Field Ambulance, the unit under command of 56th Brigade, mentions receiving heavy casualties on 8/9th June (2nd South Wales Borderers at Sully) and 2nd Essex and 2nd Glosters on 11th June (Verrieres and Tilly), but no actual figures are given. Also an illuminating entry from 203 Field Ambulance War Diary on 15th June states, 'the men of the battalions are definitely showing signs of stress.'[3]

This is not surprising considering that the battalions had been in permanent action for eight days by then, including some very harrowing periods. Brigadier Hargest,[4] the official observer with 50th Division, reported on 21st June 1944 that 'the morale of 50 Div is still high after 15 days of fighting. The men are tired and need a rest – the present cold wet spell is very trying.' But by 25th June he was reporting 'the men are tired after 18 days unrelieved strain. The advances have no impetus. The English (UK) soldier will accept losses without losing morale

provided he sees some results – but this niggling is hard on him.'[5] The strain imposed on the men of the fighting arms in 50th (N) Division was worsening because of the unrelenting nature of fighting in the bocage. With the situation bogged down through tenacious German defence and the type of countryside successful tactical manoeuvring became very difficult and costly in casualties.

The Battalion War Diaries vary in the depth of their reporting of events and rarely seem to be able to keep up with the casualty figures. 2nd South Wales Borderers War Diary does not report at all on exact numbers of casualties or reinforcements during June 1944. The War Diary of 2nd Glosters gives 71 reinforcements arriving by 25th June, but only 40 casualties between 6th June to 25th June. The latter figure is almost certainly inaccurate given the casualties reported in the Brigade War Diary and their heavy involvement between Bayeux and Tilly-sur-Seulles over this period. 2nd Essex report 147 casualties for the same period, but this does not include the estimated 150 casualties at the Essex Wood action. Their War Diary reports receiving 202 reinforcements in this period.

These discrepancies can be understood when consideration is given to the fact that the officer writing the War Diary was the Battalion Intelligence Officer, probably a Lieutenant in his late teens or early twenties, whose main job was to provide briefings on situations to the senior officers in the battalion. He gained this information from the immediate interrogation of prisoners, information received from the forward companies and intelligence from higher formations. He would have had no formal training in writing the War Diary, and just picked this up as one of his jobs. Add this to the shelling and mortaring taking place on HQ areas only a

few hundred yards behind the front lines, and it becomes clear that to be able to keep information accurately became impossible at times. Considering the worries about the reinforcement situation touched on in Chapter 2, it would be unlikely that any infantry battalion would rise above or even reach its establishment figure at this time.

During June 1944, the British and Canadian casualty figures from all causes were lower than the expected figure calculated prior to the invasion. They have been given as 24,698, of which 3,356 were killed. This means that for every man killed over six were wounded. There were many fewer casualties taken on D-Day than projected, but by the end of July 1944 they were exceeding estimates. The reinforcement situation during June was good with the number of reinforcements dispatched from the UK reaching 38,000.[6] However now in the bocage, and with a series of operations planned by Montgomery chiefly to outflank or encircle Caen, the casualty figures would be heavy, and from the end of June the reinforcement situation for British forces grew steadily worse and reached crisis point by August. Gordon Duffin of 2nd Glosters remembers a conversation with his best friend during June 1944:

> Half to three quarters the people we knew disappeared. If they were wounded or killed or just moved to different units, even Companies within our own battalion, we never saw them again. We had only been in Normandy just over a week, and I find my mate Spike scribbling on the back of a fag packet. I say to him "You won't get a bet on here Spike, I don't know where you will find a bookmaker." He replied, "I am not writing that out kid. Check them figures and see if that's correct". So I check them and that it looks right to me. "What is it?" "Its how long we've got over here". "Well you can't know that" I said. "Oh yes, the figures tell us. That is the casualties we have had up to now, that's the number in the rifle companies, so we shall all be gone in six weeks."[7]

A very similar story is told by Stan Daines of 2nd Essex that one day in their slit trench, sometime after the battle at Essex Wood, Stan saw his best friend and No.2 on their Bren gun "Blondie" Goodyear writing on the back of a cigarette packet. Stan remarked that it was difficult to place a bet from where they were; Blondie replied that he was working out their possibility of survival, which according to him was six weeks. Stan 'Blondie' Goodyear was killed by mortar fire on 2nd August 1944, and Stan Daines wounded and captured two days later.[8] They lasted three weeks longer than Blondie's' calculation, but even before their death or capture, each had already received 'minor' wounds requiring medical attention.

Of course some men lasted a short time, some longer. Some replacements lasted only a day or two or even minutes. Gordon Duffin lasted sixteen weeks between woundings and one of his friends went through until a month before the end of the war and then went 'bomb happy' and had to be sent back. Ted Castle states, "In three months in France the battalion (2nd Glosters) changed you know. They (The replacements) had had a few months training and we had been training for years."[9] In fact the majority of men interviewed for this study were wounded or injured at least once, and a number up to three times. They just kept getting sent back. Eventually there were not enough trained infantry for the conflict and men from all arms, and even Naval and Air Force men, found themselves quickly re-trained as infantrymen destined for the Army. Repeatedly asking for a comb out of Royal Marines aboard ships and on shore stations to add to the infantry, by December 1944 Churchill, reflecting on, and trying to stop the break up of 50th Division, was complaining to his Chiefs of Staff that 'one set of men are sent back again and again.'[10]

One thing that had changed within the Brigade was that it had become an experienced unit. It had stood stern tests and came through them as well and sometimes better, than other infantry units. "We were no longer green; rather we were troops who had been fully seasoned very quickly"[11] Frank Rosier believes that "the British soldier was often fairly naïve in combat. But the longer you lasted, something definitely changed in you after a few weeks of combat and your chances of survival increased."[12] Montgomery had brought back to Britain three veteran divisions to take part in the Normandy Campaign, 50th Northumbrian (Infantry) Division, 51st Highland (Infantry) Division and 7th Armoured Division (Desert Rats). Criticism has been levelled at especially two of these Divisions, 51st Highland and 7th Armoured, "Neither the Highlanders nor the Desert Rats seem to have been prepared for the difficult fighting in the bocage, where they appeared weary and frequently over cautious."[13] It is worth pointing out that these criticisms have not been made against 50th Division or the US 1st Division similarly brought back by Bradley. A discussion of this is beyond this study, but pertinent to the success in action of 56th Infantry Brigade in June 1944 are these words by Major General H. Essame, an officer in the First World War and Brigadier in Normandy, when outlining the difference between the experienced units and those units who had been training in UK since Dunkirk:

> They (the experienced units) tended to adopt a patronising attitude towards the rest of the Army who had been training in Britain since Dunkirk, training so strenuously that to many of them the prospect of real fighting, as contrasted with shadow boxing, had come with profound relief. They were in fact, the best trained and the best equipped troops who ever left the shores of Britain.[14]

For the men of 56th Brigade, a few days were spent in resting and refurbishing equipment. By now mobile bath units and the town Public Baths at Bayeux were open for the use of troops, and this largely undamaged town, was a centre for rest and relaxation. Between 16th and 19th June 2nd Glosters went to Bayeux for baths, where even here the tension of battle could show itself, "Now Bayeux is completely different than D+1. There's bunting all up, packed with more service men than I had ever seen. Everyone is smart, flashing and gleaming. Then there are us straight out of the slit trench."[15] Sitting down outside the Municipal Baths they dozed until Gordon Duffin received a kick. Looking up he saw three guardsmen "all done up to the nines." One guardsman looking down made fun of them. "Glosters, I have heard of county regiments, but I didn't know they were so filthy!" Another Gloster invited Duffin to "Shoot the bugger Duff!" The Bren gun was cocked and aimed. A timeserving Sergeant from the Guards apologised and defused the situation by giving his men a very serious talking to and explaining to the Glosters that "they (the guardsmen) are green and have only just landed."[16]

Other men have better memories of Bayeux. From the diary of Lieutenant Somerville (2nd South Wales Borderers), "We found the town absolutely packed with troops and De Gaulle had just been there and all the civilians were out in the streets. Le Lion D'Or was going strong and I managed to get a bath and a marvellous dinner."[17] Rank gave the possibility of a different experience than that of the ordinary soldier but even so Private Bill Speake, also of 2nd South Wales Borders, found himself sitting in a small packed café, drinking green coloured liquor and enjoying himself. On leaving he had not gone very far when he realised he had left his brand new sniper's rifle behind, and he returned at 'the double' to the

café. Before he reached it two Military Policemen posed the question "Is this your rifle son?" and upon receiving the affirmative instead of the expected arrest, Bill was told "Well son look after it as it is the only thing that will look after you out here!" With that the Military Police returned to the café.[18] Back at the Municipal Baths, the French attendant had tears streaming down his face, as he listened to a hundred Welshmen singing 'a song from the tune of which he thought was 'The Marseillaise' but whose words he luckily could not understand.'[19] Concerts by 'Stars in Battledress' were also held, and for a few days at least, the men were not face to face with the enemy, though in earshot of the battle. Normal battalion training and events were re-established as the 2nd Essex War Diary reports that Bren Guns were zeroed-in at a nearby quarry and training carried out to improve the battalion snipers working as a team. Parades and a morning service of Holy Communion were also re-established.

This near idyll could not last, and 2nd South Wales Borderers were moved to La Senaudiere on 23rd June to fill a gap in 69th Brigade positions on the lateral road between Tilly-sur-Seulles and La Belle Epine that had been the objective of nearly a fortnight earlier, now finally reached. By late June the Brigade had a new task centred to the southwest of Bayeux, around an area of thick bocage country named the Bois de Saint Germain and a village named on maps as Granville. Battalion Senior and HQ Section officers were involved in reconnaissance and planning for the move. Maps today give a name of Crauville for this village. In 1944 the woodland of the Bois de Saint Germain was more extensive than today and has been described by 2nd South Wales Borderers War Diary as causing much anxiety, especially as it was large dense and gloomy. Cattle in this area added more

problems by roaming around and setting off trip wires and mines. 'A great number were killed and gave off an appalling Stench as they lay in the summer sun swollen like toy balloons with their legs thrust out stiffly. As a result the area was full of flies and bluebottles.'[20]

Interpretation of aerial photography pronounced the wood empty. This was not the case as was soon discovered. German camouflage and capacity for concealed movement was excellent in this area and usually throughout the Norman countryside. In fact the area proved to be well defended with numerous machine gun posts and heavily wired and mined strong points. By 1430hrs on 28th June 2nd Essex had established their company positions, taking over from 7th Green Howards. At midnight on the same day 2nd Glosters established themselves at Parfouru l'Eclin, relieving 1st Rifle Brigade, and on 1st July, 2nd South Wales Borderers had moved into position between 2nd Essex and 2nd Glosters, at a small hamlet called La Butte. Once again 56th Brigade held the right flank of the British Army in an arc of three kilometres in length, from west of Parfouru L'Eclin, to just south of Langrage, thus flanking this strong German position. As it turned out the Brigade was to remain here for the whole month of July.

Moving a complete battalion at once, including the Carriers, battalion transport and extra transport, was a complicated procedure. This was usually organised by the Battalion Motor Transport Officer or 'MTO'. Drivers had to know routes, speed and the signing on the routes. 'Operation Ocean Swell,' is a set of orders for the move, which remains with the 2nd Glosters War Diary. The whole battalion appears to have moved at once, with the Carriers leading in the order, Carrier platoon, mortar

platoon, anti-tank platoon and pioneer platoon. These were followed by Troop Carrying Vehicles (TCV's) in order Battalion HQ, A, B, C, and D Companies. Each company was moved in six TCV's, and the Battalion HQ required two lorries. Eight other lorries carried the battalion kit, ammunition, food and other sundry items. Altogether probably over seventy vehicles were on the move. Consider that 2nd Essex, 203 Field Ambulance and other Brigade supporting units all moved on 28th June, and then the units they were replacing moved out, one gets an idea of the logistical problems involved. That this could be achieved in daylight and along narrow country roads was thanks to excellent planning and air superiority. Arrangements were made for the 2nd Glosters rifle companies to embuss in the Support Company field and drivers were ordered that 'It is essential that all TCV's move fast and move together in order to avoid blocking the roads behind the debussing point.'[21] Signs indicating 'Prepare to Debus' and 'Debussing point' were put in position at the end of the journey to prepare each lorry load for immediate dismount and dispersal.

To begin with the battalions were involved in dangerous patrol work to find out where the enemy positions were and their strength. In country such as this where you could walk right up to a well-camouflaged enemy without seeing him, this was nerve-wracking work. Gordon Duffin and Ernie Partridge of 2nd Glosters give a good idea of what a daylight patrol meant to the infantryman in bocage countryside:

> So off you go up the road. Now you have a choice, do you go up the middle of the road, where you will be a sitting duck as you turn the bend, because that's where they will be? Do you walk in the ditch and tread on a mine or trip wire? It's up to you, please yourself. Some would choose the ditch, tread

> on a mine or not. Some would choose the road and be shot or not, whatever their luck was. That is called 'Advance to contact'. You don't know where they are except they are in front. So you have to walk forward until you are shot at.[22]

Ernie Partridge describes the patrol where he ended wounded. "Our Corporal, who was a nice chap, said to me "would you be scout today?" "Christ" I said "why me?" He said, "well someone's got to do it!" "I said "if I do it today I won't get it tomorrow".[23] Some grassland was crossed as far as possible off the road. Ernie was leading about forty yards in ahead of the first Section of the Platoon. He realised the ground had been mined, as all the grass on top had dried, and so he stopped the first section and indicated the danger by hand signals. He carried on down to a little track with the Platoon Commander and first section following. When crossing the track he saw a shed and signalled the section to stop and get down while he went forward to check. At this point the section were only about 20 metres behind. "Up to the shed, before I had time to shoot, this Jerry bayonets me through the leg. The men behind shot him down. I had crept up and surprised him really. I don't remember a lot after that as the medical blokes came up and gave me a jab."[24]

Patrols were also sent out to capture Germans for unit identification and interrogation purposes. The War Diary of 2nd Glosters still holds a number of patrol reports which are very useful in understanding why and where patrols were sent out. One particular patrol led by Lieutenant Burton on 3rd July received congratulations on its success from no less than General Bucknall at XXX Corps HQ. It was a daylight patrol starting at 1210hrs and returning at 1355hrs. Its purpose was to find out the strength of the enemy at a location about 500 metres away and involved intricate movement along hedges, over a bridge and along buildings. The patrol was

described as a fighting patrol and consisted of Lieutenant Burton and thirteen men. As was sometimes the case an artillery shoot had been arranged to cover the patrol by isolating the enemy position and covering the withdrawal. It is a straightforward report that nevertheless brings home both the brutality of war and the high degree of training and commitment needed to complete the task successfully. After getting close enough to observe the enemy position 'I (Lieutenant Burton) doubled across the road and saw two Boche in a slit trench. I tried to pull them out, but they wouldn't come. A burst of Sten persuaded them, so I dragged them out.'[25] One ran across the road as ordered, but the other, who was wounded, either would not or could not, so he was shot. In the meantime another German had appeared and crossed the road as ordered, but then lay down and refused to move. "I tried everything possible to get him to move but he refused." He too was shot. The patrol returned with the remaining prisoner and German machine gun from the position.[26]

Another 2nd Gloster, Len Cox, was wounded on one of these early patrols sent to recce 'Burnt Out Farm.' (La Couarde Farm today). They were sent to see if the Germans had it occupied or not:

> During the afternoon we were sent on patrol. We went through this gate and up into the field and they fired a *Spandau* at us. I hit the deck then. I crawled down the field through a load of old thistles. The *Spandau* gunner saw the thistles moving, I had stopped for a breather and he hit me in the back next to my spine. What happened to the others I will never know, they had all gone except Gunga. The Corporal had been killed. Gunga went and got his Sten gun. I actually managed to run back! My wound felt numb at the time and only later gave a lot of pain. When I got back the lads dressed it for me, and a jeep came up and put me on a stretcher on top and took me back to the Battalion RAP. The doctor said we will give this man a cup of tea. It was one of the best cups of tea I had ever had! They sent me to the Field General Hospital in big marquees in Bayeux, where they removed the bullet and I was evacuated to England in a Dakota.[27]

By October Len Cox had recovered. During his time recuperating he was given compassionate leave to return home and help clear up the family home as a V1 rocket bomb had bombed out his family. Sent back to 2nd Glosters in October, he lasted a few weeks before being shelled and returned to Britain. Physically downgraded, and retrained after recuperating in England, he was again sent back to Europe to work in the Guards Armoured workshops and an Anti-Tank Battery. Such was the lot of the 'Poor Bloody Infantry' only able to leave the campaign in North West Europe after severe wounding, death or eventual victory.

There were four main types of patrol: a fighting patrol, with typically thirteen men; standing patrols to observe and maintain dominance over say a crossroads, typically containing two NCO's and six men; a patrol 'to contact' with the enemy which might be made up of as few as an NCO and two men; and reconnaissance patrols, again of as few as one NCO and three men. Each day or night a battalion may have put out up to ten patrols at a time for different purposes. The following are typically British passwords, first challenge, then response, as used on 2nd Glosters patrols: FISH-CHIPS, WHISKY-SODA, CHOP-SUEY, COLD-FEET, PORK-BEANS, HOME-GUARD.[28]

Gordon Duffin, who talks about the frequent and frightening shelling and mortaring, gives a good idea of what holding this static line meant on a day-to-day basis in this area:

> They (the Germans) would bring up an 88mm a couple of fields away and fire into the other side of the bank, which blew out all the earth and muck our side. After a couple of quick shots it was moved. Or bring up a mortar on a motorbike and sidecar at night. You would hear them drive up and set

> up and fire half a dozen bombs then clear off. Because they knew which hedgerow we were in. We had to assume they were in the next hedgerow.[29]

The vigorous patrol work discovered that facing the Brigade was the German 277 Infantry Regiment, backed by tanks of 2 Panzer Division, one of the most experienced Panzer Divisions of the war. A great deal of planning had been going on in the background preparing for an attack by 56th Brigade to go in on 8th July. However some days before this on 2nd July Brigadier Pepper had informed the HQ's of the Battalions that he was relinquishing command of 56th Brigade and was taking command of 131st (Queen's) Brigade. The Commander of 131st Brigade was to take command of 56th Brigade. It was an interesting change of commanders, especially as it seems a like-for-like swap. The reasons behind it need some examination, especially as in the Battalions not every one was happy with the change. In the first place Brigadier Pepper seems to have endeared himself to many as well as proving an able brigade commander. He had formed the Brigade with little time prior to D-Day, and made it into an effective unit, building up its esprit-de-corps and identity through use of the unique Sphinx Badge, and by letting people know what was going on via the Sphinx newspaper.

Frank Dilworth at Brigade HQ has this to say about Pepper: "He was a popular white haired old feller. He was all right and if you were in a field he would walk along the trucks where they were parked along the hedgerow and he would stop and talk to you all."[30] Tony Atcherley a signaller at Brigade HQ gives a similar picture:

> Brigadier Pepper was rather a lively nice fellow, who had to do a lot of dashing about, usually without his helmet, as a lot of people with red tabs on did, I don't know if they thought they were specially protected or people wouldn't be able to shoot at them! I didn't see a lot of him, but sometimes at

> Brigade HQ he was usually talking to the Colonels and went swanning off again. So I think he spent his time zooming around the battalion HQs and presumably back to Div. sometimes. He probably didn't even carry a sidearm or anything. You felt he thought he was invincible,
> a really likeable character who you admired.[31]

In his diary, Lt Somerville of 2nd South Wales Borderers was not happy, writing on July 5th when Pepper left that, "This was a great blow as he had been the inspiration of the Bde. All the men knew and loved him. He always had a smile and a word for everybody." More unhappily on the next day he wrote, "Our new Brigadier MS Ekin had been commanding 131 Bde and was changed with Pepper. Rumour has it he is not much good."[32]

This is an important point, that the new Brigadier arrived already under a cloud, and it is worth examining the reasons. Much of this unfortunate state of affairs is revealed by the fact that he took over 131st Brigade in late January 1944, when its very popular Brigadier 'Bolo' Whistler was promoted and posted to 3rd Division. 131st Brigade, it must be remembered, considered themselves part of an elite, the 'Desert Rats', 7th Armoured Division. General Erskine, in command of 7th Armoured Division, was also upset at this time by having to give up a number of his team that had been forged in the Western Desert. The new Brigadier Ekins was looked upon as adhering very much to the rulebook, and having a peacetime attitude to soldiering. A major in 131st Brigade was later to say 'He would look at us at times as if we were from another planet. With our battle experience, he must have realised we had the edge on him. Even later on in battles it took him a long time to learn and fortunately he did not stay with us very long.'[33]

During the battle on 13/14th June at Villers Bocage, Ekins had become cut off for a period from 131st Brigade HQ during the confused fighting. Possibly the change was brought about as the battlefield was looking rather static where 56th Brigade was, and it was thought that Pepper would be a better commander for 131st Brigade, who were more likely, as part of 7th Armoured Division, to be involved in bolder dashes. It also gave Ekins a fresh start with a Brigade in which the battalions had served mainly in the UK. One other thing that was clear by now, was that each of the three Lieutenant Colonels leading the battalions, Elliott, Biddle and Barlow, were seen as being good at their job, respected by their men. They had formed their own tight knit team. There are hints that their strength of character led to friction between them and the new Brigadier.

An example of this appears in the attack on the Bois de Saint Germain and Granville (Crauville) feature. Lt Colonel Elliott when discussing the action and the part played by 2nd Essex acknowledges the fact that originally the Bois de Saint Germain, known to be strongly occupied, was not to be attacked, yet would remain a serious threat on the 2nd Essex flank. 'Eventually Bde directed that I send one platoon (of C Company) through the wood as a fighting patrol, but this was not satisfactory unless the position in the end proved less effective than patrolling had indicated.'[34] The 2nd Essex War Diary notes, 'a stream of visitors from supporting arms all day as attack was laid on at very short notice.'[35] In fact, although the tiny Royal Artillery Auster air observation planes could see ample evidence of slit trenches and tracks in the British sector, nothing could be seen over the German side. But this was due to the excellence of German camouflage techniques and their

need to stay hidden, otherwise the all-seeing aircraft would direct shells a plenty onto any target.

In effect the plan of attack for 8th July kept 2nd Glosters firm-based and in reserve on the far right flank, while in the middle 2nd South Wales Borderers was to advance over two kilometres from La Butte on either side of the road leading southeast to the crossroads at Granville, move on to capture the next junction on the lateral Hottot-les-Bagues to Caumont L'Evente road, and continue to the next ridgeline at La Chapelle. Meanwhile, 2nd Essex on the left, was to outflank the Bois de Saint Germain and cut the road to Caumont at La Croix-des-Landes. If successful this attack would capture a great deal of ground, and provide a jumping off point for the next stage attacking further south and east, and breaking out of the bocage. This attack also went in at the time when Montgomery began a major, and eventually successful assault to take Caen. Both battalions were given a great deal of support. Some armoured bulldozers were to be used to break through the banks of the bocage, and 2nd Essex had Sherman and 'Crocodile' flame throwing tanks, while 2nd South Wales Borderers report a wide range of support, including 'a platoon of 4.2inch mortars, two platoons of medium machine guns, a tank squadron of 4/7 Dragoon Guards, a troop of M.10 tank destroyers, a troop of flail tanks, a troop of AVREs and a troop of Crocodile flame throwers.'[36] A field squadron of Royal Engineers were also attached to aid mine clearance. Add the Field Ambulance Unit and the 17-pounder Anti-Tank Battery attached to each battalion, and one begins to see the extent of planning and liaison needing to be carried out by an infantry battalion commander in organising an attack. Despite all these plans and patrols, what had not been realised was that the German 277 Regiment were launching an

attack also on 8th July, using their three battalions backed by tanks of 2nd Panzer Division, against the British positions.

The South Wales Borderers attacked at 0800hrs with heavy artillery support. C Company on the west, or right, of the road axis advanced south and reached the cross roads at Granville. They moved under cover of the artillery bombardment, but came under German mortar fire and encountered anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. These last held up the tank support, tanks and infantry became separated and the infantry forged ahead. Also A Company, on the other side of the road, was held up at the large farm just before the crossroads. After dealing with this fortified position they were further held up by heavy German mortar fire and *Spandau* fire, which came from the northwest corner of the Bois de St. Germain. Starting to reorganise they came under further heavy mortar fire and an AVRE tank supporting them was blown up on a mine. Further advance seemed impossible and movement stalled. C Company encountered enemy fire, but continued and reached their objective at La Chapelle cross roads. Here they spread out either side of the cross roads, covering some 500 metres. D Company came forward to support them, being heavily mortared on the way, and also having two men killed by an electrified fence. This last incident is unique as far as the author is aware.

B Company were now ordered to exploit the advance of C and D Companies and attack the Bois de Saint Germain from behind, thus allowing A Company to continue on the left flank. This was a complicated manoeuvre and was almost complete when C Company was hit by an unexpected German counter attack. They

took many casualties and were forced back on B Company, who were facing the wrong way.[37]

Bill Speake was in the middle of this, digging in with the survivors of C Company near La Chapelle. As well as his duties as a sniper he was also acting as bodyguard to the Forward Observation Officer (FOO) with C Company. The Company Commander, Major Fay, had already been shot in the legs and was out of action. Captain Thurn took over command. Speake's slit trench was near a hedge. Suddenly they were heavily mortared and a bomb landed next to him and the FOO. The FOO was killed. The mortaring was intense and Bill found later that his eardrums had burst. He remembers that German infantry were swiftly all over them. Worried that as a sniper he would be shot out of hand if captured, he had just time to hide his sniper rifle, maps and telescope by sliding them into the hedge, when a machine pistol was thrust in his back. Bill was taken through a gap in the hedge and noticed around a dozen other South Wales Borderers prisoners. Guarded by two German soldiers they were run through a gap in the next hedge with their hands up. But a camouflaged Panther tank under a tree, probably believing them to be advancing British infantry, opened fire and killed or wounded a number of the British prisoners. One of the Germans rushed through the gap and frantically waved for the tank commander to stop firing, which, realising his error, he did.[38]

Bill dealt with a soldier who was badly wounded in the arm, open from nearly top to bottom and bleeding badly. Desperately he held the few bandages the two of them had, over the wound to stop the bleeding. The Panther, now moving forward, stopped by Bill and the wounded man. The commander reached down in the turret

and threw down half a dozen fresh dressings. In the next few minutes their German captors made further acts of kindness. The captured and wounded men were moved back to a ruined cottage. Inside they sat around. One of the two German guards started demanding "Rauchen! Rauchen!". The soldiers explained they had no cigarettes. The guard took out tobacco and papers and passed them around the Welsh soldiers.[39]

Not far away on the same flank, Bill Evans was with B Company. They were in a desperate situation, with only their right flank facing the German attack. Some German tanks kept coming over the hill, firing a few rounds at them, each time retiring back over the hill to safety. German infantry threw grenades from nearby, and Evans saw Germans crawling through a gap in the hedge. Using a PIAT, he hit and smashed the concrete electricity pole near where the Germans were coming through. "No more Germans came down after that!"[40] Carrying a 38 Wireless Set, his friend Strickland started to move up the other side, when a Spandau opened fire hitting him. He screamed, and Evans grabbed him and dragged him back through the hedge. Keeping close in to the hedge, Evans gave him a fireman's lift back to the stretcher-bearers.[41]

One of the major problems was still tank-infantry co-operation, as the M10's had withdrawn from the company area. Even so C Company immobilised two of the attacking German tanks before having to withdraw. The situation for 2nd South Wales Borderers was still very dangerous. A Company had had to withdraw two fields back. The area was continually drenched in mortar fire. The remnants of B, C and D Company withdrew to a point opposite A Company. That night C Company

eventually withdrew into reserve. It was reported to have only 24 men left. Over 20 men of 2nd South Wales Borderers had been killed. Effectively the forward companies remained cut off overnight and it was found impossible to get rations up to them.

The following morning D Company was attacked, and its left hand platoon was overrun. The ground was covered by fire from two German tanks. At 1100hrs on 9th July, a Carrier and three tanks managed to supply the forward companies with rations and the shelling and mortaring had become intermittent. Over 150 casualties had been dealt with at the Regimental Aid Post the previous day. B and C Companies relieved A and D Companies. Only shelling and mortaring took place and the position was maintained with 2 Glosters taking over some of the area for a time on 14th July. Between 9th and 11th July 130 reinforcements arrived with 2nd South Wales Borderers, and C Company numbers were increased.

Returning to 2nd Essex on the left flank of the attack on 8th July were faring, it is frustrating to find that the Battalion War Diary is particularly unhelpful. It has no entries between 7th and 11th July, an event that must be unusual if not actually breaking army regulations. Its writer was the Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Hugh Barrett-Lennard, who remained very busy during this period on tasks other than writing. He had joined the Battalion shortly after Essex Wood as a replacement. Eventually both Baronet and priest, he became one of the great characters of the Battalion, and was wounded at least twice. A year later he made up for his lack of writing at the time with his own series of notes. He writes that, 'looking at the map of the battleground one was quite shaken to see so many little blue dots that

indicated "known *Spandau* positions" and these were confirmed by the continual rattle of that deadly weapon.'[42]

'Reveille was at 0300hrs and at first light we were forming up in orchards by the advanced companies and a bulldozer was smashing a path through the hedgerows for our vehicles to come up after the leading troops.'[43] At this point the British artillery barrage tore into the German battalion co-incidentally forming up to attack at midday, causing them to suffer high casualties. Despite this, the reason for the tough resistance encountered by 2nd South Wales Borderers and 2nd Essex in this battle, is likely to be because the German infantry and their supporting armour and artillery were well positioned to receive an attack. Similarly to the South Wales Borderers, 2nd Essex infantry forged ahead, but tanks were unable to follow due to the presence of mines. They harboured in a field and gave supporting fire, while attempts were made to clear the road of mines.

Lieutenant Colonel Elliott describes the problems of this ground 'We were asked to advance more than 2,000 yards through the thickest bocage imaginable – some of the fields were no larger than tennis courts, and all banked and ditched with thick hedges interspersed with large trees.'[44] Due to the problems faced by 2nd South Wales Borderers on their right flank, and the fact that it became increasingly obvious that the enemy were in force on three sides of the battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Elliott decided to halt the attack and get the companies to dig in. This was perhaps fortunate, although initially for the rest of that day and night the Germans only sent patrols to probe the 2nd Essex positions. The tank support withdrew promising to return in the morning.

Major Pat Barras told a story that exemplifies the close quarter nature of battles in this countryside. That evening he went into the woods unarmed to look for one of his platoons. Coming through a hedgerow and seeing a group of men, he approached them; suddenly realising they were a group of Germans. Taking to his heels, he crashed back through the hedgerow with the bullets chasing him. He reflects that if he had been armed with his *Schmeisser*, he may well have stopped to fire back and the ending been very different.[45]

The next day, before the tanks returned, there was an attack on their positions by 'hordes of infantry' and three German tanks, Mk. IV 'Specials,' which advanced down a track through the wood. Close in front of these tanks was Lieutenant Barrett-Lennard helping the stretcher-bearers evacuate some wounded. At this moment some of C Company were clearing an area of the Bois St. Germain, when a company sniper rushed up to Corporal Harry Conn and said "we have got to get back quick." They retired back across the road just in time, as the three German tanks came along. A section led by Lieutenant Bob Filby ambushed the tanks with PIATS and immobilised the first and the last tank. The first tank was already firing on Barrett-Lennard's party. The commander of the middle tank appeared to surrender, then pulled up a *Scmeisser* machine pistol and shot an Essex man. He in turn was shot and another PIAT round hit this tank. One German escaped from this tank into the woods. Amazingly this 'German' (an Austrian) met Barret-Lennard in the 1950s at the Seminary in Rome, as both were becoming priests.[46]

The situation was now serious with 2nd Essex battling it out against a large number of the enemy. However the tanks had returned and communications were good. Artillery was brought down to break up the enemy attacks and Typhoons attacked the German rear areas with rockets. It was probably this action that Philip Maillou from Support Company remembers as:

> Being with our Bren guns in the line. We can see through these trees no more than fifty yards, and we could see figures moving. Artillery is going over and two or three tanks were firing over our heads in support. We were knocking these infantry over. Afterwards we counted about sixty German dead. We thought how long is this going on? There is the gun sergeant and I am the gun corporal and we suddenly realise we have got a lot of empty magazines. So two or three of us start reloading the mags. We are behind a bank, but a lot of stuff is going over. All of a sudden there is a bang. Get a stretcher-bearer! Bugger off get one yourself! A ricochet had taken a lump out of my leg. No one was going back to the First Aid Post under that fire. Eventually I did get back to the First Aid Post, where they put a bandage on it and had done with it. I returned to duty.[47]

The 2nd Essex maintained their positions overnight and beat off more German attacks, the final one being stopped by the Crocodile flame tanks, even though each tank was holed. They had stopped and crippled a force possibly up to three times their size. During the action they too had lost over 20 men killed. On 11th July 2nd Essex and 2nd Glosters swapped positions, 2nd Essex going to Le Pont Mulot. Although no attacks had gone in here it was a very unhealthy place, described as '1,000 yards of no mans land with burnt out farms and shell spattered fields and the endless dead and stinking cattle.'[48] It was in this area that in the abandoned church tower at Torteval, on the road to 'Burnt Out Farm,' the 2nd Essex snipers found a French family including a child 'half shot and tied on chairs, hands behind back, and left to starve in no mans land.'[49] But despite being in the front line the villagers tried to live as normal a life as possible and the café remained open for cider and

calvados. No eggs were available, as apparently the previous incumbents to 56th Brigade had slaughtered the chickens for food.

The Brigade was to maintain its positions for the next two and a half weeks. There was a daily drain on manpower through the continuous patrolling and enemy shelling. Never mind that 50th Division artillery was giving back much more than its infantry was receiving. Over the whole of 21 Army Group 105,000 shells a day were being fired, well in excess of expected consumption. But the Germans had now brought a frightening weapon to the battlefront. The Nebelwerfer was a six-barrelled mortar, sometimes vehicle mounted, but more often quietly manhandled or horse drawn into position. Cleverly they often had a banshee-wailing device attached, to strike fear into the troops they were aimed at. There were three brigades of them now in Normandy all opposing British or Canadian troops. They came in three calibres of 15cm, 21cm and 30cm, and with a maximum range of three to five miles depending on type.[50] A battalion of 18 Nebelwerfers used together, could fire 108 projectiles in seconds and concentrate their missiles into a small area, a terrifying spectacle for men on the receiving end.

Again the Brigade was facing 2 Panzer Division, which was very well organised and has been described by one writer as 'one of the most experienced armoured divisions in the Wehrmacht.'[51] They would not let the Brigade rest with constant attacks by mortar, self-propelled gun or sniper. The Brigade replied in kind and all officers were told that it was imperative to 'lean heavily on the enemy.'[52] This was accomplished by aggressive patrolling. Eventually, after a series of patrols by 2nd South Wales Borderers on 20th July, it was realised that the enemy had

withdrawn from the La Chapelle area and a 2nd South Wales Borderers patrol went forward and dug itself in. This was reinforced, and A Company then 'beat through the Bois de Saint Germain and established themselves on the southern edge of it.'[53] It was now realised just how well the La Chapelle position had been prepared for defence. It had been a very good observation post, allowing the Germans to look deep into allied lines. In the following days over 450 Teller Mines and 160 anti-personnel mines were lifted from this area. There was extensive wiring, weapon slits and deep dugouts constructed by the Germans, turning the area into a small fortress. Despite the mine lifting, a scout car was blown up in C Company HQ area on 25th July and two South Wales Borderers were killed and two wounded.

From this new position patrolling continued, especially towards the village of St. Germain d'Ectot, the next obvious target. One patrol brought back a wounded German who later died, but this established that 326 Division had taken over from 2 Panzer. This may have explained why it had been slightly quieter and shelling less intensive, and by July 29th, completely quiet. On 31st July starting at 0530 hrs 2nd South Wales Borders attacked towards the ridge to the north of St. Germain d'Ectot. By evening they had their final objectives. It is recorded that in taking the final orchard on the ridge, D Company with bayonets fixed, actually trod in the flames of the Crocodiles supporting them. The following day, still using the Crocodiles, they took St. Germain d'Ectot, and pushed another kilometre forward to take the hamlet of Candon. On 2nd August they linked with 2nd Essex on their right, and 231st Brigade on their left, at the next major feature south, Launay Ridge. This twelve-day operation, again cost many wounded and twelve killed. Lieutenant Somerville, giving a vivid picture of the scene around St. Germain d'Ectot, describes the

aftermath of this continuous advance: 'we found a valuable Arty OP of the enemy and captured some valuable documents. There was a fair number of enemy dead in the St. Germain d'Ectot area who had to be buried.'[54]

The 2nd Glosters had also been patrolling extensively through the Bois de Saint Germain, but were then moved back west, taking over American army positions on the 2nd South Wales Borderers right flank and further southwest. Some of their patrols led to small scale but vicious fighting, and they also took a number of casualties. On 29th July they gave up their positions to 2nd Essex and were to attack towards Launay and Anctonville. As they were forming up at 0500hrs a German aircraft dropped a bomb, which hit the 2nd Glosters ammunition truck, causing a number of casualties. However the truck was swiftly replaced, and via a series of platoon battles control was gained of the Livry to St. Germain road. On the way 'Burnt Out Farm,' the area of so much patrol action during the month was finally taken, involving a major action by B Company.

As the Glosters approached the farm, Germans in and around the buildings shot down and killed a section corporal and three privates from close range *Spandau* fire. Two of the Glosters Carriers shed their tracks in the narrow lanes while trying to manoeuvre to bring Bren gun fire to bear. A flail tank, brought up for support, blew up on a double-banked Teller Mine. The inevitable German mortar fire began to take its toll, and from further back German 88mm guns began shelling the area. A platoon sergeant lost his nerve and started "prancing around shouting like a madman".[55] He was punched fair and square to bring him under control and escorted back to Company HQ. At about this time the Battalion 2i/c arrived to try

and get things moving. Climbing on the immobilised tank for a better view he was shot dead. 10 and 12 Platoons got closer to the farm with support from dismounted Bren guns from the Carriers. The men were again heavily shelled and mortared. The Company 2i/c then became seriously wounded. Finally the remnants of 12 Platoon charged the farm and cleared it at the point of bayonet. 'A small number of prisoners were taken.'[56] This action was unexpected; 'Burnt Out Farm' was thought to be clear of enemy, or at worse lightly held. The action around the farm held up B Company for the whole day, and they only reached the expected 'start line' at dusk. This relatively small action, in the overall scheme of Normandy fighting, again underlines the difficulties faced by troops attempting to advance in the bocage.

Afterwards the Battalion Pioneer Platoon lifted over 300 mines and dealt with eight booby traps on the ridgeline. The 30th July action alone cost 2nd Glosters two officers and sixteen other ranks killed, and five officers and forty-four other ranks wounded. But the actions of 2nd Glosters and 2nd South Wales Borderers had cleared the enemy from the ridgeline they had held for over a month.

After a rough time patrolling from Pont Mulot, 2nd Essex were moved forward for the final assault on the Launay Ridge feature. Luckily by now the Germans were in retreat and showed relatively little inclination to hold onto this feature. Beginning from a taped 'start line' just forward of 'Burnt Out Farm' a heavy British artillery barrage preceded the advance, with the forward men of 2nd Essex following as close as 25yards behind this creeping barrage. Almost incredibly after the difficult fighting of the last month, 2nd Essex were expected to advance over one and a half miles, in only one and three quarter hours. Again the plan had been very rushed,

with Lieutenant Colonel Elliott only receiving his orders at 1600hrs for an attack starting at 1800hrs. Eventually his arguments managed to get the attack postponed until 2000hrs so that he could co-ordinate with the supporting arms and get his widely spread out battalion organised.

However the weight of the artillery, plus mortars, tanks and Typhoons, blasting German positions, gave the enemy little inclination to hold on. 'Onlookers saw what was afterwards described as a perfect picture book attack.'[57] Sergeant Peter Giggens, of the Mortar Platoon, went forward following the 25pdr creeping barrage to see if the mortars were needed. Early on they had fired some smoke. Orange silk marker diamonds were laid out on the front line and Typhoons also shot up the ridge. He was impressed by the amount of German gear lying about, which shows that a concentration of German troops was surprised by the attack and left in a hurry. Towards the top, the ground became littered with dead Germans. Suddenly the mortars stopped firing. He radioed back to demand why and was told that a mortar had exploded and killed two men. Peter told the officer to get on with it – the attack still needed support. Needless to say he felt he was not too popular for a time on his return after the attack, but he had been right.[58] 2nd Essex captured 100 prisoners and the equipment of two battalions, including meals still cooking over German stoves.

At last when this feature was taken, 56th Brigade had an unobstructed view in front of them over many miles of German held territory, and breathed a sigh of relief that the bocage seemed finally behind them. In fact the Germans had withdrawn as far back as 10 kilometres, leaving only small covering parties behind.

By 1st August 2nd Glosters had occupied Anctonville. After another two days around Launay Ridge the Brigade was taken out of the line and sent to the now safe area of Buceels north of Tilly-sur-Seulles for a well-earned rest.

With Caen taken, the American breakout showing positive movement, and the quicker retreat of German forces, the overall Allied battle picture was slowly becoming more fluid and promising. The detail in the actions outlined above show why there is a comparison to be made between this period of the war in Normandy and the trench warfare of the First World War. The narrow lanes, tracks and deep hedgerows with fortified strongpoints bear some comparison with the trench systems of the earlier conflict. The weather too, was often less than kind this July, so that as in June, men had to put up with the wet in their tiny slit trenches and on patrol. During low cloud, this meant that they could not have the air cover they craved. Certainly casualties among the infantry were reaching levels attained at the worst periods of the First World War. Inevitably this constant drain on the Brigade was to have another effect, well known from 1914-1918, that of battle exhaustion. The Brigade (like all front line units) had suffered cases of battle exhaustion among officers and men from the beginning, and even from D+1 there were a very small number of incidents, where men purposefully injured themselves to get back home. After the terrible fighting around Tilly-sur-Seulles it is not surprising that cases of battle exhaustion occurred. However a number of memories recall some men being shaken by events, and there is some good evidence about the effects of the constant strain on men committed to the front line for extensive periods.

The War Diary of 203 Field Ambulance shows that on 8th July, the Officer Commanding 203 Field Ambulance, saw Brigadier Ekins 'reference numbers of exhaustion cases in the Brigade'[59] and after a briefing from Brigadier Ekins on the expectation of the Brigade maintaining its defensive position on 13th July, it was noted that this was considered unsatisfactory 'as the troops definitely require a rest as shown by the large number of exhaustion cases admitted to this unit and it is hoped that one company a day will be taken out of the line and allowed to proceed to Bayeux for a bath and visit to the cinema or concert.'[60] Lieutenant Colonel Myles, commanding 203 Ambulance Unit, was also very concerned about hygiene in the sites occupied by 56th Brigade Units. From 4th July he 'arranged to have a NCO from the Corps Hygiene Section to be attached and send him round to the battalions at regular intervals until the sanitation in the Bde is satisfactory.'[61]

Despite this plea for rest from Lieutenant Colonel Myles, the battalion war diaries make no note of any real rest or recreation apart from baths visits until early in August, although a cinema called 'The Sphinx' was set up just to the rear of 56th Brigade positions at La Belle Epine. Normally the war diaries like to make mention of any recreational events, so it appears that the Brigade remained on duty throughout the whole of July and into August. This must be some testament to the efficacy and staying power of the officers and men, spending this time so close to the enemy and continually carrying out operations in this difficult bocage country described by one officer as 'the Rifle Platoon's nightmare.'[62]

So from 3rd to 8th August, the Brigade moved back to rest to an area it knew well, and had previously cost it many casualties trying to gain. Despite the change

from constantly being on the edge of danger to a full rest, many reports indicate that it was somewhat depressing to be situated where so many bad memories remained. However there were diversions in the shape of the Bayeux Baths and an ENSA show starring George Formby and his wife. The Battalions also put on Drumhead Services and their own concert parties. Even at rest though the wider war reached out to some men and Nicholas Somerville records that on August 7th 'Harry Reed had his home bombed out for the fourth time this war and went home on compassionate leave. He seems to have got used to it by now.'[63] The V1 or 'Doodlebug' flying bombs were by now having a dramatic effect on London and the south east of Britain.

Another big change for the Brigade was in hand, again caused by the number of casualties being inflicted on the British infantry. 56th Brigade was to leave 50th Division and join 59th (Staffordshire) Division. This was the most junior Division in the army, made up of Territorial Army units. Its shoulder flash was a red pithead winding gear on a black triangular slagheap on a light blue background. Some from 2nd Glosters at least, nicknamed them the 'Slag Heap Mob'. The move was not universally welcomed in the Brigade, as although only 'under command' of 50th (Northumbrian) Division, since the landings 56th Brigade had appreciated the excellent organisation and staff work of this experienced division in terms of the provision of rest camps and baths, and the support of its artillery from 86th and 90th Field Regiments, which in the future were to be particularly missed.

At the Brigade drumhead service on 6th August, a message was read out from General Bucknall, commander of XXX Corps in appreciation of the service of 56th Brigade to XXX Corps:

> Given only a short space of time 2nd SWB, 2nd Glosters and 2nd Essex Regiments together with Brigade HQ troops have welded themselves into a first class team. This was a very high test for the three Regular battalions and illustrated how regular units can overcome all difficulties and how great was devotion to duty of all ranks. I realise with great regret that the casualties in the Brigade have been heavy and the fighting from the beaches fierce. I would be grateful if this letter can be read out to all ranks of 56th Infantry Brigade.[64]

Bucknall and others though were already on their way out; swept aside by a string of changes Montgomery initiated, frustrated by lack of progress and believing these commanders were no longer up to the job. First to go was Bullen-Smith on 15th July of 51st (Highland) Division: '51 Division is at present not (repeat not) battleworthy. It does not fight with determination and has failed in every operation it has been given to do. I consider the divisional commander to blame and I am removing him from command.'[65] He replaced Bullen-Smith with Rennie. Then on 2nd August Bucknall of XXX Corps and Erskine of 7th Armoured Division received their marching orders: 'Have decided to remove Bucknall from command of 30th Corps and he will be returned to UK as soon as released by HORROCKS. Also necessary to replace Erskine in 7th Armoured Division.'[66] The following day Montgomery sacked the well-known Brigadier 'Looney' Hinde of 22nd Armoured Brigade: 'Request Brigadier Mackeson be sent here by air to take command of 22nd Armoured Brigade vice Hinde. Certain changes necessary in 7th Armoured Division and Hinde is one.'[67]

Montgomery was under pressure from Churchill and Brooke for more tangible success, and relations with Eisenhower and the Americans were becoming strained. Also there was pressure to end the flying bomb attacks by the V1's by taking their launch sites, which were affecting morale and causing heavy casualties at home. These launch sites were still many miles away in the north of France. Montgomery's other headache was the increasing problem of replacement manpower. There was a perception that the Americans, now with many more troops on the ground, were doing the lion's share of the work. But the example given in this chapter of the resilience, fortitude and success of the men of 56th Brigade and the other infantry brigades, fighting against a highly experienced enemy while suffering heavy casualties in this most difficult of areas, flies in the face of such criticism. During July 1944, the focus of attention on actions carried out by the British Army in Normandy has often been concentrated by writers as diverse as D'Este in Decision in Normandy and Neillands in The Battle of Normandy 1944, on such operations as Epsom, Charnwood and Goodwood, to envelop, take and then break away from Caen. These actions, and the perception of historians such as D'Este in Decision in Normandy and Ambrose in Citizen Soldiers for example that in some way Montgomery or the operations failed or faltered in execution, have formed the major part of descriptive writing and argument over Montgomery's tactics during July, while the hard slogging work that was done, pinning German forces on the right flank of the British Army, remains largely unacknowledged.

References Chapter Six. Holding the Right Flank – Desperate Fighting in the Bocage. June 21st to 8th August 1944.

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Chapter Seven.

Breakthrough. Suisse Normande to the Taking of Le Havre.

9th August to 14th September 1944.

By early August 1944 the situation of the Allied Armies in Normandy had dramatically changed. The constant pressure and heavy attacks on the Germans throughout the month of July had brought the German Army to crisis. By July 1st the American Army had cleared the port of Cherbourg and had control of the majority of the Contentin Peninsula. They could then concentrate on advancing south. By 19th July they had reached the key town of St. Lo. On the British front Caen had finally fallen on 10th July. Further operations south of Caen allowed the British Army to start the drive on Falaise in the final week of July. Meanwhile the Americans developed the right flank. By the 30th July they had advanced as far as Avranches. The German Army was now in great difficulty. Villers-Bocage (a hoped for target of D-Day) fell on 4th August to the British. The American Army smashed a German counter-attack at Mortain soon after, and then began slipping round the German flanks, eventually nearing Argentan and beyond by 13th August. Between the Americans to the south and the British pressing on Falaise from the north, was created the Falaise 'pocket' and the beginning of the swift withdrawal of German forces from Normandy.

From 5th August 1944, 56th Brigade had come under the command of 59th Division, which was engaged in attacking Thury Harcourt on the east bank of the River Orne, 12 miles south of Caen. There was now a complete change in the type of countryside for 56th Brigade, from the bocage south of Bayeux, to the Suisse Normande south of Caen, an area of often-forested, steep-sided and sometimes

rocky hills, cut by rivers and streams. The countryside would present a different series of problems for an attacker to overcome, although by now the German Army was slowly being surrounded and engulfed by allied forces. The German Army was gradually retreating from a pocket, the exit of which would be become famous as the Falaise Gap. The attack on Thury Harcourt would further squeeze this pocket shut.

59th Division had landed in late June and been involved in heavy fighting north and west of Caen since early July. Then in early August it had forced the crossing of the River Orne near Grimbosq. It had bitterly contested a German counter attack here as 56th Brigade arrived, and by 8th August had suffered well over 2500 casualties. The arrival of 56th Brigade allowed 176th Brigade, comprised of the 7th South Staffords, 6th North Staffords and 7th Norfolks, to be withdrawn from 59th Division due to its number of casualties. The other two Infantry Brigades left in 59th Division were 177th Brigade (5th South Staffords, 1/6th South Staffords and 2/6th South Staffords) and 197th Infantry Brigade (2/5th Lancashire Fusiliers, 5th East Lancashires and 1/7th Warwicks).[1] While 177th Brigade pushed south on the west bank of the River Orne, 56th Brigade was to cross to the east bank of the river, and advance south and take Thury Harcourt.

2nd Glosters and 2nd Essex were to be the first of 56th Brigade to cross, at La Pont de Brie near Brieux, and 3 miles north of Thury Harcourt. Brigade HQ and 2nd South Wales Borderers were initially to stay on the west bank and cross when the other two battalions were well established. A narrow bridge, still under shell and sniper fire, was to be traversed by both battalions, 2nd Glosters by day to take

Brieux, followed by 2nd Essex at nightfall. The plan was then to advance 'to contact' south down a minor road, and take the villages of La Forge a Cambro and Croisilles. This all had to be organised quickly by the staff of the two Battalion HQ on 9th August, with only a brief reconnaissance from the high ground west of the River Orne, and orders were issued that afternoon by Brigadier Ekins. 2nd Glosters crossed at 1500hrs, and after a brief battle had cleared Brieux by 1730hrs. It is worth quoting Lieutenant Colonel Elliott of 2nd Essex at length, to get an idea of the task and feelings of the two CO's, as they pushed forward with their men on the night of 9th August:

> Lieutenant Colonel Biddle (2nd Glosters) and myself were a little anxious about our right of way over the one narrow bridge. We were told however that it would be allotted to us for 2 hours (I think) 2200hrs to midnight. In the event we met a tank brigade and other vehicles returning from the bridgehead: there was complete chaos and apparently no proper traffic control. However we filtered the infantry across in single file, and started off into the night and into enemy territory, without a single vehicle or anti-tank gun between us. We were delayed some hours by this poor example of staff work. It was an extraordinary operation of war: two battalions of infantry marching side by side down a narrow road late at night, with some moonlight luckily, but with no idea of the enemy's whereabouts and no supporting arms. Our plan was simple. We had a 'joint' advanced guard, etc. and we two CO's walked together. If we met trouble the Essex would deploy to the right if possible and the Gloucesters to the left.[2]

This operation for the time of year, and the fighting conditions prevailing in Normandy, seems an incredibly audacious one bearing in mind the experiences of 56th Brigade earlier in the bocage country. This operation was carried out successfully through the nerve and leadership of the two commanding officers. Lieutenant Barret-Lennard, 2nd Essex Intelligence Officer gives this striking image of their progress:

> We passed through a blazing and sulphurous village and this weird operation took us on marching through the night down a dark silent narrow Normandy lane wondering whether it was mined and very very quietly we continued, the two CO's walking side by side.[3]

For the advance of several hundred men in hob nailed boots to have been mainly quiet seems something of a miracle, but in Courmeron, a village passed in the early hours, and temporarily 2nd Essex Battalion HQ, several sleeping Germans were captured the following morning! Despite this one 2nd Glosters report says, "The noise from the closed up marching columns seemed hideous."[4] Great leadership was displayed here, in the certainty that disaster would strike if the battalions bumped into a strong German defence. This included the knowledge that at Essex Wood in June, Lieutenant Colonel Higson had seemingly been sacked as commanding officer over just such an operation as advancing the battalion without the anti-tank platoon closely following.

By first light they had cut deeply into enemy territory, and were only 300 metres from La Forge a Cambro, although Lieutenant Colonel Elliott was still disappointed with the speed of advance caused by the time lost in crossing the bridge. However the good news was that some of their supporting arms were crossing the River Orne and were starting to catch up. As the battalions approached La Forge a Cambro they deployed, so as not to be caught out at first light. Some short engagements had taken place already and numbers of abandoned slit trenches searched. Lieutenant Col Elliott went forward to the advance party and heard sounds of digging over the next crest. The 2nd Essex rifle companies were brought

up and deployed ready to attack the village. It appeared that the Germans had no idea they had two battalions of infantry on their doorstep.

Now tanks came up in support, and with an artillery barrage covering them, C Company put in an attack. C Company went over the crest and apart from the sound of battle no reporting back occurred to Tactical HQ. After 45 minutes Lieutenant Colonel Elliott reports he was getting somewhat anxious. Going forward to find out what was happening, he first met 120 German prisoners escorted by two men of C Company. Major Barrass had lost his wireless operator in dashing about urging his men on, thus explaining the lack of useful wireless reports. Nevertheless C Company had cleared the village. Over the next few days between 12th and 15th August the Battalion moved south of Thury Harcourt to near Esson, and patrolled into, and held the difficult wooded area of the Bas Breuil. This thick wood overlooked the village of Esson and the tree cover was so dense that visibility was often down to a few yards. There were a number of small, but vicious actions fought within its confines. At one stage German forces armed with a preponderance of automatic weapons, overran a platoon of 2nd Essex, and the situation could only be restored by the use of heavy artillery.

Arthur Dyer, a signaller with the M14 Signals Half-track at Battalion HQ, gives this gritty account of being in action in this area, and in his diary records how even the HQ of a battalion could be vulnerable:

> At noon we take up our position in an orchard. 5 dead cows there stinking in the sun – black with flies. We dig – Jerry pastes us – more moaning minnies and mortars. Same job - diving in and praying. One of our companies nearly cut off they are getting hell. Our Artillery is supporting us more now Jerry

must be tiring. We still dig – ground very hard, hands blistered. Still there is only one motto "dig or die." Our feet are sore cannot take boots off and the heat is causing sweat.[5]

There was hand-to-hand fighting as well, and at least some of 2nd Essex casualties came from their own artillery and mortars bursting in the trees, but as they would later find out, these casualties were as nothing, compared to the German dead. Perhaps one story epitomises the sang-froid and soldiers humour in battle. Lance Corporal Jeffs took a message from Battalion HQ to an advanced platoon. Walking through this dense forest alone, and finding the platoon in one piece he offered: 'blimey, we thought you were all dead. You can come back now.'[6]

As the 2nd Essex attack went in at La Forge a Cambro on 10th August, German artillery observers had spotted the 2nd Glosters Tactical HQ, and a barrage badly wounded Lieutenant Colonel Biddle. Bill Robinson, who was the driver for the Battalion Padre, was present when this happened:

We were in this small copse with little cover, and I dug a slit trench as soon as we arrived. Colonel Biddle came through with his driver Bill Fudge. Biddle got to the other side of this copse and got out of his jeep and sat on the bank. The Germans put a mortar stonk down on us and Biddle was wounded in the head very badly. When this stonk started I was into the slit trench like a rat and straight on top of me like a ton of bricks came Bill Williams the Padre. I think some of the medical orderlies were hit. Nearby there was a little farm being used by the MO and Colonel Biddle went in there. On the junction was a pile of slates all over the road and the Germans had put these down to cover some mines they had laid. One of the jeeps went up on this and a corporal was badly wounded. In the farm I saw Colonel Biddle and he wasn't unconscious, but you could see his brain exposed, a shame, as he was a very nice bloke.[7]

Lieutenant Colonel Biddle survived, but was hospitalised, badly wounded. Temporarily Major Lance took over as CO, with Major Stephens as Battalion 2i/c, until Lieutenant Colonel Butterworth took command on 15th August. Inevitably all

three battalions, and even Brigade HQ, were to be subjected to heavy shelling and mortaring, sometimes almost continuously, for the rest of the operation.

Meanwhile Brigade HQ and 2nd South Wales Borderers had crossed the River Orne into the main battle zone. On 10th August 2nd South Wales Borderers crossed the bridge at 1100hrs and arrived south east of the village of Courmeron. Nick Somerville's Diary records:

> Crossed the Orne amid a steady stream of traffic. There was so much congestion on one road that we had to get off it into the fields to enable two squadrons of Churchills to pass through. The whole bridgehead was under considerable shellfire and it was not very comfortable riding up and down the main axis on a motorbike.[8]

That night 2nd South Wales Borderers pushed two kilometres southeast, outflanking Thury Harcourt to the east. Their Battalion HQ was at La Forge a Cambro, on the main D562 running south to Thury Harcourt. They were in position by 0500 hrs on the morning of the 11th August. The German response was to heavily shell and mortar the Company areas. Clearly, despite the advance of 2nd Essex and 2nd Glosters, the Germans still had good observation over the battlefield. A squadron of Churchill tanks that came forward in support gave away the 2nd South Wales Borderers positions, and drew more fire from 88mm's and Nebelwerfers. 'A & C Coys had a nasty time as they were alongside the tanks. Forge a Cambro came in for a belting from 'moaning minnies' and Bn. HQ was exceedingly hot.'[9] Jeeps visiting the forward companies had to charge down narrow bumpy tracks at 45 mph to quickly get through the observed zone. Eventually on the A Company road, all vehicles were banned except Ambulance Jeeps. This shellfire

caused fifty casualties to pass through the Regimental Aid Post that day. Battalion HQ moved south to be much closer to the advance Companies.

The 12th August was quieter. Fighting patrols sent out overnight to the northeast enabled the supporting tanks to withdraw for maintenance. On the night of 13th and 14th August, 2nd South Wales Borderers advanced further south and then east again by sending out fighting patrols, which were then followed by the main body. German resistance was in each case confined to mainly shelling, though this was often vicious and prolonged. Colonel Barlow's carrier was shelled and turning into a gateway to escape blew up on a mine. Barlow was not in it at the time, but his signaller was injured and the Gunner Commander killed. Thury Harcourt was now outflanked to the southeast, and 2nd South Wales Borderers and 2nd Essex had virtually cut off the town by completing a semi-circle of advance around it.

Men from Brigade HQ were not idle during all of this, and they were often under shellfire. Frank Dilworth as a 'Don R' (dispatch rider) was sent time and again, carrying messages back and forth across the bridge, under observed fire from artillery, mortar and *Spandau* to the forward positions, a feat that was to earn him the Military Medal:

> I had passed this cottage in a field that had been burning and there was a German lying burnt there. I was trying to find where the Essex were. I went towards the corner of the forest. On a bank were five dead Essex men. There was a sergeant in front and the others behind him. It must have been a burst that killed them. Also there were a couple of trenches with a dead German in each. To get down this valley and across the other side and up was beyond a joke and I did it four times during the day. The first time I went down there were two of our linemen knocked out trying to run a line down. It was suicide to try that really in that place. The 59th Div. bridgehead was getting nowhere. Going up the other side from the bridge were six Churchill's knocked out.[10]

Riding alone a dispatch rider had only his wits, a well-developed sense of the battlefield, and the speed of his motorbike in order to survive. What is left out of the above commentary, is that on each crossing Frank probably noticed that there was already one dispatch rider blasted up into the trees near the crossing, noted by Bill Robinson of 2nd Glosters. It is likely that the same group of dead men described above were come upon by Tony Atcherley of Brigade HQ, who adds the honest and very human thought, that unlike some his comrades, he could never get used to corpses.

> I came across a group of six British soldiers ambushed in a forest. They were lying or rather half sitting in a little dell. Had it not been for the wounds and pools of blood, you would have thought they were sleeping, and a touch on their shoulder would wake them up.[11]

The Brigade HQ moved forward and took up position in a field or open area. In the middle of this area was a tall wooden structure that had been used as a German observation post able to look out over the trees. A number of men including the Don R's were sleeping in the open when: "all of a sudden shells landed, Bang! Then Bang! We all realised what was happening and shot into the ditches at the edge of the field. Again Bang! Right in the middle. They were trying to knock out the OP so we couldn't use it."[12] As usual the Germans seemed to have the range of ground they had retreated from, to the metre.

Now 2nd Glosters were in a position to directly attack Thury Harcourt. Initial 59th Division intelligence reports said the Germans had left; however this proved

not to be so, and a 2nd Glosters patrol to the town at 0700hrs on 11th August reported back:

> Located teller mines and booby traps along the (main D 562, since re-routed and much larger) road and were able to reach the outskirts of the town. Here they came under heavy *Spandau* fire and were forced to withdraw. Valuable information was obtained. The French civilians were very pleased to see the British troops.[13]

One member of this patrol was Frank Rosier, and he remembers it vividly adding some detail to the above report. They were lucky to get back:

> When looking down on the town from the high ground to the north we thought it was a peaceful town and nothing appeared to be moving in the village. I was part of a ten man patrol and we got down to the bridge and lay on it a while and then started to go back up the hill. Then all hell broke loose and we fought hand-to-hand which was horrible, but all ten got back. I have the impression that the Germans purposely set out to capture some prisoners and had lain in wait.[14]

This good work could not be immediately put to use, as German pressure and attacks from the east required some fighting off, and support was given to 2nd South Wales Borders as they advanced, including aid to the beleaguered tanks stuck with them. Strong patrolling was also needed to stop Germans reoccupying villages at Espins and Le Moncel. However in the early hours of 12th August 2nd Glosters were tasked to seize Thury Harcourt, as Brigade intelligence reported it finally evacuated by the Germans. The start line was a road running east to west and three quarters of a kilometre north of the town. B Company was on the right and A Company on the left with C and D Companies in reserve.[15] This axis of advance meant approaching Thury Harcourt from the north. Here the land steeply slopes

down to the railway yards and River Orne on the right. A deep valley with steep sides and a stream was to their front and at right angles to the river. On the far side of this narrow valley, was the previously mentioned patrol road of 11th August.

The two Companies left the start line at 1430hrs, preceded by a bombardment of the ground ahead. No opposition was encountered until reaching the outskirts of the town at 1500hrs. Then the Germans opened up a considerable fire. Firstly they had reoccupied the west bank of the River Orne just south of the town, and opened a steady and effective fire with mortars and artillery on the 2nd Glosters from here. Secondly, 2nd Essex were attacked on the left flank in the Bas Breuil, wood and required the artillery to beat off the Germans. Thirdly the town, far from being empty, was heavily defended with snipers and machine guns in the upper stories of factory buildings, the chateau and the railway station. When D Company went through A Company to clear the town, it too became pinned down, and confused house-to-house fighting broke out. Ted Castle, stretcher bearer with A Company HQ was looking down into the town, and gives this tense description of events as they received Spandau and mortar fire:

> We went in and after 2-300 yards all hell let loose. A Company got a plastering from mortars and Spandau fire and B Company got trapped in the town below. Our company commander, Major Wakefield, got hit. The lads had gone down this cliff into Thury Harcourt. The stretcher-bearers had to climb down and take casualties out on our backs. I brought up fifteen. One lad dropped down between a house and the cliff and I couldn't do any more for him. Major Wakefield couldn't move and I crawled up to him and he said, "There's some lads down there Castle. Get down there!" I said it was "pretty hairy" and he replied by saying "I know you will do your best".[16]

Frank Rosier was in the town with D Company. They had climbed down a steep cliff with traces of a path through it. As they reached the bottom a Spandau opened fire and killed three men. They were ordered via the radio link to stay down until nightfall. They were in a depression that protected them from the German fire. They put the Bren gun up on the lip and occasionally returned fire. With nothing better to do they settled down to a game of cards! However the enemy fire spattered the cliff above and threw chips of rock over them. After some time their Bren gunner was fed up with this, and picking up the Bren charged the German position and wiped it out. They returned to their card game.[17]

At the beginning of the advance, Gordon Duffin of A Company remembers advancing across a field in open order, with birds singing and flowers on the ground. But the platoon converged as they moved down into a thickly wooded area, and it seemed that A and B Company were joining on a narrow path leading towards a virtual cliff down into Thury Harcourt. This made the path crowded, and an obvious target. When they started going down a Spandau opened fire, and in leaping to get down Duffin tumbled some way down the slope. They ended up on the road at the bottom of the cliff. Running across the road, still under fire, they had to find cover and got down at the side of the road. However a sergeant he did not know was standing up in the middle of the road, and despite shouted pleas to get down, calmly walked over to Duffin. They exchanged positions and the sergeant was immediately shot. Then the men dived down an embankment, and to a house at the bottom that shielded them from enemy fire. German fire caught the thatched roof alight. Ordered to look through a window to observe what was happening, Duffin could see Germans in a slit trench at 20 yards range. He fired a long burst

from his Bren gun and killed some Germans. He immediately moved away from the window, avoiding the quickly returned fire that penetrated the window and the surrounding daub wall.

His section was now pinned down behind this house, and with the roof alight burning thatch was falling down on them. From opposite up the cliff they were glad to hear the order, 'A Company, withdraw back up the cliff.' Running back across the road they scrambled up the cliff to where Major Wakefield was being looked after by a sergeant. Gordon noticed that Wakefield had a wound in his leg, and it was the other leg than that on which he limped badly, having been wounded in the Desert Campaign. He told Gordon "the buggers have shot my other leg!" Gordon had received a shrapnel wound across the back of his neck, and went back to hospital at Bayeux. On the way there he was placed in charge of two wounded Germans. He was pleased to take charge of their wallets and insignia, but returned their photographs. After a short spell in hospital he was returned to 2nd Glosters.[18]

B Company was equally caught in the town. At one point they were being shelled and machine-gunned by a German tank from only three hundred yards. Later they were in danger of being cut off. Smoke Grenades were used to cover crossings from house to house, but the smoke only further indicated the positions of the Glosters and focused fire on them. The company were totally pinned down and at about this stage a horrific incident occurred. A soldier from the Glosters was hit by a Spandau in his ammunition pouches. The 77 Smoke (Phosphorous) grenades he was carrying ignited. In agony he implored an officer to shoot him, which the officer did. It was impossible to save the soldier in any way.[19]

The withdrawal of 2nd Glosters was well covered by machine gun and cannon fire from Churchill tanks of 34 Tank Brigade. They could not get into the town because of the terrain. The tanks fired mainly smoke to cover the withdrawal. Eventually Major Wakefield was evacuated, after seeing most of his men away. Even with the obvious withdrawal of 2nd Glosters the Germans did not stop firing on them and Ted Castle had a further narrow escape:

> It was not tank country and it was a foggy night and the order was to pull back. Major Wakefield was still there wounded and in command. I was one of the last to leave; we got him out on a tank. All of a sudden a mortar bomb fell and blew me sideways, I wasn't wounded and carried on back. I think there were about twenty of us left in the company. I don't suppose they were all casualties. Some would have been dispersed in the action. Major Wakefield was a remarkable man and had already been wounded in North Africa leading to him having a permanently gammy leg. He recommended me for the MM for this action but I didn't receive it.[20]

Thury Harcourt was burning heavily and 2nd Gloster patrols maintained a close watch. Over the night of 13/14 August patrols realised that the enemy appeared to be gone, and on 14th August a carefully managed advance into the town took place. By 1530hrs, with only mines and booby traps needing to be dealt with, the town was cleared, and it was found that the Germans had evacuated it. On 15th August a move forward was made by 2nd Glosters to occupy all the high ground south of Thury Harcourt, coming into line with 2nd Essex and 2nd South Wales Borderers. The results of the artillery bombardment on the Germans in the Bas Breuil wood, in support of 2nd Essex, now became evident. As the battalions advanced through the wood there was no opposition, just the putrefied bodies of many German soldiers. Arthur Dyer, signaller with 2nd Essex, writes how even moves like this were fraught with danger:

> August 14th - Shelled again this morning. Blokes going bomb happy everybody dog tired. We push off at 11am on another hell ride. Ruins all around, shells falling, houses on fire, burnt Jerries, dead cattle, heavy casualties, not sleep. It is now almost Midnight I am on the set. It is roasting hot as hell, my eyes ache to close, feet are sore, we are all the same. Just as we arrived Jerry shelled the field, past worrying about shells, just sleep that's all we want. At one place we stayed at for an hour we sang Hymns and had a cup of tea. August 15 – We move into our new area, other troops go through us. This village is mine infested and burning. Carriers have been blown up and clinging to the wreckage is human flesh burnt and stinking. This is all around. However, here we close down the set and have a sleep.[21]

The battalions rested in positions now dominating a large loop in the River Orne by St. Remy, well south of Thury Harcourt. The Germans had to abandon the area 'leaving behind a large number of mines upon which a melancholy succession of vehicles and civilians were blown up.'[22]

The following morning the IO of 2nd Essex, Lieutenant Barrett-Lennard, with only a driver for support, was tasked to make a forward reconnaissance in a jeep. It was typical of the man that they drove forward, roaring down roads a reported twenty miles, possibly the farthest advance by only two men of the British Army in Normandy. Often the only thing slowing them was the incredulous crowds that greeted them. Forward movement only stopped when the Mayor of one village informed Barrett-Lennard that, "The Boche are packing up the other side of the Mairie!" On return to Battalion HQ, Barrett-Lennard was able to report the way ahead open. His shaken driver's only report to his mates was that "Barrett-Lennard is bonkers!"[23] By 17th August operations in the area were closing down and the Brigade were lorried to the area of Falaise.

Again the Brigade had taken heavy casualties during this nine-day operation, and over twenty men were killed in each of 2nd South Wales Borderers and 2nd Glosters. 2nd Essex suffered over twenty-five killed. Wounded were numerous, and it is worthwhile examining the weekly returns from each battalion war diary, to find how far short each battalion was of establishment numbers at this time.

On 12th August 2nd South Wales Borderers required 9 officers and 165 NCO's and men, 2nd Essex required 8 officers and 119 NCO's and men, while 2nd Glosters required 11 officers and 150 NCO's and men.[24] These numbers were not guesses and had to be strictly checked. Demands were put in weekly on the appropriate form, and were separate to the war diary daily reports of activities of each battalion. It is easy to understand the difficulty each battalion CO was under when he found that he was a company to a company and a half short of officers and men for the allotted tasks of his battalion. It is worth stating again that the men required were almost always rifleman. The CO had few options, and either reducing each company's strength to only sixty to eighty men instead of one hundred and thirty three men, or operating with only three rifle companies instead of four, was the normal response. In either case this meant that his tactical options were severely compromised and the firepower of the battalion was greatly diminished as well. The numbers quoted above were on the weekly demand sheets from early in the operation, and show the situation before 2nd Glosters attacked Thury Harcourt and sustained further heavy casualties.

There is a further important point to be made about the reinforcement situation. By now the regimental system, by which men held in the Reinforcement

Holding Units (RHU) and fed forward to replace casualties in battalions from their regiment, had broken down. For some time it had not been the case for example that replacements to 2nd South Wales Borderers were from the South Wales Borderers Regiment. This was leading to a diminution of the very regimental spirit, or brotherhood, that the British Army relied on for its esprit de corps.[25] Very good evidence for this is provided by Lieutenant Colonel Elliott, commanding 2nd Essex, writing about his battalion prior to the move to 59th Division when resting at Buceels: 'There had been so many casualties that the standard of training of the battalion had fallen. We were now a strange collection of many regiments (by complete platoons as far as possible) and many still wearing their own badges.' He later mentions the problem of joining a new and strange division, and that 'many (2nd Essex) men were still in tattered uniforms.'[26] It is worth remembering that this was a proud and regular army battalion and the situation for 2nd South Wales Borderers and 2nd Glosters was similar. Somehow in the ten days following their brief rest at Buceels, 56th Brigade went into battle, and again fought with distinction in exacting circumstances, against an enemy determined to hold open the jaws of a trap closing around them.

The reinforcement situation was now so bad that Montgomery had to act. As early as 14th August, as 2nd Glosters carefully occupied and cleared Thury Harcourt, he had sent a personal telegram to the CIGS, Sir Alan Brooke, stating:

> Regret time has come when I must break up one Inf Div. My Inf Divs are so low in effective rifle strength that they can no (repeat no) longer fight effectively in major operations. Request permission to break up at once 59 Div. 65 Inf Bde (He meant 56) will be retained as an Independent Bde for the present. Request this matter treated as urgent.[27]

Permission was very quickly given, and fairly quietly the men of 59th Division were redistributed to other divisions. It was made clear to the commander of 59th Division, Major General Lyne and his senior commanders, that this decision was taken purely because this was the most junior division in the British Army, and the contribution of the division to the Normandy battle had been greatly appreciated. 56th Brigade was to be moved for the final time to replace a brigade in 49th (Polar Bears) Division.

Before this change became official, 56th Brigade moved 12 miles to the southeast, with 2nd South Wales Borderers at Treprel and 2nd Glosters at Les Loges Saulces. Both battalions were immediately involved in further fighting and patrol work for 24 hours. 2nd Essex was kept in reserve. The Brigade was only six miles west of Falaise, and despite desperate rearguard actions, the German collapse was imminent. Relieved during 19th August, that afternoon and evening the Brigade started to move out in their lorries and carriers to join 49th Division southeast of Caen. They passed through Falaise which 'was in a terrible state, every house burning and the whole place littered with bomb craters, dead horses, Germans and civilians.'[28] On 20th August 2nd Essex and 2nd South Wales Borderers were at Pendouze, where they were visited by their new Divisional commander General Barker. 2nd Glosters were at Airan. Church services were undertaken and the Brigade was in reserve.

The area was infested with flies and mosquitoes, and some men became very ill, with dysentery reaching epidemic proportions. The 2nd South Wales Borderers Medical Officer dealt with over a hundred cases of dysentery. Also as a good

example of the continuing reinforcement problem, 2nd South Wales Borderers received 60 reinforcements from the Tyneside Scottish Regiment. These were from 49th Divisions' 70th Brigade, which had been broken up through heavy casualties and 56th Brigade was replacing. Despite this C Company, 2nd South Wales Borderers had to be temporarily disbanded allowing A, B and D Company to come up to something like full strength. Two days earlier on 19th August the Weekly Return for 2nd South Wales Borderers shows the battalion as virtually 200 men short.[29] Welcome as they were, 60 men must have been a grave disappointment, with requirements on this scale.

49th (West Riding) Infantry Division was a First Line Territorial Division in 1939. Some elements of it took part in the Norwegian Campaign in 1940. Part of the Division went to Iceland as members of Alabaster Force, and later the rest of the Division followed. During this time the Polar Bear sign was introduced and painted on their vehicles. By 1942 the Division had returned to the UK. Originally earmarked as an assault division for the invasion of Europe, it lost this role to 50th (Northumberland) Division, due to Montgomery's wish to use a division already experienced in landings and battle to lead the way. However it was highly trained, and as a follow up division in Normandy it was involved in heavy fighting in the area between 50th Division and the Canadian Army. As such it had taken high casualties fighting 12th SS Hitler Youth Division and Panzer Lehr.

In late July 1944 it was transferred to 1st Corps, which was part of 1st Canadian Army. It is often not realised that the British 49th (West Riding) Division and 51st (Highland) Division formed an important part of 1st Canadian Army. The

Divisional Commander was General 'Bubbles' Barker, a dynamic thrusting leader. By now the Polar Bear Badge, redesigned with a much more aggressive looking Polar Bear, had become the Divisional shoulder badge worn by its troops. Due to some uncompromising actions between it and German units, the Germans came to call them the 'Polar Bear Butchers.' 56th Brigade caught up with 49th Division at Airan, southeast of Caen.[30]

On 19th August the Falaise 'gap' was closed, and the German Army had extricated as many men as possible from the Allied trap. That night US units further south reached and crossed the River Seine. This was excellent news, but caused a problem for the British troops and General Dempsey who 'could not readily deploy his forces coming from the crowded pocket with all their supplies and equipment, until the Canadians on his left veered northwards and the Americans on his right gave him passage.'[31] In fact events had placed the British and Canadian Armies in a relatively long, but narrow strip of land reaching from the mouth of the River Orne to Falaise, and the whole direction of advance had to be changed from south to east.

The Canadian Army was tasked with clearing the coast of France and Belgium as far north as Bruges, taking the ports of Le Havre, Boulogne and Calais and masking Dunkirk. As far as 49th Division and 56th Brigade were concerned on 20th August, the immediate task of 1st Corps was to capture Le Havre and St. Valery after crossing the River Seine. However, whatever the success of the US Army's advance to the south over the River Seine, 49th Division still had over forty miles to go, and four rivers to cross, to reach the town of Pont Audemer. A fifth river, the River Risle, then remained as the last major physical feature before the River Seine.

In the way were a number of German units, some still desperately defending every river, ridge, wood and village. 56th Brigade were advanced to Bonebosq in preparation for the next move.

The first part of the task required an advance to the town of Cormeilles. This involved crossing the River Touques and then the River Calonne to reach the town. On 24th August at 0300hrs, 2nd Glosters crossed the River Toques in the dark, and moved north towards Cormeilles, past positions held by the Hallamshire Regiment. By advancing on Le Breuil en Auge, they relieved German pressure around the town and allowed a Bailey Bridge to be constructed, giving easy access across the river to the follow up battalions. 2nd Essex pushed on and meeting some resistance had to attack Cormeilles at last light. The town lay in a steep wooded valley. Covered by artillery and tank fire they entered the town finding the Germans had left. 2nd Glosters had pushed up in support holding the left flank of the advance. Only light enemy shelling is reported in the War Diaries. At 0800hrs 2nd Essex crossed the river and took the town suffering only a few casualties. In 24 hours the Brigade had pushed the advance 14 miles east.

The orders were to continue the advance and 2nd Glosters left Cormeilles, following up armoured cars that had already sped forward to contact. Five miles to the northeast the Germans were not prepared to give up the town of Epaignes without a more serious fight. Three of the reconnaissance armoured cars were knocked out on the approach to the town. By further reconnaissance, and talking to local civilians and Free French fighters, 2nd Glosters had it confirmed that the area was held in force by up to two companies of Germans. 2nd Glosters moved forward

and German resistance showed that an attack in battalion strength was required. The plan was to send D Company to clear the left flank and enter the village from the northwest, A Company right flanking to enter the village from the south, and B Company to use the main road into town as its main axis of advance. The Germans were well dug in in the surrounding woodland, and had well sited Spandau positions and mortar observation.

In the end 2nd Glosters got into the town, where some fierce hand-to-hand fighting took place, and eventually the Germans were driven out. Parts of the town were on fire including the church. It was suspected that the Germans had fired it to deny its use as an observation tower. Usually one side or the other destroyed such features. Ted Castle remembers this battle as:

> Having a right do at Epaignes. When we took it the town was all in flames. The Germans fought in the town and it was a real rough house. I can remember Frank Clark and B Company there in town. We lost a lot of lads there, which kept the battalion weak. A Company was sent in to relieve B and D Company who were taking a hammering.[32]

In all 2nd Glosters had 14 men killed and over forty wounded. Two members of the Royal Armoured Corps and a Royal Engineer also lost their lives. 2nd Glosters had killed 48 of the enemy and taken 5 prisoners. The number of German dead gives an indication of how hard they fought to hold this little town knowing that the end result was inevitable. This operation had taken all day, starting at 0930hrs on 25th August until 2230hrs, when the town was finally reported as cleared.[33] The town has erected one of the few monuments commemorating British soldiers in Normandy who died in action. It is about 100 metres before entering the eastern side of the town, on the main D139, and lists the men who died here.

At 0730hrs the following morning, 49th Reconnaissance Regiment moved through to clear the way ahead, and by 1300hrs the battalion was on its way to Pont Audemer and the west bank of the River Risle. Both 2nd Essex and 2nd South Wales Borderers came forward to take this crossing. Elements of 6th Airborne Division were there before them, still in the fight despite plans to withdraw them shortly after D-Day. However they were unable to cross the river due to its width. Also the Germans had blown the bridges, and numbers of enemy snipers and observation posts were firmly established on the other side. Again the valley sides were steep, heavily wooded and 120 metres high, and the Germans were regularly shelling the town.

A great change had taken place in the distance advances were covering. They could now be measured in miles each day rather than yards. By the early afternoon of 26th August all three battalions of 56th Brigade had been brought up to Pont Audemer. With 49th Division held up along the River Risle, 56th Brigade were tasked to cross at night to open the way, using 2nd Essex on the right flank, and 2nd South Wales Borderers on the left, advancing through the town. The first problem was to find the best place to cross. Lieutenant Colonel Barlow visited the town with Sgt. Richard Philips to find out any information from the local population. Inside the town it seemed chaotic. German shelling was going on, and the local French Forces de l'Interieur (FFI) were out in force, some reportedly looting shops in the town. One can see that Lieutenant Colonel Barlow had a job on his hands and Sergeant Dick Philips remembers this well:

> I clearly recall accompanying Colonel Barlow to the local Maquis HQ to find if there was a fordable point across what was really a deepish stream. There must have been over 40 Maquis present and each one of them had a different idea of where the river could be forded. The arguments between them became quite heated and the CO decided to make a discreet withdrawal.[34]

After leaving this bedlam, what followed involved a reconnaissance with a member of the FFI, crawling through offices and shops, in and out of ground floor windows and via a tannery until they were only a few yards from the water's edge. Here it was indicated that the water was shallow enough to ford the river. The reconnaissance party arrived back at battalion at 2030hrs and Lieutenant Colonel Barlow made his plans quickly, including having white tape laid from an assembly area in town through all the buildings encountered, to the crossing point. He got the leading Company to start following the tapes at 2130hrs and crossing the river by 2230hrs. The Germans were continuing their shelling of the town. B then A Company crossed, holding their weapons above their heads, and took the high ground dominating the town 400 metres beyond. B Company were hit by a burst of Spandau fire when pushing through the buildings beyond the crossing, and suffered 12 casualties. A feature of this advance was the excellent Signals work organised by the Signals Officer, Sam Weaver:

> The plan was for each of the two attacking companies to be given a drum of telephone wire to unwind behind them as they advanced. So lines had to be laid from Battalion main HQ on the hills above the town *(British side)* to Tac HQ in the town and then from Tac HQ to the crossing place along an extraordinary route. Because Main HQ was an unusually long distance from Tac HQ, line-laying signallers were in short supply as so many were needed. So when it came to allocate a gang for the line from Tac HQ to the crossing place, Nobby, (Cowan, the Signals Sergeant and Sam Weavers mentor from the New Forest) turned to me and asked, "shall you and I lay that Sir?" Once more I was gratified to think that Nobby considered me sufficiently adept for this task.[35]

Although somewhat cut off, the boot was now on the other foot, and the following day the two companies dominated the German positions. At one stage five Bren guns were grouped to lay down a devastating fire on one *Spandau* position. That night D Company crossed via the partially destroyed main bridge in the middle of the town, and all the companies pushed forward to take a crossroads north of the town. Then Battalion transport was brought down into town, and by first light on 28th August, Battalion HQ had crossed the River Risle and joined the rifle companies.

Meanwhile, 2nd Essex attempt to force a crossing further south using storm boats, foundered when the noise of launching the boats alerted the Germans. Flares and Verey Lights lit up the river, which was then swept by machine gun fire. A second attempt using the wreckage of the bridge in the town centre was slightly more successful, as a Section of A Company crossed. But then the Germans woke up and threw grenades into the water around the second section, and opened up on the town with mortars and 88mm guns as well as *Spandaus*, making further attempts impossible. By daylight the small force was ensconced in buildings on the far bank and refused a German demand to surrender. Sniping and shelling ensued by both sides.[36] But with 2nd South Wales Borderers in force on the heights dominating the town, it became obvious by late afternoon that the Germans were quietly withdrawing, and by 1500hrs on 27th August the rest of 2nd Essex were following A Company across the river. Now Engineers could set to work and build Bailey Bridges to enable armour and vehicles to follow up.

The crossing by the two battalions was very successful due to the audacious nature of the operation and the discipline and bravery of the men carrying them out. What they had achieved was all the more impressive because the off-the-cuff planning that had to be done by the senior officers of each battalion. Normally a defended river crossing required comprehensive reconnaissance, planning and training of troops. In just over a week since the actions to take Thury Harcourt, 56th Brigade had yet again shown its effectiveness crossing a number of rivers and taking several towns.

Ahead, the remaining German forces had now been squashed into a small area with the River Seine at its back. Along with 147th Brigade on its left, 56th Brigade was tasked with taking the Foret de Brotonne, and moved forward to seal off the southern edge of the wood. After over a week of continual action most men were exhausted. The large area of forest, covering around thirty square miles, was surrounded on three sides by a large loop of the River Seine. Intelligence reports believed the Germans would make a strong rearguard stand here, as they evacuated as many men, and as much material as they could, by ferry across the river. 2nd South Wales Borderers moved to an area to the south of the forest near the town of Bourneville, in brilliant weather, and with the skies full of Allied aircraft. On 28th and 29th August they were involved in small scale, but vicious encounters around the edge of the forest. On the right of 2nd South Wales Borderers both 2nd Glosters and 2nd Essex encountered similar problems of mortars, mines and *Spandau* positions, and took casualties.

However, 49th Division's General Barker believed that the resistance was only a crust, and ordered a rapid advance through the forest by all three battalions. So after the edge of the wood was heavily attacked by rocket firing Typhoon aircraft, all three battalions advanced, using different roads and rides through the forest. Often driving ahead firing automatic weapons into the woodland, they were amazed at what they saw. The forest hid the wreckage of the German Army in this area. Each battalion has left a record of what it saw. The 2nd South Wales Borderers noticed that, 'the whole of the forest had been used as a huge vehicle park. Glancing to the right and left down the rides one could see lines and lines of trucks and guns, mostly burnt out which had been parked here to wait their turn to cross the river.'[37] For 2nd Glosters, 'we were astonished at the chaos that was found in the wood. There had not even been time to booby-trap this tempting array of souvenirs.'[38] Finally 2nd Essex recorded 'The Foret de Bretonne proved to be what everybody had hoped – the graveyard of the bulk of the equipment of the 7th Army.'[39]

Driving right through the forest on various routes the Brigade came into the open and down to the River Seine. Many prisoners were driven into the hands of 2nd South Wales Borderers. In wrecked towns like La Mailleraye, the now free French people feted them, despite enduring many days of bombing and strafing by the Allied air forces as well as looting by the withdrawing Germans.

Now a rest was given to the Brigade, although units had the task of counting abandoned vehicles and weapons in the area. Sam Weaver, of 2nd South Wales Borderers, claims he gave up counting at several hundred vehicles, but had great fun driving some of them around. There were over three hundred abandoned in La

Mailleraye alone. Unfortunately 2nd Essex lost an officer engaged on this task, when his jeep blew up on a mine. Also many hundreds of horses had been released and were running free. Many were injured and had to be put down, and French farmers driving into the area appropriated many more. Quite a number of soldiers amused themselves riding bareback, which was usually a comedy. 2nd Essex claim every man had a mount, and Major Dauncey, of 2nd South Wales Borderers, was seen driving a pony and trap. During their stay, a small patrol of 2nd South Wales Borderers daringly crossed the River Seine by boat, and investigated a shipyard containing a damaged U Boat. More importantly they could report that the Germans had withdrawn back from the river. Many German soldiers stranded in the woods and cut off, were rounded up over these few days.

The final part of the plan was now to be implemented, that of taking the port and large city of Le Havre. Both 51st (Highland) and 49th (West Riding) Division were to cross the River Seine and surround Le Havre to the east and north cutting it off completely. The marching groups of 2nd South Wales Borderers moved not far north to Caudebec and began to cross in storm boats. D Company were across complete, followed by A Company when tragedy struck. The turning tide caused the speed of the river to increase, and one of the storm boats overturned, drowning 14 men of A Company. Crossing was suspended for the day. In 2006 a plaque was unveiled at Yvetot honouring these men. Meanwhile essential transport was ferried across further south of La Mailleraye. By midnight the marching troops of D and A Company that had got across, the carriers of Support Company and vehicles and personnel of the Tactical HQ were together on the north side of the River Seine

commanded by Major Dauncey. On the morning of 3rd September this group advanced north into enemy territory without making contact.

On the south side of the river the remainder of 2nd South Wales Borderers marching troops crossed in DUKWS, in the same area as the carriers the previous day. They then marched 18 miles to a concentration area, and were then taken in lorries to join A and D Companies. That afternoon Lieutenant Colonel Barlow and the remainder of 2nd South Wales Borderers crossed and joined the battalion, making it complete.[40] On 2nd September 2nd Glosters were told they would proceed via Rouen then had this order cancelled. This was replaced by an order for the marching troops to cross by DUKWS and storm boats. The weather turned rough and the move was cancelled. Crossing took place the next day. 2nd Glosters transport went via Rouen. The sheer numbers of vehicles using the Rouen route held up the transport, and they eventually joined up with the marching troops on 4th September.[41]

Syd Hampton, 2nd Glosters, remembers that the transport got up to the outskirts of Rouen "then the MT Sergeant did a recce down by the docks and found German equipment and dead horses and nowhere to cross. So we started driving and it took all night to go around and end up opposite where we had started!"[42] It is interesting to note, that like all good soldiers of the British Army, they took time to have a speculative look around for any extras they could scrounge! 2nd Essex seem to have had an easier time of it crossing the river at four separate points, but using 'ferries, assault boats and amphibious craft'.[43] The word ferry indicates the key to their

crossing. On the other side three German lorries were made available to them to help with transport on to Le Havre.

The problem of getting around the River Seine at Rouen blew up into a major argument between Generals Dempsey and Bradley. Dempsey accusing Bradley at a press conference that he had been obstructed by US traffic. Bradley thought this 'one of the greatest injustices done to the American Army' and complained to Montgomery, who apologised and gave Dempsey a strict telling off for running down Bradley in public. This row arose again in 1951 when Bradley criticised Dempsey in his biography A Soldier's Story and Montgomery again interceded on behalf of Dempsey via Eisenhower.[44] This gave a valuable insight into the rivalries and pressures Generals were under, but a clearer transport plan between the British and US Armies in the area may have saved the lives of fourteen men of 56th Brigade.

Now 1st British Corps, led by General Crocker, and under command of 1st Canadian Army, closed up and isolated Le Havre by surrounding the town on its northern and narrow eastern flanks. The River Seine cut the town off to the south, and the sea to the west. The port was heavily fortified on its seaward side, with a number of batteries containing 35 coastal guns. Strong defences had been constructed in depth on its landward side. No plan for assault from the river or sea was tenable. Originally the reduction of this fortress city was examined prior to the invasion, when '21st Army Group produced in March 1944, a study on Operation Axehead' seeking to capture Rouen and Le Havre by 90 days after D-Day.[45] Now

only 75 and 81 days after the landings, on 20th August and 26th August 1944, two messages from Montgomery tasked First Canadian Army with its capture:

> 20-8-44. First Canadian Army. It is important to clear the port of HAVRE very early; the railway communications from the port, eastwards and northwards, will be required for the maintenance of the armies and much time will be saved if these can be secured intact, together with all possible railway stock.
>
> 26-8-44. First Canadian Army. One Corps will be turned into the HAVRE peninsula, to destroy the enemy forces in that area and to secure the port of HAVRE. No more forces will be employed in this task than are necessary to achieve the object. The main business lies in the north and the PAS DE CALAIS.[46]

Coincidently with the Montgomery order of 20th August, the commander of Le Havre attempted to get the civilian population to leave. But expecting a quick allied advance, and urged to disobey the order by the local resistance, few took the opportunity to do so either then, or on 31st August following a second German decree. Le Havre was the second largest port in France and able to accommodate the largest ships afloat. Its port comprised over 12 miles of quays. It also contained three petroleum wharves, three shipbuilding yards, and two aircraft factories. It was hoped that if captured quickly with little damage, it could be put to work to the Allied advantage with its potential as an important port and distribution centre.[47] Also Le Havre still had the potential to be of more than nuisance value to Allied shipping operating in the English Channel. On D-Day its torpedo boats had sunk the destroyer HMNS Svenner and narrowly missed the battleships HMS Warspite and HMS Ramillies. Prior to the invasion air reconnaissance showed 5 Torpedo Boats, 50 minesweepers and 21 Patrol Craft in the port. Bomber Command destroyed much of its potency for maritime operations on the 14th and 15th June during two heavy raids. By August only six Motor Torpedo Boats remained operational there.

On July 6th a mass attack by 26 manned Marder human torpedoes was launched from Le Havre sinking two minesweepers. In late August with the Allied advance reaching the River Seine, British Naval patrols blockading Le Havre were increased to stop German supplies and reinforcements reaching the port, and deny the escape from the port of all remaining vessels. Between 26th and 29th August four naval battles took place at night sinking nine German vessels, and from 30th August the port of Le Havre stayed empty.[48]

As early as January 1944, Le Havre had been declared a 'Festung' or fortress by the Germans, and by the end of August its commander General Wildermuth had had orders to make the docks unusable and defend the city to the last man. Its defenders were a mix of Army and Navy personnel and of varied combat value. However there were at least three months of provisions and ammunition within Le Havre, and Allied estimates put the number of all German combatants as high as 8,700 although the real figure turned out to be over 11,000. Some of these were reckoned 'of low fighting value.'[49] On the landward side, the River Lezarde ran due south through the town of Montivilliers and exited into the River Seine, providing the boundary between the port of Harfleur and Le Havre. The heavily defended northern plateau was bounded to the east by the River Lezarde and to the south by the River Fontaine. The source of the small Fontaine river rose near the village of Fontaine-le- Mallet and ran west to east into the River Lezarde at right angles.

The Germans had dammed these rivers and flooded their valley floors. South of the River Fontaine rose the southern plateau, its top covered by the Foret de Montgeon and leading down into the city. At the northern outskirts of the city were

two large 19th Century forts, and throughout the city were roadblocks, fortified buildings and pillboxes. A plan was now put into operation to lay siege to this fortress that was to lack little, and bring force to bear in order to reduce the defences very quickly and with as little loss of life to British forces as possible. Maps and aerial photography was used extensively to help create detailed scale models of the area from sand and cloth.

The two Divisions of 1st Corps were spread covering the northern and eastern land access to Le Havre. 51st (Highland) Division covered the west, and 49th (West Riding) Division covered the east. Under command, 51st Division had the 33rd Armoured Brigade, 1st Lothians (Flail tanks less one squadron), 2 squadrons of 42 Assault Regiment AVREs and C Squadron 141 Royal Armoured Corps (Crocodile flame tanks). 49th Division had 34th Tank Brigade, 22nd Dragoons (Flail Tanks), 42 Assault Regiment (less two squadrons), A Squadron 141 RAC Crocodiles, plus 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrying Squadron. This was a squadron of 44 'Kangaroos', self-propelled artillery with guns removed and converted to carry troops into battle. This was a relatively new Canadian idea. There were also the usual divisional troops attached such as field ambulance, engineers and artillery.

56th Brigade were chosen to lead the attack to take the northern plateau between Montivilliers and Fontaine-le-Mallet and establish crossings over the River Fontaine. The right flank was to be dealt with by 2nd South Wales Borderers, and the left flank by 2nd Glosters. 2nd Essex were then to move through in the Kangaroos and take the edge of the southern plateau. Both 51st Division and 147 Brigade from 49th Division were then to move through into the city and port. 2nd Glosters had five

strongpoints to deal with, 2nd South Wales Borderers three, and 2nd Essex two strongpoints. The German strongpoints consisted of buried concrete bunkers and pillboxes with walls up to three metres thick. Trenches, some of which were covered, linked these anti-tank and machine gun positions. At least one position had a turret-mounted flamethrower. Each position was wired in and mined. Across the front of the German positions was a deep anti-tank ditch with further minefields.[50] It is possible to examine the remains of 2nd South Wales Borderers target strong points around Empremesnil Farm to this day. Barbed wire surrounding the present day fields is still staked out using the original German stakes.[51] The defences of Le Havre showed that it was indeed a fortress, and would need considerable softening up prior to an attack if a large number of casualties were to be avoided. An important problem for the Allies was the large number of French civilians still in the city.

In order that an ultimatum could be sent to the Germans, General Barker declared a truce overnight on 3rd September. The Germans refused to surrender but wanted a truce lasting two days to allow the evacuation of French civilians. General Crocker refused due to a lack of time.[52]

There then began a softening up process. Over 900,000 leaflets were dropped into the area by plane or shellfire, aimed at persuading German soldiers to desert. Some did desert, and even brought important information over. Loudspeaker broadcasts were aimed at a similar result, and could be plainly heard up to three kilometres into German lines. This prompted the fortress commander to remove any doubtful units from his front line. A very active artillery programme was followed.

At sea HMS Erebus, a monitor with two 15inch guns, and the battleship HMS Warspite with eight 15inch guns, took on the coastal batteries on the 10th September. On two previous occasions, 5th and 8th September, HMS Erebus had twice been hit herself and forced to retire. The German batteries had also been heavily bombed but were still not out of action. On 10th September the two warships fired over 300 15inch shells and finally silenced the batteries.

But most distressing was the bombing by air of not only targets in the northern assault area, but also in the city. On 5th September the southwest portion of the city, believed to contain the German HQ was heavily bombed for nearly two hours. On 6th September another two-hour raid by the RAF on the defences of the plateau southeast of the Foret de Montgeon took place, and on 8th September another raid hit the area of south of Octeville. 1,000 bombers dropped 4,000 tons of bombs and incendiaries in these raids. The official British Army view is recorded that 'During these attacks the forward troops were withdrawn to 3,000 yards from the target, but they were delivered with extreme accuracy and were well concentrated.'[53] However during these raids the Germans suffered comparatively little, but the centre of Le Havre was destroyed, and over 2,000 civilians killed.

Although he did not know the size of the French casualty toll, these acts prompted Captain William Douglas Home (a younger brother of Sir Alec Douglas Home, Conservative Prime Minister 1963) to refuse to take any further part in the operation, despite a direct order from his Commanding Officer. A subaltern and liaison officer between 51st Division and his unit, 141st RAC, he was aware of the German offer to evacuate French civilians. He had previously been disturbed by the

bombing of Caen, and had already written to newspapers outlining his distaste for the Allied war aim of unconditional surrender. He was later sentenced to dishonourable discharge and served eight months hard labour. In 1988 the War Office declined to reopen his case and he died in 1992.[54] The seemingly indiscriminate use of bombing over the town upset many other men and Nicholas Somerville, now Adjutant of 2nd South Wales Borderers, recalls feeling, "appalled to see the damage and civilian casualties through the bombing. I felt bitter about that". General Crocker is reported to have said, "This isn't war its murder."[55]

A further problem was the weather, which had remained wet. The wet ground caused problems for the armour, and the attack was postponed. When the weather improved the attack was ordered to begin on the evening of 10th September. The South Wales Borderers Mortar Platoon fired 1500 rounds into Fontaine-le-Maillett from an established dump in preparation the night before the assault.

The supporting armour and infantry of 56th Brigade combined to make eight gaps through the German minefields and reduce the fortified positions. Just prior to the attack over 800 bombers unloaded a further 4,600 tons of bombs on the German forward positions, reducing some woodland to matchwood. The battle was to be intensive, with 2nd South Wales Borderers having more problems than 2nd Glosters. In the gapping operations 22 tanks were lost on mines or anti-tank guns and 'throughout the night and following day both tracked and wheeled vehicles continued to strike mines in the lanes.'[56] Five lanes were completely abandoned, and others were even impassable to carriers, due to the mud. The Petard firing tanks, and awesome flame throwing Crocodile tanks, were terrifying in their ability

to destroy prepared positions. On the 2nd South Wales Borderers front it is reported that the flame gun of one Crocodile tank wiped out a whole platoon of German infantry. However 56th Brigade completed its task very well, and by the following day things were going so well, that General Barker altered his plan and was still using all three battalions of 56th Brigade to clear into the town and down to the docks.

Such a well-organised and brilliantly planned attack remains fixed in the memories of those who took part. Some though, were out of action before 10th September. Private Frank Rosier remembers being pulled back for the bombing. Frank, and a friend Bert Figg, had used their time usefully in gathering some food. Frank had some eggs stowed down his battledress top and a chicken over his shoulder. What Frank describes "as the smallest mortar bomb in Normandy"[57] fell between the two men. Bert Figg went down gushing blood from a neck wound. Frank picked him up and shoulder carried him back, but he too had been hit in the head and could see less and less. He managed to get his injured friend back before collapsing. Bert Figg recovered, but Frank lost an eye and was evacuated. Sam Weaver, of 2nd South Wales Borders, now found himself taking on the role of Intelligence Officer. As the attack went in he was at the small Tactical HQ on the edge of a wood near Fontenelles. The area came under shellfire and Lieutenant Colonel Barlow wanted them to get into some disused slit trenches. Seeing they were lined with straw, and worried about his hay fever, he remained above ground. "With the microphone and headphones on. Inevitably, I suppose, I was hit in the leg by a shell splinter."[58] He now allowed himself to be dragged into the trench and was evacuated back to UK, rejoining 2nd South Wales Borderers in December.

Some days prior to this Dick Philips, the Intelligence Section Sergeant received a visitor with important information:

> A Frenchman came in. He was employed in the office of the Commander Le Havre. He brought in 'Most Secret' German documents, showing every minefield and the defences. He brought it to me; I gave it to Nick Somerville, who gave it to the CO. Then Colonel Barlow did this day patrol, looking at the going for tanks in the area. He wanted me with him in charge of the patrol, and we went quite a long way, until finally we were under quite heavy fire. Despite the heavy fire we saw a farmer ploughing. We shouted to him to get out of it, but he carried on until there was a mortar burst and the horse was badly hurt. By this time I said to Barlow "I think you had better get down sir." Later when we got back, it was reported to me that Colonel Barlow had said that he thought Sergeant Philips would never get down![59]

The information provided by the Frenchman was very important, and the attack was put back for some days to change the assault plans. Despite the high degree of planning, casualties in the attack were inevitable. Ted Castle records the excellent briefing given to 2nd Glosters and the sad loss during the attack of a very popular and brave officer:

> For the attack on Le Havre we had one of the best briefings I ever had. The attack was well thought out. The night before the attack about 500 Lancasters bombed the town, the next night over 500 guns opened up, then there was another bombing raid. We got into position about late evening, and we got out of our trenches and moved across some land. There was a tank got hit by a mine and was on fire. I went across and there was a chap in the tank, and we had to take his leg off with a jacknife to get him out. We got so far, but came under heavy defensive fire and Major Lance MC got hit. He lost his jaw. I ran to him and we put him in the Bren Gun Carrier. He shook hands and said 'keep going, keep going' but he died soon after, and it knocked the guts out of A Company, morale went right down. Later when we were down in Le Havre, dug in at the cemetery, the sergeant major came up and he said, "I have got some bad news, Major John is dead". Tears were running down his face as he said it and mine as well. He was so well respected, a man of few words and a disciplinarian, but you would follow him to hell and back.[60]

When entering the town, Dick Philips remembers the armed and helmeted French Maquis going in with them, and that alongside the danger an episode of comedy might relieve the tension of battle:

> There were quite a lot of French Maquis there. The first tank proceeded downhill into Le Havre, and all hell broke loose. The Maquis disappeared except one car. The next thing that happened, we were behind these Churchill Tanks. We went downhill and turned right and came on very heavy machine gun fire. These two fellows got out of the car and run into a shop doorway. This big Churchill came down, swung around and didn't see the car. It went straight over the top of the car and backed off. These two Frenchmen had their heads in their hands, as they had borrowed the car without permission from one of their brothers in law! So you had a flat car! The Shermans came along, and soon put paid to the German machine gun fire. I later remember seeing a bridge blown up so high, going up and up and up, and suddenly disintegrating.[61]

Gordon Duffin with 2nd Glosters remembers that they advanced behind a flail tank. As they approached the wood a large RAF raid flying through thick German Flak blew it to splinters. He came on an officer crying, and saying that he could not go on. They managed to get him to go with them, but he disappeared fairly soon. Coming up to a German blockhouse an AVRE tank slowly approached it and fired its petard. The blockhouse disappeared in a cloud of smoke. They spent the night in a very deep bunker, which was the telephone exchange for the northern plateau. This was full of cigars, cognac and food, and one very dishevelled German. A small group of RAF men that had been shot down in the bombing of the wood came up to them and were sent back. They had wanted to know where the officers' mess was! The next day as they advanced into town they came across the first of streams of surrendering Germans. That night they bivouacked in a cemetery, and the following morning captured the Fort Sanvic, where much loot was to be had from the

surrendering Germans. Gordon himself kept three pistols and money worth £60 – a considerable sum in 1944. Stopping their advance further down in the town, they all started cheering like mad when the lid of a tank was raised, and the tank man shouted "its all over they have capitulated!"[62]

The transport started to catch up with the rifle companies and Syd Hampton driving a lorry full of 2nd Glosters ammunition remembers, "we were parked in a farmyard saw the bombing raids going in. We were ready to follow up and were by this barn, when Jerry replied with artillery, and a shell landed sizzling in the manure heap, probably delayed fuses. We moved off quickly!" Then, following a flail tank they had just got into the built up area, when hundreds of Germans started coming up the road "like a football match!" His cockney friend Danny said, "look at all these bastards!"[63]

> Then a German said in perfect English, "How far have you come from mate?" I was amazed, I nearly collapsed! He was English and had apparently been working in Germany in 1938 and married this German girl, couldn't get home when the war started, and been whipped into the German Army. I remember a cemetery on the right and the Provost Sergeant Glyn was there and said, "look after them a minute. Make them turn out their pockets." He had got all these German officers. We got 50 Francs off one of them. Just after that some RAF blokes came up, one of them was Canadian, and we gave them some fags. They had been shot down in a Lancaster.[64]

In fact the battle was not quite over. The town had to be properly cleared. In the area of the port snipers, and *Spandau* teams held out for some time. 56th Brigade were in the thick of it, as seeing an opportunity to get on quickly, General Crocker had changed his plans and pushed 56th Brigade into the town then port area, rather than waste time with other units coming through them. One of the problems in clearing the town was to persuade armed civilians to get out of the way. When told

of Germans holding out in the local gaol soldiers of 2nd Essex found, 'There was a good deal of indiscriminate shooting. After considerable persuasion we cleared the armed civilians out of the way – they were very dangerous, many youths being armed literally to the teeth.'[65] When a Sherman tank blasted down the gaol gates it was found to be empty. To be fair, many of the local FFI had been more than useful in gathering information before the attack, and then helping to gather, guard and march away prisoners afterwards.

There were thousands of prisoners and a considerable amount of loot. Each battalion claims well over a thousand prisoners, 2nd Glosters over 1,600, so the Brigade as a whole took more prisoners than it had men. A number of officers and men complain that very often prisoners were searched (and therefore loot gained) by rear echelon troops. "There were a tremendous number of prisoners and we put them in this school. They, (soldiers from other units), went to town on the first lot we delivered. They kept us back and relieved them of any valuables, watches and so on."[66] The 2nd Essex CO even put an armed guard with bayonets fixed over one valuable cache of alcohol, thus ensuring that his battalion could enjoy it later. There are numbers of stories concerning money taken from German paymasters. Certainly some of it made it back to Post Office and bank accounts in Britain. Some men are purported to have buried a vast sum and returned several years after the war to retrieve it, only to find that it could no longer be converted. Certainly a great deal of alcohol was retrieved by the Brigade, and when 56th Brigade was put into reserve for a well deserved rest near Lillebonne, there were football matches with the locals, dances and battalion parties. In fact what they did not know was that they were grounded, due to 1st Corps transport being taken to operate with the forces now

going into action much further north in Operation Market Garden, the drive on Arnhem. While around Lillebonne the men could only wonder at the vast air armada that crossed the skies to Arnhem, and what it meant for the future.

The operation to take Le Havre was a great success. Planning, and the determination of the attacking troops, were two reasons why this most heavily defended stronghold fell so quickly and thankfully with only small numbers of British casualties for such a prize. Other reasons doubtless include the low morale of the German troops locked up in Le Havre and the attitude of its senior officer, General Wildermuth. He was not a young fervent Nazi, and is reported to have said 'it was futile to fight tanks with bare hands. In the event of an attack by tanks, resistance nests which no longer had any anti-tank weapons, were then at liberty to surrender'.[67]

A concern of the men who took part in this operation is with the large numbers of casualties inflicted on the French by bombing, and the fact that in the past the taking of Le Havre has often been presented as a Canadian success, whereas mainly British units were involved, under Canadian high command.

For 56th Brigade as a whole, there was a period of rest, enforced by the use of 49th and 51st Divisions lack of transport. However by the end of September they were involved in intense fighting on the Belgian-Dutch border near Popple, at the taking of the area around Antwerp and the advance north past Walcheren. They were then moved to Nijmegen and spent the winter in an area known as 'The Island' until becoming the assault brigade for the final capture of Arnhem in April 1945.

But the reality of what they had been through since June 6th was often brought home in a more down to earth fashion, and before they left Le Havre, an officer approached Gordon Duffins' Platoon:

> We had flopped down on a patch of grass where our officer said "Ah good, I want a picture of all you D-Day lads." He was using a German camera he had looted! We line up, and there are only seven of us left from over thirty that had started out on D-Day. Of the seven, only two remained unwounded by the end of the war.[68]

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Conclusion.

By the 20th August 1944 the deployment of 56th Brigade was settled for the remainder of the war, as it became a permanent Brigade within 49th Infantry Division. By September it had successfully operated as part of that division in the advance to the River Seine and the taking of the fortress city of Le Havre. With the end of its operations in France and loss of its title of 'Independent' it is a good time to review its achievements and effectiveness since formation in March 1944. Some comparisons with similar units operating in Normandy will be made and the problems associated with using casualty figures explored. Finally an evaluation will be made of the methodological issues, which have arisen in a thesis that has drawn heavily on veteran testimony in order to reconstruct and analyse the operations of the 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade in the Normandy Campaign.

It will be remembered that the constituent battalions of 56th Brigade had all been on Home Service since the middle of 1940. Variously used for coastal defence construction, reinforcement units for sister battalions serving overseas and even farm work, the battalions were in various states of readiness for action in early 1944. Certainly 2nd South Wales Borderers and 2nd Essex seem to have been particularly depleted of men and first line transport. Also because they were Home Service units, inevitably the three battalions contained a number of officers and men who were unsuitable by age or ability for the coming battle in Normandy. The process of forming a brigade ready for action saw a weeding out and further reductions in the numbers of men in each battalion. It seems somewhat incredible that starting only in March 1944, the Brigade had to be formed, organised, brought

up to strength, trained to land in Normandy on D-Day, fulfil the task of advancing to Bayeux and holding the forward right flank of the British Army before playing an important part in future operations. Yet that and more is what 56th Brigade achieved between 6th June and 14th September 1944.

The reasons for this success are important, and lay in the belief, will and dedication of the commanding officers of each battalion in 1944 to surmount all problems and get the job done. Without doubt one thing that helped see them through was that the officers and men were in Regular Army battalions with a deep-rooted regimental history behind them. The men who made up the battalions were indoctrinated in this background, had faith in their comrades, and despite the vagaries of three years of military employment in the UK, were well trained to the standards of the British Army in 1944. In other words the Army system of the time based on pride and attachment to the regiment seems to have helped greatly in the formation 56th Brigade. Equally, Brigadier Pepper has to take much credit as both manager and director of the whole entity. His vision and simple expedients of playing on the 'Independent' role of the Brigade (the only independent infantry brigade in Normandy) and a shoulder badge of the Sphinx that made each member of the Brigade stand out within the rest of 21st Army Group as being unique, quickly gave them a pride and 'team' identity.

It is perhaps the speed with which this was achieved that seems improbable. So many tasks had to be tackled; heavy schedules for re-equipping, training, and planning, with the landings only just three months away. Aside from manpower issues, it is a second tribute to the Army system at this stage of the war, which saw

such effective officers in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and Major with both high organisational and leadership skills in place within the battalions. This system did not show wanting when engaged in combat, even after each battalion had to have a replacement commanding officer during the time in Normandy. Equally at the level of junior and non-commissioned officer, there was a similar effectiveness and professionalism, and this has often been highlighted during interviews with the veterans, and reported in the battalion war diaries and other associated literature.

Once in Normandy the Brigade operated very effectively. Despite a late and fragmented landing beyond its control, it concentrated at Buhot in reasonable time and moved forward into contact with the enemy, achieving the majority of its tasks that day, except the taking of Bayeux. It was undoubtedly the correct decision to put off taking the town until daylight, especially as a reconnaissance on the night of 6/7 June by 2nd Essex was opposed. When comparing it with other similar sized D-Day units, 56th Brigade operated as well as the others landing on Gold Beach. The lateness of the landing of the Brigade because of the heavier resistance from the Germans, especially at Asnelles and Le Hamel, was the main factor holding the Brigade back from taking Bayeux until 7th June. This is certainly not to condemn the ability of the assault or other follow up brigade. Each worked efficiently and with great bravery. Their problem, particularly on the right flank of Gold Beach, was that the heavy bombing programme intended to subdue the defences failed, some defences had not previously been recognised, and unexpectedly the defence was much tougher, being provided by a German field division rather than a static coastal division. This gave the assault battalions a far harder time of it than anticipated.

Together with the continuing poor weather, which caused a slow build up of forces from D+1, this saw the effective end of the plan to put an armoured brigade as far south as Villers Bocage by the end of D-Day. Instead, by 11th June, Panzer Lehr and 12th SS Panzer Divisions had arrived in the battle area, and the direct route to Villers Bocage was thwarted at Tilly-sur-Seulles. Some days later the attempt to gain Villers Bocage by a right hook foundered initially under the gun of Wittman's lone Tiger tank. Despite this, it must be recognized that by the end of D-Day the forces landing on Gold Beach had made a most significant thrust into German held territory.

In retrospect we can see 56th Brigade in action as a series of extended periods of front line activity. Firstly D-Day and the consolidation of the beachhead area as far west as the line of the River Aure, the action at Chateau Sully and advance to consolidate the ground south and west of Bayeux. This period already showed the difficulty of operating in the bocage and the tough opposition they might expect from individual snipers and *Spandau* teams, willing to risk and give their lives. Also it became clear that infantry and tank co-operation techniques were severely lacking in effectiveness. Commanding officers and the Brigadier realised that in this landscape there were to be found no good spots on high ground giving a clear view over enemy positions from which to observe and plan future actions. Senior officers often had to become highly mobile, and hence vulnerable, using jeeps for reconnaissance. Also if the Allies had control of the air the German Army would prove that it had excellent techniques of camouflage and cover.

A second period would see 56th Brigade used with the armour to try and smash through the German line in the area between Tilly-sur-Seulles and Lingevres. This was a period of near impossible tasks and heavy casualties, taking on very effective units of Panzer Lehr, who proved that their tanks could operate equally well in both the restricted streets and rubble of a town like Tilly-sur-Seulles and the orchards of the bocage at Essex Wood. But the month of July spent in the area in front of St. Germain D'Ectot shows beyond doubt that the men of 56th Brigade had themselves become tough and intractable fighters, whether holding a heavy German attack, or on one of the endless and frightening patrols by day and night into the bocage. Here the fighting can be compared to the static warfare of the First World War and reliance on artillery, both British and American, helped the Brigade stand its ground.

By the time they were moved to 59th Division in August to help in the operation to take the area around Thury Harcourt, the Brigade could show that despite its casualties and serious replacement problems, their regular and conscript soldiers had forged a very reliable professional unit. The efficiency of the actions here prove this, for the Germans would have liked to hold open the pocket closing around them at this shoulder. The two final periods of action with 49th Division, advancing to and crossing the River Seine and the taking of Le Havre, underline the effectiveness of 56th Brigade, as the approach involved a number of difficult and defended river crossings, as well as the final assault into the fortress of Le Havre.

What is surprising, considering the recent history of its battalions and the short period of time 56th Brigade had to prepare for the invasion, is that it was put in

to land with the very experienced 50th Division and expected to achieve as difficult a set of tasks as faced by the other three experienced brigades in the division. Apart from a short period of time under command of 7th Armoured Division, 56th Brigade fought mainly under command of 50th Division during June and July 1944, fitting in well. Exact comparisons between battalions and brigades are difficult because so much depends on the enemy and the ground one has to fight across. What is clear is that each brigade and battalion in 50th Division is deemed to have fought well. Casualty figures point to the intensity of fighting and while on 11 - 12 June 2nd Essex report over 150 casualties at Essex Wood, on the same day 6th Green Howards of 50th Division, while working down the east of the River Seulles towards Tilly-sur-Seulles, suffered over 200 casualties at Cristot.

Examples such as these show that while units of 56th Brigade suffered high casualties at times, they were no worse than casualties in other battalions in the Division fighting a similar battle. However the taking of heavy casualties and continuous fighting could have extremely detrimental effects, and in one well-known case 6th Duke of Wellington Regiment, of 49th Infantry Division, suffered 23 officer and 350 other ranks casualties between 13 June (when it was put into battle) and 30 June. This caused poor morale and sometimes hysteria to break out in the troops. The commanding officer reported that, '6 DWR is not fit to continue in the line.' Consequently the battalion was disbanded.[1] The point is that no unit of 56th Brigade gave concern for its fighting efficiency, even when suffering large numbers of casualties. Indeed after suffering casualties, the battalions of 56th Brigade often had to remain in the field and continue fighting for extended periods of time.

Part of this study has involved dealing with casualty rates. In Normandy these were high for all front line units. French[2] gives a figure of 75% casualties within the seven British infantry divisions and 37% within the three armoured divisions during the Normandy Campaign. On average for each infantry division this meant the loss of 341 officers and 5,115 infantrymen out of 7,200 men in the nine rifle battalions in each division during the Normandy Campaign. French also compares losses of men in the British Army during the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele) July-November 1917 as averaging 2,324 per day, while between 6th June and 28th August in Normandy 1944, the British Army lost more men per day at an average at 2,354.

South of Gold Beach the cost of this can still be graphically witnessed by the series of Commonwealth War Grave Commission cemeteries at Ryes (652 burials), Bayeux (3843 burials and 1808 names on the Memorial to the Missing), Jerusalem (47 burials), Tilly-sur-Seulles (990 burials) and Hottot-les-Bagues (1005 burials). The journey to visit them all covers barely fifteen miles, and one is reminded forcibly of the similarity to the First World War cemeteries in Northern France and Belgium. In this dreadful scenario the men of 1944 had at least more hope of survival when wounded than their fathers. Medicine and surgery had made great leaps forward since, and partly because of, the First World War. Evacuation was much speedier and the 5cwt Ambulance Cars, better known as Jeeps, adapted to carry four stretchers, transferred the wounded quickly from within the battle zone to the Regimental Aid Posts and on to the surgical hospitals located at centres such as Bayeux. Men stable enough to be moved were then transferred to Britain by ship, or more quickly by air. Len Cox, 2nd Glosters was shot on 5th July 1944, "They sent me

to the Field General Hospital in big marquees in Bayeux. They took the bullet out there. I was lucky really as I could have been paralysed. A Dakota later flew us home."[3] Ernie Partridge, bayoneted in the leg in late June 1944 was driven by jeep back to the Regimental Aid Post, patched up and sent directly to the coast, where he was transferred by DUKW to a hospital ship. This took him back to Portsmouth and soon he was on a hospital train to Guildford Hospital.[4]

Organisation and welfare on this scale meant that there was much less risk of infection, and depending on injury, men could be returned quickly to the battle zone. This included battle exhaustion cases, who were removed often only as far back as their own rear echelon and allowed to rest before being returned. Even more extreme cases of battle exhaustion remained in Normandy, and depending on their recovery returned to unit, or transferred to work in the rear areas. The quarterly returns of 203 Field Ambulance, working under command of 56th Brigade shows that up to 13th July 1944 (33 days in action) they dealt with 206 battle casualties and 134 sick. Of the 206 battle casualties, 66 were gunshot wounds, 83 splinter wounds (showing that mortar and artillery fire were major casualty causes) and 35 were blast wounds. The remainder suffered multiples of the above or bayonet wounds. Mortar or artillery as well as grenades caused some of these last casualties. Of the sick there were only 17 cases officially diagnosed as 'exhaustion' (meaning battle exhaustion), however 24 were classed as battle accidents and some of these may have been purposeful self-wounding. Only one case of venereal disease appears to have been treated, but later in the campaign for North-West Europe VD was to become much more widespread in the Allied armies.

Of interest is the fact that 18 cases of malaria were treated. These would most likely be re occurrences from men who had served in the Desert or Italy. The original Brigade Major, Major Buchanan only lasted two weeks in March 1944 at the formation of 56th Brigade, and then went down with malaria and had to be hospitalised.[5] Not all the men treated by 203 Field Ambulance were from 56th Brigade, neither would every 56th Brigade casualty go through 203 Field Ambulance. However the return gives a good idea of the cases caused directly through battle and other cases of sickness or accident that such a unit commonly dealt with. It is noteworthy that more than a third of the cases were caused through sickness not attributable to battle.

Exact casualty figures for units are difficult to ascertain. Two different places that were accessed for 56th Brigade give slightly differing results. The Nijmegen Bevrijdingsmuseum 1944 give those killed from D-Day until the end of the fighting in Le Havre as follows: 2nd Essex 130, 2nd Glosters 80 and 2nd South Wales Borderers 117. This museum has special links to 49th Division, which spent much of the winter of 1944/45 in Nijmegen, so long in fact that it became known as the 'Nijmegen Home Guard.' The Role of Honour[6] produced by the Bevrijdingsmuseum 1944 was the work of a number of museum staff painstakingly using Commonwealth War Graves Records and other sources. It is likely to be correct or very nearly correct. Another often used source, Army Roll of Honour – World War II[7] gives slightly higher figures, 2nd Essex 135, 2nd Glosters 87 and 2nd South Wales Borderers 130. However this source is more likely to be incorrect as it was completed by March 1949 using untrained National Servicemen, operating a Hollerith Punch Card machine. Initial errors were reckoned to be around 7% and

despite amendments later there are still errors in the record. Two examples of errors are that some men are listed twice as serving in two different units, or the wrong unit at death. This is most often clearly shown on Commonwealth War Grave Commission entries for officers who were transferred from the original Regiment into which they were commissioned to serve a different Regiment. However other ranks are also sometimes shown in this way. The Registrar for Deaths and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission also used this source and so their records are suspect to a smaller degree because of information and changes made in the intervening sixty plus years.

A concrete example from 56th Brigade is that of Major Hopper, killed on 30th July 1944 with 2nd Glosters. He is listed only as Artists Rifles in the Army Roll of Honour database and so does not appear as a 2nd Glosters casualty. Luckily since 1949 someone has ensured that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has that information and his Certificate of Remembrance mentions, 'Attached 2nd Glosters.'[8] With the destruction of some primary sources during and since the Second War, it is unlikely that a complete record can ever be made. Families conducting research are now the most likely to find and correct errors. The surest way of doing so is to access a soldiers Record of Service. However for the Second World War and after, only those still living whose record it is, or the close relative of a deceased who served, can apply for that person's Record of Service from the Ministry of Defence.

During research and interviews for this thesis the author also discovered that even though these battalions were often short of men, it was still quite possible for

an officer or 'other rank' to be transferred to another unit. Stan Daines and Stan 'Blondie' Goodyear of 2nd Essex had this happen to them. While they were at the Regimental Aid Post being treated for minor wounds, probably around 11 July, 2nd Essex received a full complement of reinforcements. On their return they were not needed on the establishment, so were returned to the reinforcement unit and were then sent on to 4th Dorsets in 43rd (Wessex) Division. Serving with 4th Dorsets, Stan Daines was captured on 4th August, and Stan Goodyear killed on 2nd August. It became clear during interview with Stan Daines that they were not the only Essex Regiment men so transferred. By following this up using a 4th Dorsets War History, it became clear that 4th Dorsets lost virtually every man of A Company on 11/12 July on an attack at Maltot. On 15th July they were sent out of the front line to reorganise and were heavily reinforced: 'a large contingent from the Essex Regiment, including some officers, went 'en bloc' to form a completely new A Company.'[9] In attacks between Jurques and Ondefontaine between 1st August and 5th August, it was again A Company, 4th Dorsets that took the brunt and many casualties. 'Blondie' Goodyear lies in Hottot-les-Bagues CWGC Cemetery. Ex 2nd Essex, his headstone proclaims the battalion he died with, 4th Dorsets. The question must be how many others at Hottot-les-Bagues whose gravestone shows 4th Dorsets, were originally 2nd Essex and 56th Brigade? Only one, an officer, is so marked.

This author believes it doubtful that all the men sent to 4th Dorsets were from 2nd Essex; even reinforced, 2nd Essex could not have borne the loss of up to 120 men without comment. However they may well have all been from the Essex Regiment via the reinforcement unit in Normandy. The 4th Dorset War Diary

mentions the arrival of 7 Officers and 350 Other Ranks from 33 Regimental Holding Unit over 11th –12th July 1944.[10]

The largest numbers of casualties was by wounding, but unfortunately we have no sure way of knowing the number of wounded suffered by each battalion. The only sources reporting this are the Battalion War Diaries, and these could not be kept up to date and relied on as discussed in Chapter 6. In major actions a figure of between three and six wounded for each man killed is a reasonable calculation. However on the numerous patrols carried out, there might be no wounded, a number of wounded or three men (a whole patrol) killed. So it is unwise to expect that we can find an easy equation to give a reliable figure. As an obvious example the incident of the 14 men drowned from 2nd South Wales Borderers in the River Seine, related in Chapter 7, caused no wounded. But during the campaign in Normandy it is highly likely that total casualties taken by each battalion rose to at least 75% of its established strength of 845 men, and what it is always important to remember is that the majority of these casualties were with the rifle companies, and that sometimes the rifle companies were down to as few as 50 or 60 men, or the battalion was only working with three rifle companies, not four. Appendix Seven on pages 290 to 292 graphically illustrates the replacement requirements of the three infantry battalions of 56th Brigade from June to September 1944.

A further way of enhancing knowledge and understanding of 56th Brigade actions in Normandy by the author has involved undertaking field trips to virtually every location where they fought a major action in Normandy, and attendance at Regimental commemorations in the area. Some have involved more extensive

investigation than others. As the author is skilled professionally in the use of maps this has been very useful in helping determine changes in the landscape and size of habitable areas using original base maps from 1944, and comparing them with the modern Institute Geographique Nationale (IGN) French maps of various scales between 1:25,000 and 1:100,000. The main problem associated with this has been the change of grid system between the 1944 maps and the present day. It allows one to say 'this attack went this way,' or 'this is burnt out farm' and understand the complexities of terrain facing the soldier in Normandy.

An important aspect fairly quickly realised by comparing modern maps with those of 1944 is that the agricultural area in the bocage has been greatly adapted and reduced since 1944, and many hedgerows removed in some areas. But the modern 1:25,000 IGN maps show change of crop use within large fields by green boundary lines. By comparison of some contemporary aerial photographs and maps of 1944 it was found that these lines coincided with the old bocage field system, with often nowadays a minor track or low earth bund clearly marking the division on the ground. It is unfortunate that The Aerial Reconnaissance Archive (TARA) of the Second World War has been fairly inaccessible for some time and expensive to use by individual researchers. Hopefully this will be resolved by its move to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland but for this study disappointingly only a few aerial photographs at the Imperial War Museum Department of Photographs and on the original TARA website could be usefully accessed.

The most important part of this study and its outcomes has been the use made of oral history through interviews with 45 living members of 56th Brigade and written depositions from a number of others. Thus an important archive specific to 56th Brigade has been collected. Copies of tape transcripts, of between 2,500 words and 18,000 words each, will be deposited with the National Army Museum and Imperial War Museum. The three Regimental Museums and Royal Signals Museum will receive copies of transcripts relevant to them. The veterans involved in the study are all aware that this procedure will take place. When initially listing the documents available to investigate 56th Brigades' role in Normandy, this author was surprised to find that there were only two relevant veteran accounts at the Imperial War Museum Department of Documents and four at the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive. The National Army Museum had no extra relevant documents. Considering that 56th Brigade comprised over 2,700 men on formation, this shows a lack of first hand combat information.

The compilation of the British Official Histories of the North West Europe Campaign 1944-1945 was tardy. Victory in the West, Volume1, Normandy, was completed in 1962; Volume 2, The Defeat of Germany was only completed in 1968. There has never been an official attempt by the British Army or Government to obtain a wide range of veteran testimony from the Second World War. In contrast, the United States has had a long history of officially collecting evidence from men in combat. According to the US Army Center for Military History, 'the US Army has a long tradition of using oral history to preserve historical information and to enrich its official written histories with material otherwise unavailable in the documentary record.'[11] During the Second World War the United States War

Department's Historical Branch sent appropriately trained men out into the combat zone to collect first hand accounts of actions. One of the most well known of these was Forest Pogue, who had gained a Ph.D in 1936 and held the rank of Master Sergeant. Tasked with collecting information with V Army in Europe, he was awarded the Bronze Star and French Croix de Guerre for his efforts collecting information in the front line. Samuel Marshall as chief combat historian was similarly employed, and ended his military service in 1961 with the rank of Brigadier General. Both produced written works and books after the war which became well known for their insight and reporting of combat.

The lack of trained British combat historians means that there has never been a large-scale accessible collection of first hand accounts of the British Army in battle, as there is within the US Army, and this leaves a void in our historical record. In the way that US Army historians operate, they gather around them at appropriate periods soon after combat, young trained soldiers, and get a clear and immediate insight as to how an action developed. Over time of course memory fades. These depositions are of great use in two ways; firstly by allowing a fairly immediate and in depth examination of what went on, allowing lessons to be drawn by the military on the success or otherwise of tactics, and secondly by allowing a wide historical record to be collected for use in the future by historians and the general public. It means for the British historian in a study such as 56th Brigade, that they still have to do research and the difficult task of following up leads and sources, to find eyewitnesses scattered across the country.

These witnesses are all of course now elderly, and for this study were aged between 82 and 94 years of age in 2008. In the study of 56th Brigade, what has perhaps been surprising is that so much information can be gathered well over sixty years later. The forty five interviews with the veterans has provided over 125,000 words of transcript from tape, and gives a wide ranging account of these units of the British Army from 1939 to 1945. Three veterans' deposition begins prior to the Second War. The usefulness of this method has been to enable the author to add real insights into the official documents that have been accessed to examine 56th Brigade. Also they are a check against official documents and unit histories and are another useful source giving more general views of this country during the Second War. It allows a comparison at different times of morale, actions and events, and even individual feelings within the 56th Brigade.

In one sub-unit, A Company, 2nd Glosters, it has allowed a comparison of events through the eyes of three members of a single company, although all were wounded at various times during the campaign. Luckily the whole range of veterans interviewed includes a variety of ranks and posts, from private to major, including men who were promoted to officer on the field of battle, and from driver to company commander. As well as the interviews, some veterans have provided photographs, copies of diaries they kept, contrary to military discipline, during the campaign, as well as memoirs and notes they have made since the end of the war. These have all provided good source materials, adding extra information and insight to the interview. Finally a number of the veterans have kept up a regular correspondence that sometimes adds extra information or helpful advice. Hardly any of this was in the public domain before.

Interviews were originally very carefully planned and structured with a series of primary and secondary questions. These hardly ever came into play. Sometimes there was an initial period of awkwardness during first meeting, but this soon wore off and interviewees tended to talk well and cogently whatever their social background and rarely straying off the topic. Interviews were planned to last about two to three hours[12] but there was a time difficulty, as it was impossible to travel so far away from home just to have a short period with each veteran. All veterans made the interviewer very welcome, and usually a long morning or afternoon was spent interviewing with appropriate breaks. On a number of occasions lunch had been pre-organised by the interviewee (without reference to the interviewer!) and the interview carried into the afternoon. Possibly because the veterans are of retirement age a meeting such as this can be construed as a social occasion. During the interview handwritten notes were kept and points of clarification made at opportune moments or towards the end of the interview. A transcript of the tape was word processed at home and a copy sent to the veteran for checking and agreeing. Sometimes this meant that added information became available. A few veterans have been able to be visited more than once. This loose technique seems to have worked well. Follow up letters are always sent, as has been a yearly update of progress on this study to each veteran at Christmas.

The use of such material has to be scrupulously managed. It is unfortunate that of the two US War Department Historians mentioned earlier, SLA Marshall was criticised after his death for making up some of his battlefield statistics gained from testimony, and he has been accused of inaccuracy and bias. A later student of

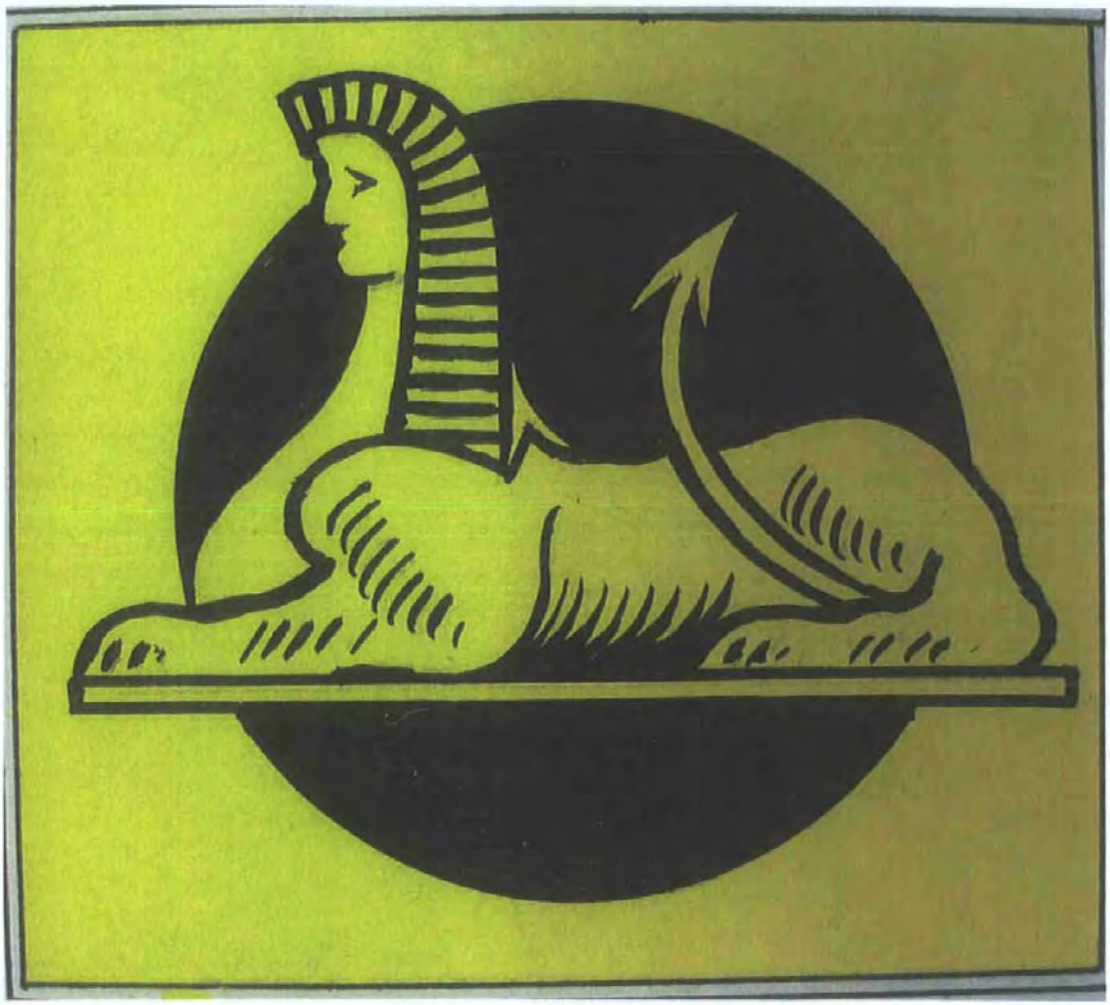
Forest Pogue, Dr. Stephen Ambrose, has equally been accused of inaccuracy, plagiarism, serious historical errors and controversial statements over a number of published books. This is a great pity as he has published a number of popular books on the theme of the Second World War in Europe and these, like some of the books published by Marshall, may in part be diminished by these accusations. Ambrose died of lung cancer in 2002, but a full discussion of these allegations can be found on the History News Network.[13] The way to avoid such controversy is very clear. The historian must be scrupulously truthful about his or her sources and be very careful in weighing the balance of evidence when using primary documents and considering the probability of a natural built in bias, whether these are the war diary of a battalion, a Cabinet Office historical paper or a personal memoir. It is only in this way that we can produce 'good' history that can be trusted by future generations and that does justice to the generation that fought and sometimes died in Normandy over sixty years ago.

> What for you is a haunting memory of danger and sacrifice one summer long ago, is for your country, and for generations of your countrymen to come, one of the proudest moments in our long national history. I take it upon myself to express the immense debt of gratitude we owe to you all.[14]

References. Conclusion.

[1] D'Este, C., Decision in Normandy. William Collins. 1983. Note pp 282-283.
[2] French, Raising Churchills Army. Oxford University Press. 2000. p 147.
[3] Len Cox. 2 Glosters. Interview with author 21st August 2006.
[4] Ernie Partridge. 2 Glosters. Interview with author 12th January 2006.
[5] TNA: PRO WO 171/803. 203 Field Ambulance War Diary. Quarterly Report, 13 July 1944.
[6] Remembrance Book to the 49th West Riding Infantry Division (The Polar Bears), in North West Europe 1944-1945. Bevrijdingsmuseum 1944/Polar Bears Association. 2004.
[7] Army Roll of Honour – World War II. Soldiers died in the Second World War 1939-45. The Naval and Military Press in association with The Public Record Office. CD-Rom. Uckfield 2006.
[8] Commonwealth War Graves Commission website. Casualty Enquiry 'Hopper.'
[9] Watkins, GJB., The War History of the Fourth Battalion the Dorset Regiment. June 1944 – May 1945. From Normandy to the Weser. Rowe, Eastbourne. Circa 1950. p16.
[10] TNA: PRO WO 171/1286. 4 Dorsets. War Diary.
[11] US Army Guide to Military History. Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington DC. 2006.
[12] US Army Guide to Military History. Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington DC. 2006. p 18.
[13] History News Network. http//:hnn.us/articles/504.
[14] Extract from a speech by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at Arromanches, before a large parade of veterans on 6th June 2004, 60th Anniversary of the D-Day landings.

APPENDIX ONE.



56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade. Sign and Shoulder Flash.

This picture of the distinctive Brigade shoulder flash is taken from the front cover of 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade Operational Order No. 1, preserved with 56th Brigade War Diary, March-December 1944. TNA: PRO WO 171/650.

APPENDIX TWO.

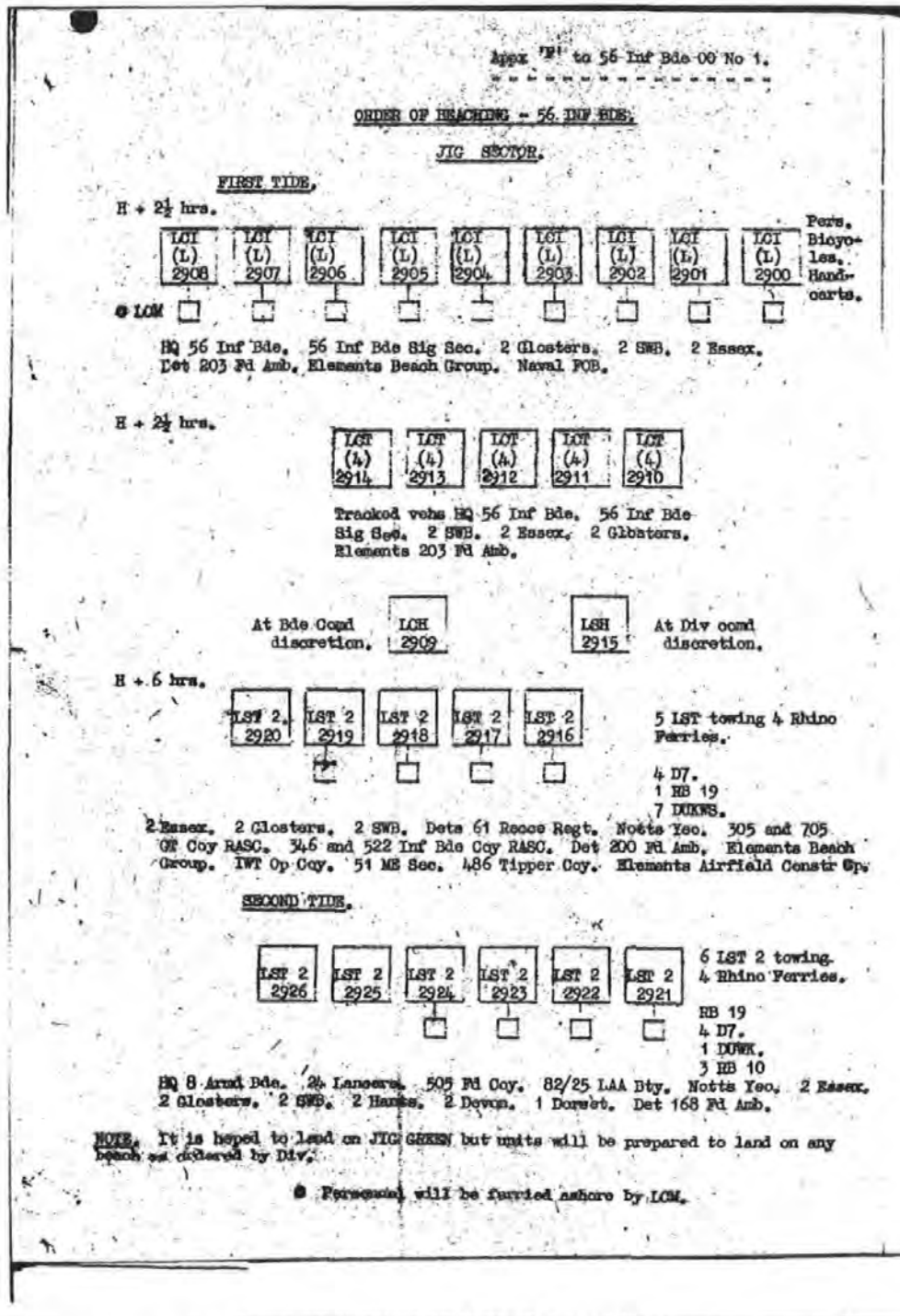
Exercise Smash: The area of Studland was given over to practice landings by 50th Division with an advance inland to 'take' and firm base after Wareham. This replicated the Gold Beach D-Day landings and advance on Bayeux. The map is clearly marked up with the expected movements during the exercise of the Reserve or 'Follow up' Brigades, 151st and 56th Brigades.

There were four 'Smash' exercises altogether. Each of the first two exercises tested one assault brigade; 69th then 231st Brigades. The next exercise had 69th Brigade assaulting the beach followed up by 151st Brigade. Finally SMASH IV had 231st Brigade assaulting the beach followed by 56th Brigade. This map is reproduced from TNA: PRO WO 199/2320 Exercise Smash.

APPENDIX THREE.

Exercise Fabius: 50th Division landed on Hayling Island with the Canadians to their east and further east again the British 3rd Division at Littlehampton. In fact the reverse of the D-Day plan.
Because of the limitations of the landing area marching troops had to re-embark. The sea state led to the deaths by drowning of the men from HQ D Company, 2nd Essex.
The Assembly Area north of Hayling Island roughly marks where 50th Division transport had to drive around to, giving practice before D-Day to both civilian and military forces in marshalling large numbers of vehicles.

APPENDIX FOUR.



Appx 'F' to 56 Inf Bde OO No 1.

ORDER OF REACHING - 56 INF BDE.

JIG SECTOR.

FIRST TIDE.

H + 2½ hrs.

LCI (L) 2908 | LCI (L) 2907 | LCI (L) 2906 | LCI (L) 2905 | LCI (L) 2904 | LCI (L) 2903 | LCI (L) 2902 | LCI (L) 2901 | LCI (L) 2900

Pers. Bicycles. Handcarts.

* LCM

HQ 56 Inf Bde. 56 Inf Bde Sig Sec. 2 Glosters. 2 SWB. 2 Essex. Det 203 Fd Amb. Elements Beach Group. Naval FOB.

H + 2½ hrs.

LCT (4) 2914 | LCT (4) 2913 | LCT (4) 2912 | LCT (4) 2911 | LCT (4) 2910

Tracked vehs HQ 56 Inf Bde. 56 Inf Bde Sig Sec. 2 SWB. 2 Essex. 2 Glosters. Elements 203 Fd Amb.

At Bde Cmd discretion. LCH 2909

LSH 2915 At Div cmd discretion.

H + 6 hrs.

LST 2 2920 | LST 2 2919 | LST 2 2918 | LST 2 2917 | LST 2 2916

5 LST towing 4 Rhino Ferries.

4 D7.
1 RB 19
7 DUKWS.

2 Essex. 2 Glosters. 2 SWB. Dets 61 Recce Regt. Notts Yeo. 305 and 705 GT Coy RASC. 346 and 522 Inf Bde Coy RASC. Det 200 Fd Amb. Elements Beach Group. IWT Op Coy. 51 ME Sec. 486 Tipper Coy. Elements Airfield Constr Gp.

SECOND TIDE.

LST 2 2926 | LST 2 2925 | LST 2 2924 | LST 2 2923 | LST 2 2922 | LST 2 2921

6 LST 2 towing. 4 Rhino Ferries.

RB 19
4 D7.
1 DUKW.
3 RB 10

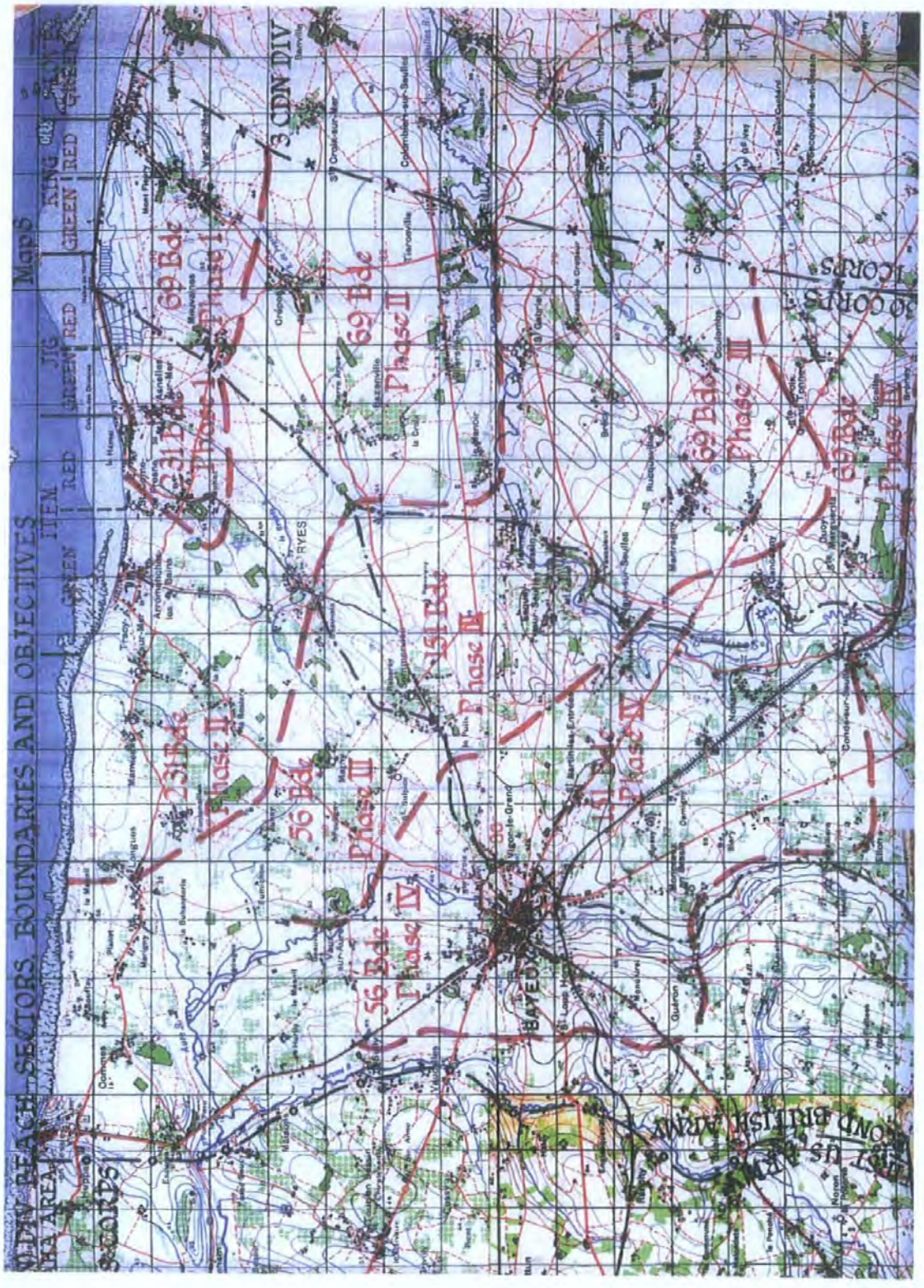
HQ 8 Armd Bde. 24 Lancers. 505 Fd Coy. 82/25 LAA Bty. Notts Yeo. 2 Essex. 2 Glosters. 2 SWB. 2 Hants. 2 Devon. 1 Dorset. Det 168 Fd Amb.

NOTE. It is hoped to land on JIG GREEN but units will be prepared to land on any beach as ordered by Div.

* Personnel will be ferried ashore by LCM.

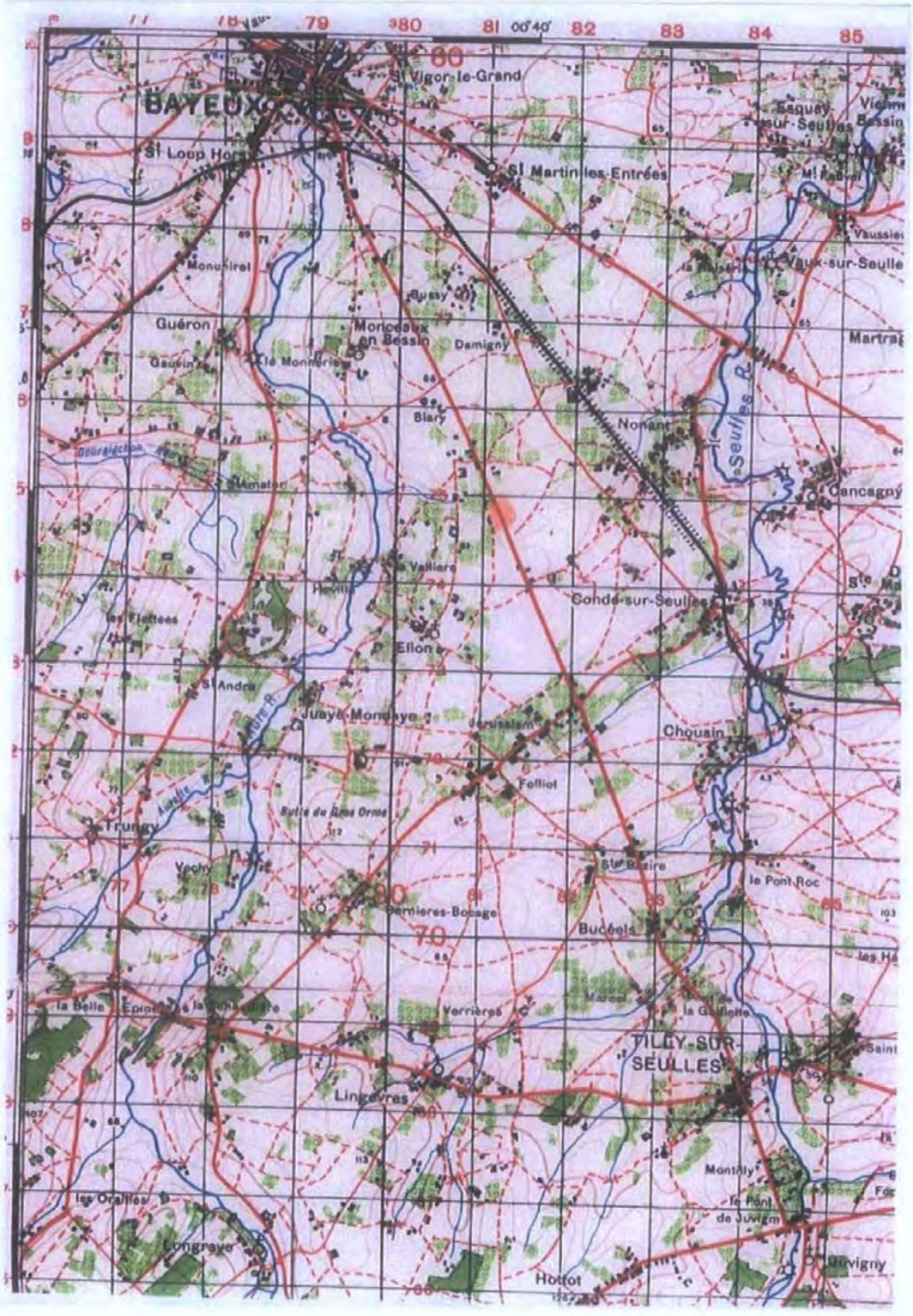
Appendix F to 56th Brigade Operational Order No.1. This order confirms that the marching troops were expected to be ferried ashore by LCM and to be prepared to be landed on any available beach. The timings of the landings are also evident.

APPENDIX FIVE.



This map clearly shows the planned and hoped for positions of 50th Division by the end of D Day. In fact the line achieved ran from Vaux-sur-Aure, St. Sulpice, Esquay and just south of St. Gabriel and Creully. From Vaux-sur-Aure back to the coast the achieved line passed through La Rosiere to Arromanches. CAB 44/243 30 Corps, D-Day Planning Appreciations and Operations.

APPENDIX SIX.



Bayeux to Juvigny, 1944 Map. This map shows the important villages and towns for the operations involving 56th Brigade, 10th – 20th June 1944. The nearly straight road leading southeast from Bayeux to the hoped-for objective of Juvigny via Tilly-sur-Seulles shows the axis of advance. Just southwest of Bayeux can be seen St. Loup Hors and Monumirel the final positions of 2nd Glosters and 2nd Essex on 7th June 1944. The wood/orchard attacked by 2nd Essex on 11th June is in the southeast corner of Map Square 7969. From WO 171/803.

APPENDIX SEVEN.

Below in table form are the 'Weekly Returns' of reinforcements required by the three Infantry Battalions of 56th Infantry Brigade from 3rd June 1944 to 30th September 1944.These are not 'Casualty Returns', but reflect the inability of 21st Army Group to provide adequate replacements. It provides graphic evidence for the replacement problem facing the British Army in Normandy during August 1944.

2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers reinforcement requirement June – September 1944.

Date.	Officers.	Other Ranks.
03 June 1944	Nil	10
10 June 1944	3	31
17 June 1944	Nil	13
24 June 1944	Nil	17
01 July 1944	5	32
08 July 1944	5	14
15 July 1944	6	45
22 July 1944	7	53
29 July 1944	8	73
05 August 1944	7	116
12 August 1944	9	165
19 August 1944	12	185
26 August 1944	5	108
3 Sept 1944	6	88
9 Sept 1944	3	88
16 Sept 1944	8	137
23 Sept 1944	7	85
30 Sept 1944	8	137

Notes:

1. Nominal roll for 15/7/44 notes 6 officers wounded that week. x1 admitted Advanced Dressing Station with exhaustion, x1 missing and x1 returned 33 Regimental Holding Unit.
2. Nominal Roll 29/7/44 notes that the 8 Officers required were x1 Captain and x7 Lieutenants and 2nd Lieutenants.
3. From Battalion War Diary WO 171/1380 Weekly Returns.

2nd Battalion Essex Regiment reinforcement requirement June – September 1944.

Date.	Officers.	Other Ranks.
03 June 1944	2	5
10 June 1944	1	15
17 June 1944	5	38
24 June 1944	3	8
01 July 1944	3	5
08 July 1944	1	3
15 July 1944	6	15
22 July 1944	6	32
29 July 1944	6	36
05 August 1944	8	74
12 August 1944	8	119
19 August 1944	11	200
26 August 1944	13	60
2 Sept 1944	12	67
9 Sept 1944	11	68
16 Sept 1944	11	66
23 Sept 1944	5	44
30 Sept 1944	8	101

Notes:

1. 122 reinforcements arrived on 24/6/44.
2. From Battalion War Diary WO 171/1295 Weekly Returns.

2nd Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment reinforcement requirement June – September 1944.

Date.	Officers.	Other Ranks.
10 June 1944	1	19
17 June 1944	3	11
24 June 1944	0	5
01 July 1944	0	15
08 July 1944	2	0
15 July 1944	1	28
22 July 1944	2	34
29 July 1944	6	56
05 August 1944	10	121
12 August 1944	11	150
19 August 1944	11	166
26 August 1944	8	124
2 Sept 1944	9	42
9 Sept 1944	9	66
16 Sept 1944	10	98
23 Sept 1944	5	74
30 Sept 1944	6	92

Notes:

1. May 23rd 1944 Nominal Roll was 39 Officers and 794 men.
2. 11/6/44 (Tilly sur Seulles) 13 wounded. By the end of the day there were many more killed and wounded.
3. The reinforcement situation only gradually improved. By November the Battalion was still short of 80 'Other Ranks' and even during December was only down to the low 20's weekly.
4. From WO 171/1298 Battalion War Diary Weekly Returns.

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56th Independent Infantry Brigade. List of Veterans who have contributed to this study. Highest known rank given for officers and Non-Commissioned Officers.

HQ 56th Brigade.

Dr. Tony Atcherley	Royal Corps of Signals.
Frank Dilworth MM. BEM.	Royal Corps of Signals.
Sydney Lee	Royal Corps of Signals.

2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers.

Alfred Bridger
Lieutenant Dennis Davis
Islwyn Edmunds (WO II)
Bill Evans
Robert Metcalf MBE. Royal Corps of Signals, attached from 56th Brigade HQ
Lieutenant Richard Philips MiD
Brigadier Sir Nicholas Somerville CBE. MiDx2
Bill Speake
John Redgewell
Lieutenant Sam Weaver MiD
Captain Dennis Whittaker MC

2nd Battalion Gloucester Regiment.

Len Cox
Major Edward Burkart MiD. Knight of the Order of Orange Nassau.
Ted Castle
Captain Frank Clark
Arnold Day
Gordon Duffin
Roy Everett
Syd Hampton
Don Leech
Bill Robinson
Ernie Partridge
Frank Rosier
Vincent Spring OBE
Major Basil Stephens MC
Maurice Wells (Corporal)

2nd Battalion Essex Regiment.

George Barker
Major Patrick Barras MiD

Father Sir Hugh Barret-Lennard (Captain) MiD x2
Charles Benford (Sergeant)
Harry Conn (WO II)
Albert Daines
Stan Daines
Arthur Dyer — Royal Corps of Signals, attached from 56th Brigade HQ
Major Robert Filby MC
Peter Giggens (Sergeant)
George Jesson (Sergeant)
Philip Maillou (Corporal)
Tony Mansi (Sergeant)
Clifford Stone
Captain James Townrow MBE
Major Charles Willis

203 Field Ambulance Unit.

Gordon Hornsby

2nd Hertfordshire Regiment (Beach Group).

George Church MM

Nottinghamshire Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry.

Ken Ewing

4/7th Dragoon Guards.

Cecil Newton

French Residents 1944.

Jeanine Baptiste	Lingevres
Michel Pont	Sully

Also.

Judith Green	Daughter of Lieutenant Jack Cooper MC. 2nd Essex. Wounded at Tilly-sur-Seulles.

List of Awards:

MC	Military Cross.
MM	Military Medal.
BEM	British Empire Medal.
MiD	Mentioned in Dispatches.
OBE	Officer of the British Empire.
MBE	Member of the British Empire.

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WO 171/1278	2nd Devons War Diary.
WO 171/1285	1st Dorsets War Diary.
WO 171/1286	4th Dorsets War Diary
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