

## **17th Royal Horse Artillery - 11th Armoured Division.**

### **Survey Party July 1944 - Division Sign "The Charging Bull"**

Left U.K. from Newhaven on a liberty boat and landed at the Arromanches Beachhead. Tank battles at Caen and broke out of the Falaise Gap. Crossed the Seine by night and a long dash, 56 miles, through Northern France. Mosquito aircraft bombing the Channel Ports all night. Lots of abandoned horse drawn transport and dead horses on the road left by the fleeing Germans, who did not realise we were so near.

Several times German columns joined us from side roads in the dark and were unaware we were the enemy. Some fighting with pick handles and shovels to avoid the sound of gun fire; lots of prisoners taken. On to Amiens at 5.30a.m. and captured the German 7th Army commander at breakfast and he cried like a baby. Rounded several frightened Germans in a wood but they soon recovered their confidence and were given chocolate and cigarettes.

On again to Lille and everywhere the people were out cheering and weeping and showering us with gifts - bottles of all kinds of drink and apples and pears. I was hit by a large pear thrown by a well meaning Frenchman. German snipers left in some houses, church towers etc and booby traps left in demolished buildings, especially in toilets!!

On to Antwerp whilst the Guards Armoured Division went south and captured Brussels. A Belgium engineer got into the leading tank and took us by side streets and small bridges to capture the Antwerp Docks which were essential to us for landing supplies as the lines of communication were so long, stretching from Normandy (the Channel Ports were still held by the Germans - now cut off).

Walcheren Island was still held by Germans and there was constant shelling in Antwerp but we did capture the Antwerp Commander. He was humiliated by being made to run through the town pursued by one of our Bren Gun carriers (a small tank) at a fairly fast speed to the huge delight of its local people. Also put in a cage in Antwerp Zoo!

I spent the night in a slit trench dug in the public park under some trees while Jerry was shelling us with "air bursts". It rained hard in the night and the trench filled up so I got out and slept on the ground. One of our men got three empty petrol cans and slept on them floating in his slit trench.

We stayed in Antwerp a few days and had a day's leave to look around the shops. We went south a bit then to Louvain and on to Nieste. At one place near the Albert Canal I was riding a big BSA 500cc motorbike and saw several farmers crowding in a roadside ditch and not until I stopped the engine did I realise that Jerry was machine gunning the road - I could hear the Spandau - dddddd.

We went up to Eindhoven and supported the 51st Highland Division who took a bridge between Zamanem and Asten. The villagers of Asten had all been sheltering in a wood but came out after the Germans had retreated. We stayed for a week or two at Asten doing a lot of survey work. The Colonel took his O.P. tank forward and fired a few shots into the Reichwald Forest at maximum range - about six and a half miles and then hurried back - the first Regiment to land a shot in Germany!!

We got billets at Asten in a sort of Council house with a working class family. Most of the people worked in a small clothing factory. I got a pair of miniature wooden clogs from the local clog-maker and watched him carve them out of a block of wood. He was delighted with two packets of Players cigarettes which I did not use but came up with the rations. These were 14 man packs, A or B - the best had tinned bacon, corned beef, rice pudding and tinned fruit and everything else from sugar and salt to toilet paper and they were really delicious.

We stayed in this part of Holland for the rest of the winter moving about this side of the River Maas between Eindhoven, Helmond, Leissel, Weert (where we used to go to a mobile shower unit for a hot shower and clean underwear - a vest and long johns which never fitted) and Deurne. Jerry held the other side of the Mass at Venio and Roermonde and it wasn't healthy to get too near the river as he used to "stalk" us with his 88mm guns.

There was a pocket of Germans this side of the river and it was decided to straighten out the line for the winter and to give us a break, the Yanks sent a division up to clear it. They had everything - I never saw so much equipment - it was an armoured division with mobile cranes for recovering disabled tanks. They had super rations too. After they had a day of action in there I asked Tech. Adj. how they were doing and he said 'They have advanced minus 500 yards'.

So we helped to clear the bulge and were there all winter. It snowed heavily and the villages looked lovely. At Deurne we used to take a tank into the forest and cut down trees for firewood. It was good work with big axes off the tanks. The Mayor complained to the O/C (he owned the wood) and the O/C said that if he didn't like it we would move to another village and that ended the complaints.

The cold was intense and bare skin froze to motorcycle handle bars and jeep steering wheels. The tank tracks froze to the ground in the night and drivers were ordered to get up every two hours and start up and move the tank a few feet to free the tracks in case we got an order for a quick move. One chap who was afraid of the shelling one night slept under the tank and was killed when it was moved. The tanks were hopeless on frozen roads and could not be steered.

One day we had to take a criminal to prison at Liege in a half track vehicle and it skidded all over the road. We had another billet with the school master and his wife used to make lovely cherry flan for us.

During this winter the Survey Party went forward to take up a position at a farm in the forest close to a wooden tower normally used for watching for forest fires, it was about 50 ft high. The farming family didn't like us - I think they were Germans.

We did shifts up this tower and did observations and angles across the Maas on vapour trails (fine trails at night) rising from the ground miles away in Germany. They're V2 rockets going to London but we weren't told at the time. Two other Survey Parties were deployed in other towers along the river and the three observations pin-pointed the origin of the V2.

The Yanks used to come along this road with a loud-speaker truck and shout out to Jerry to surrender but they soon stopped it when Jerry did some sound ranging on them and they got shelled. They also pin-pointed us in the tower and sent a few over but never hit us. One day the Americans asked if their OP officer could come up the tower to direct a shot from their 105 mm guns. The Yankee gunners used to shout 'Another egg coming over' in contrast to our gunners 'Shot one over'. The Germans came through the forest at night and put a tight wire across the road which killed one of our Dispatch Riders.

A week or so before Christmas we were given 48 hours leave to go to Brussels but we got there in time to be ordered back - Runstedt had made his push in the Ardennes, 16th December I think. We spent the whole day in a Bedford truck trying to get to Brussels with roads clogged with vehicles and a night and day getting back again where I spent the night in a slit trench at the roadside covered with snow and a roll of barbed wire between me and Jerry. I also had a half pint of rum.

In the spring of 1945 preparations were being made to cross the Rhine. The Guards Armoured Division was to get to Nijmegen and Arnhem to support the Airborne Division but they never got there in time. Thousands of guns were in place all along the Rhine including some 9inch naval guns and shelling went on day and night. On the day of the attack the air was full of aircraft and gliders - Yank Transports towing gliders which landed short sometimes near us and the men had folding bicycles and all sorts of things. I saw one Yank Transport hit and it went nose up then crashed in flames.

We crossed the Rhine near Wesel on a pontoon bridge (I took the Colonel over on the pillion of a motorcycle) and the destruction by the artillery bombardment was total. There was not a building left standing - farmland houses were flattened, some still burning and the smell of horses, cattle and pigs burning was sickening. Even now in 1985 the smell of burning takes me back to the Rhine crossing.

We headed northwest avoiding the industrial Rhur to Rheine on the Dortmund Ems Canal and then east to Osnabruck, Rabber, Lenern, Rahdam, Uchtee, Stolzenau (in a wood two German youths had killed two British and were trying to burn them with dead leaves. They didn't live) and where we crossed the River Weser, Rehlung, Schwarnstedt, Winsen where German officers came under a flag of truce (and were blindfolded part of the way) to inform us of a severe outbreak of typhoid in a

village ahead, and to arrange a temporary truce for two days whilst we got through - the war to resume on the other side. This was the notorious Belsen Camp.

Typhoid being caused by lice, we all had anti-lice powder pumped up our shirts and down our trousers and off we went. We came to this large camp surrounded by a barbed wire fence with Hungarian soldiers, armed to the teeth with grenades and revolvers around their belts, on guard outside the fence. Inside was dreadful to see. There were scores of people in striped pyjamas, like living skeletons sitting and lying about, some dead, some drinking from dirty puddles, and the smell was terrible.

Major Chapman, in charge of our A.A.tank went to Commandant's (Von Kramer) office and was so incensed by what he saw that he hit von Kramer over the head with his revolver and locked him in a large fridge for a while - he was purple when he came out.

We put our water cart in with 600 gallons of sterilised water and the poor inmates who were strong enough mobbed it and we had to put an armed guard on to serve out the water properly. We moved on to start the war again on the other side of the forest and discovered the Germans had re-mined the road and the leading tank had a track blown off.

This was about the day President Roosevelt died. We were all saddened by this and the horrible sight and smell of Belsen. We entered a farmhouse that night and found the chimney full of smoked sausages. Then on to cross the River Aller where we were held up by a Tiger Tank on the other side. A Recce car went forward but was 'chewed up' by an 88 mm shell from the Tiger and the driver got out all right but I remember he was complaining that he had lost all his personal luggage in the armoured car.

We called up the RAF Lightnings - code word 'Limejuice' and we fired red smoke shells at the Tiger to identify it. In a few minutes two Lightnings came and dive-bombed the tank with 2 lots of 2 rockets each and destroyed it.

We went northwest across Luneberg Heath and crossed the Elbe on another pontoon bridge after dark. It was a slippery approach down a steep bank and the same up on the other side under heavy shell fire. As we came out on top the column halted for a while and in the comparative silence a nightingale was singing at the road side. I wrote home and told this to my mother.

We came to Luneberg and Scharzenhoc to the outskirts of Lubeck where we pulled off into a field in daylight. We spread out - luckily, because a single German aircraft came over and dropped a bomb on us which half buried the Doctor's half-track and killed a dispatch rider who had just set up his tent for the night. The aircraft came over again and dropped an object which watched fascinated and frightened but it was an empty cardboard box - a cynical joker.

The war was over the following day. We went north over the Kiel canal to liberate Denmark. There had been no war in this part of Germany and the arrogant Nazis had smart uniforms and polished jackboots whilst we were a bit untidy I suppose. We spent a few days at a place called Gettauf where there was an establishment for producing blue eyed, fair haired babies for the 1000 year Reich, complete with blue eyed, fair haired women and fathers to match.

From there we went to a place on the Baltic near Eckenfonde - a large farm by the sea. It had an enormous barn with a thatched roof right down to the ground and two storks nesting on top. They had Polish and French slaves who, we were told, were chastised with a whip. I saw the farmer's wife with a whip approaching a Polish servant (slave) and I pointed my Sten gun at her and she put the whip down.

The beach was clean and pebbly. A German submarine, came close in and the captain, a red head, and crew came ashore and surrendered. They were locked in the barn for the night but the captain and others got out and scuttled the submarine, making the beach oily. We did not see him again. We later went out in a rowing boat with a large quantity of revolvers and the other small arms surrendered and tipped them all into the sea.

After a few days we moved off and occupied Martin Borman's house not far away. He had been Hitler's deputy. It was huge house, white with thatched roof and farm buildings and stables to match. The stables had white tiles floor to ceiling and were fitted out with mahogany doors, windows and stalls. In the house the gun room was outstanding. The walls covered by animal skins and pictures of Borman and Goering and others standing with rifles and one foot on wild animals they had shot.

The floor was made of large crazy-paving stone and there were animal skins, zebra etc there too. On each side of the large fire place was a stuffed Great Bustard which I supposed they had shot. Borman's car was a bullet-proof Mercedes and the Colonel had a great time riding about in this grey coloured car. He also rode some of the white horses that were in the stables. We never saw Borman.

From here I was sent to the Woolwich Barracks via Hamburg and Tilbury to await Class B release to return to the Police Force.

*Written by Arthur Beresford Harrop in the summer of 1985.*