

Alexander Stanier

Born 1899. Decorated officer in two world wars.

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SAMMY'S WARS



BRIGADIER SIR ALEXANDER STANIER BT
DSO, MC

SAMMY'S WARS



RECOLLECTIONS OF WAR IN NORTHERN FRANCE AND OTHER OCCASIONS

of the late
BRIGADIER SIR ALEXANDER STANIER BT
DSO, MC



Edited by SIR BEVILLE STANIER BT

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Rear Cover Photograph: Sammy's Memorial at Arromanches

P R E F A C E

My father, Alex to his relations and his civilian friends, Sammy to his military friends, was a great man for an anecdote. He usually had a story or a tale that was pertinent to the occasion whether military or otherwise.

Not long after his death, my family and I were rueing the fact that we had not written down more of his stories and that much was gone forever when I realised that, in the military part of his life, at any rate, it was not necessarily so.

Sammy had written articles at intervals for the Welsh Guards Association magazine; then late in his life, he recorded interviews with the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and the Imperial War Museum. Finally, I discovered that one of his war time Brigade Majors the late Peter Hadley, formerly in The Royal Sussex Regiment, with whom Sammy used to stay regularly in Cornwall, had sat him down when he was over 90 beside a tape recorder and persuaded him to tell the stories of his military career from Eton days right up to 1943. For that I shall always be in Peter's debt.

My father's military career was unusual in that he participated in all the three different military campaigns of the twentieth century in Northern France against the Germans. He was a Platoon Commander in 1918 in the trenches and got an MC. He was a Battalion Commander in 1940 at Boulogne and was awarded a DSO. He was a Brigade Commander in 1944 on D Day, for which he received another DSO. All this he survived without a serious wound in action (he lost his left eye in a training accident in England).

I have edited what he wrote and said of his experiences as a soldier and have put them together in the first person in such a way that, hopefully, it gives a picture of the man and his outlook on life in the Army and in war.

I am most grateful to both Charles Stephens and Christopher Thursby-Pelham for their encouragement and advice throughout and to Charles Hargrove for checking the D Day chapter. I would like to thank Yvonne Mitchell and David Evans at Regimental Headquarters for their help, both Terry Holder and Christine Thornton at John Baxter and Co. for their care and patience in the printing and production and, last but not least, my wife Shelagh for reading the proofs with such an eagle eye.

B.D.S., 1998

INTRODUCTION

Alexander Stanier was born in January 1899 at Hodnet in Shropshire. He had an elder sister, Dulce and two younger brothers, Pip and Eddy. His father Beville had qualified as a land agent after agricultural college and married in 1894, a parson's daughter, Connie Gibbons, whom he had met while working as assistant agent to the Earl of Dudley at Abberley in Worcestershire.

The young family had moved back to Shropshire by 1899 to help run the family estate at Peplow. Beville was the second brother but his elder brother Frank preferred the social life of the Mediterranean, so Beville, Connie and their children moved in to Peplow Hall where the young Alex was brought up.

His father stood for Parliament in 1908 as a Conservative and won the Newport seat in Shropshire. Shortly afterwards Alex went to Summerfields School at Oxford and also at the school's St Leonards branch and then to Eton in 1912. His story begins during his time at Eton.

Chapter 1

A Great Day at Eton

There was a resounding cheer, echoing round School Yard at Eton as more than a thousand boys voiced their approval of what the King had just said. It was a brilliant summer's day in July 1913 for the visit of King George V and Queen Mary. The King addressed the whole school from the steps of College Chapel and he told us that he would be sending his son Prince Henry to Eton, in honour of which he requested that we should all have an extra week's holiday at the end of the summer holidays. The King and Queen then departed in a barge, which had been built for King William IV, on the Thames and as they left they were escorted by the Eton boats whose crews were wearing their Georgian uniforms normally only worn on the river on the Fourth of June when Eton celebrates the birthday of King George IV.

I was fourteen years old and just coming to the end of my first year at Eton. As I walked back from the river bank to Mr Goodhart's house on the Dorney Road, I mused on how I might spend this extra week's holiday.

We lived in North Shropshire at Peplow near Market Drayton but my father, Beville Stanier, was an MP so we also had a house in London in Buckingham Gate. We were unlikely to be in London during the Parliamentary summer recess but what I hoped was that perhaps I could persuade my father to spend an extra week in Scotland. He invariably rented a sporting estate in Scotland and although I was still too young to be included in the grouse shooting team, I had wonderful opportunities to fish and to go with the deer stalkers.

At the time it did not occur to me what a very assured and certain way of life I and my family led nor could I have guessed how events within just over a year would totally destroy that serenity which characterised the first fourteen years of the century in Britain and that, in many ways, life would never be the same again.

The following summer, Eton conducted its usual rituals, the Fourth of June, the Eton and Harrow match at Lords and Henley Regatta in the manner to which it was accustomed and I went home at the end of July 1914 looking forward to a very normal holidays culminating in the usual trip to Scotland. Little did I know that in a few days time, on the 4th August, we should hear that Britain and Germany were at war.

Chapter 2

Eton in the War

As you can imagine, despite the declaration of war, things at home in Shropshire were not at all changed during those holidays except that our Scottish visit was cancelled. My father was one of the early motor car owners and I recall that his chauffeur was called up almost immediately since he was on the reserve for the new mechanical transport that was being built for the Army.

I went back to Eton towards the end of September and the first thing that I noticed was that nearly all the young assistant masters had left to join the forces and their places had been taken by an older generation who were principally retired masters coming back again.

I joined the Officer Training Corps; very soon we were told that we would be helping the war effort and we were despatched to nearby Slough to make, as we thought, munitions but it consisted entirely of sweeping up metal filings off the floor and the scheme very soon came to an end. Then they sent us on trips to Didcot in Oxfordshire by special train. We unloaded stores into a huge shed where they were sorted out; I remember unpacking hundreds of china mugs which I put on a shelf and they were immediately whisked away and put into smaller numbers according to requisition orders being sent in. We went to camp on the cliffs above Swanage in Dorset where we dug trenches in the chalk, being told that we must dig these trenches to provide defences against the Kaiser's Army which our schoolmaster officers told us might invade England at any moment.



Alex at Eton, 1916.

The following summer, I became conscious of the Welsh Guards. The newly formed regiment, though keen to recruit as many officers from Wales as possible, was quickly aware that in such a relatively underpopulated area, the border counties would also produce useful material and that included Shropshire from whence I came. My father, being an MP, knew Lord Harlech from his appearances in the House of Lords, and thus my name came to the Regiment's notice, Lord Harlech being the Regimental Lieutenant Colonel.

I was summoned from Eton to be interviewed by Lord Harlech. He told me that he knew my family and after a few questions he said "I shall be pleased to put you on my list; you can start your training straightaway." As I left the room I just managed to say to the Regimental Adjutant, "Sir, does Lord Harlech realise I am only sixteen? I did hope to have another year at Eton before joining up!" I was, of course, sent back to school for another year but in December 1916 I left Eton and after Christmas went to Sandhurst for twelve months for officer training. It is difficult to know how much use that was to me. Many of the instructors had their minds firmly locked in the South African War and their ideas were out of date. Some of the staff were men from the front who had been wounded. Discipline was very strict and both drill and turnout of a very high standard, led by the Adjutant and Colour Sergeants from the Brigade of Guards. Training included horse management because at that time there was not yet any motor transport. Riding horses was an essential part of an officer's training; it was no great difficulty to me as I had been brought up with horses but some cadets had terrible problems coping and trying not to fall off their mounts. At the end of 1917 I was gazetted as a second lieutenant in the Welsh Guards.



Alex, on commissioning as a second lieutenant, December 1917.

Chapter 3

Joining the Regiment

I joined the Reserve Battalion at Ranelagh Polo Club in Putney. Like most newly commissioned officers, I thought I had learned my drill at Sandhurst, but like many another I was put "on the square" to learn it all over again. Shortly after Easter in 1918, the Adjutant told me I was on the list for overseas posting and that I should go on embarkation leave, so I went home for a few weeks and on my return in May I was told to convey a party of four officers to France. Though I was the most senior in rank, it was extraordinary that I was by far the youngest, being 19 whereas their average age was 40!

We went to Dover and thence over to Boulogne but found that nobody was expecting us, because the Guards Reserve Base was at the other end of the Channel coast at Le Havre! However, we were not to be outdone; we took matters into our own hands and we hitchhiked on lorries, gradually reaching the front. It was a long and dusty journey but we eventually arrived at the battalion base at a farm called Warlincourt. They had had an unfortunate bomb attack the night before when four attached Grenadier officers had been killed while playing bridge. Nevertheless I slept well and presented myself the following morning in front of the Adjutant who told me I was to go up to the front at Alette, at once.

I was allotted a servant, Private Evans, who would show me the route of about four or five miles to the front. We set off but had only gone about half way when he suddenly apologised and said he had forgotten my blankets which he said I would miss very much when I got to the front line; so, once he had pointed out some ruined buildings in the distance, which was where our Quartermaster and the Transport stayed during the day, he went back to get the blankets. In retrospect, I may say, nobody told me before I went to France, what I should take and as a result I took some very unnecessary things and omitted some most important items. However, one soon collected things up and you could not carry a lot anyway, so it was not that bad. I went on to the ruined buildings, where, sure enough, I found the Quartermaster who was extraordinarily hospitable and welcoming. He gave me a very strong whisky thus providing some Dutch courage for the last stretch up to the front line and he also provided a fresh guide to show the way.

After a time we got into a maze of trenches and in due course to the Welsh Guards Battalion Headquarters. The Commanding Officer had just held an Orders Group and so all four of his company commanders were with him as I arrived. One of them, on seeing my very young face peering over the top of the trench, shouted out "Good Heavens! Are we reduced to receiving the infant Samuel?" Ever since that day, I have been known in military circles as Sammy. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Humphrey Dene, on the other hand, was not at all pleased to hear how old the other newly joined officers were!

Chapter 4

Life in the Trenches

I was allotted to No 2 Company, under Major Walter Bonn, a kind and charming person who made every effort to look after his junior officers. I walked up through more trenches to the actual front line and to the sector which No 2 Company was holding nearly opposite a small village called Ablainzevelle which you could see in the distance and not far from Arras. By this time, it was late afternoon and after a cup of tea while I listened to Walter Bonn describing company routine, it was time for evening stand-to. There should have been six of us in all but three were away for various reasons and the only other officer in the company at that moment was Brian Gibbs. So out we trooped and all the men stood in their firing positions.

The part of the line that we were in consisted of continuous trenches with fire steps at different points but not all of these were manned. The method was that sections would be formed at certain points and they would cover the front to both left and right of their position so that there was continuous firing capability along the front; but it was not held, as some people think, by a solid unending line of men all covering directly in front. We covered about 500 yards in all looking out on flat derelict land which of course, by this time, had not been farmed for years, but it appeared to have done the wild life little harm and I was continually seeing quite large coveys of partridges and wishing I had a shot-gun handy; I once tried to shoot one with a rifle!

After it was fully dark the company stood down and that was when work would really begin. We would send back guides to escort in the fatigue parties which brought in food, ammunition and stores. The men were allotted various tasks for the night. They would go out and repair the wire about fifty yards in front of the trenches where it had been broken by enemy shell and mortar fire. The two officers, Brian and myself, took it in turns to go back to Company Headquarters to have a meal or a wash and perhaps snatch a few hours sleep. At other times we would be repairing the trenches and I recall that the Welsh Guards had particularly good trenches, probably because many of them had been miners in civilian life. There was a mass of telephone lines everywhere; these lines were always getting broken and qualified men had to be sent up to mend them; the Germans eventually perfected a listening device on the telephone lines, but the Welsh Guards countered this by speaking in Welsh! By the time these tasks had been completed, it was usually beginning to get light and time for the dawn stand to for about an hour. Stand to at dawn and dusk was because it was thought that those were the most likely times for an enemy attack.

Stand to, in practice, was usually fairly quiet unless somebody loosed off a gun and that always brought swift retaliation and a gunfire battle which brought no advantage to anybody but ruined the preparations for a meal which were going on behind our lines. You could hear our horse transport coming up behind our lines with the food and the Germans must have used much the same system, because you could also hear their transport moving at the same time. Mostly, both sides refrained from firing at this time because we were both hungry.

Food was plentiful and came up piping hot in dixies but inevitably it was dull and very repetitive, usually bully beef and butter beans or soup or, interminably, stew, followed by bread, margarine and jam. But we all received food parcels fairly regularly so there was always something to look forward to.

Food was doled out into mess tins with a lid so a degree of warmth was retained for a time and tea poured into the upper half. If it was very cold, the men were given a rum ration, carefully supervised by an officer, to make sure that the older soldiers did not get more than their ration at the expense of the younger ones. There were some poor young ones who said they had promised their family before they left for France that they would never touch liquor. So I had to tell them that they would be drinking medicine and not drinking liquor at all! That was always good enough for them whereupon they downed their rum ration with great enthusiasm.

One of the most awkward things about trench life was one of the most necessary, the use of the latrine. For obvious reasons every effort was made to ensure that it was kept as far away from the main area of the trench as possible. That could present a problem for it was often little more than a hole to which access was hazardous to say the least. It could be a question of taking your life in your hands just to get there and then it was necessary to be as quick as possible so as not to draw fire on yourself before making the equally dangerous return journey. It was altogether a very unpleasant business.



Captain Norman Harrop, 3 company, in the trenches at Alette, May 1918.

Personal cleanliness was another problem. There was little water to spare for washing in the trenches and it was very difficult to be anything other than dirty. At one stage, I remember that I was so dirty that I thought that a quick splash of water from a shell hole would freshen me up a bit. This was a big mistake because it turned out that the water had been severely contaminated by gas, possibly from a gas shell. However, I was not aware of that as I splashed water on my face quite happily. In no time my face was heavily blistered as the dissolved gas took its effect. The blistering was so bad that I could not shave for several days and I believe that the chest problem that I had always thereafter was caused by the gas.

We also had to deal with dead and wounded from time to time; to put it crudely, the dead were relatively simple to deal with; you wrapped them in a groundsheet and dealt with them later; the wounded presented a more urgent problem; once the stretcher bearers had recovered them, it was extremely difficult getting them down the trench lines; the stretchers were very long and were awkward to get through the narrow twisting trenches. At times it was easier to get up on the top and walk back, hoping the Germans would accept a Red Cross on their arms and not shoot them up.

During most of the hours of daylight, I rested, sitting on the side of the trench on a fire step or I visited the rifle sections and the light machine gun (Lewis gun) sections of my platoon along the trench. I would be accompanied by my orderly who always carried an SOS rocket attached to the end of his rifle barrel, which if we were attacked, I was supposed to order him to fire. It was an awkward weapon because the rocket sometimes showed up above the trench and the Germans loved to have a shot at it.

Overall, it was very quiet during the day at this time, with activity confined to occasional shelling or mortaring which only produced casualties if a shell or a bomb actually landed on the trench. We had snipers, however, who operated from hideouts to restrict German daytime activity.

Shells could, as well, cause casualties to our men when they were out in No Mans Land repairing wire or patrolling. The stretcher bearers would then have to go out to get them back and they were of an exceptionally high standard, always prepared to go over the top and risk their own lives to rescue the wounded.

When we got a series of shells or mortars, we called it a "stonk" and when a stonk came in we would respond by firing back with our company weapons and if possible we would refrain from using the SOS rocket because that summoned up the divisional artillery which in turn brought an equal German response. A platoon commander who did this would not exactly be popular!

The other great night time activity was patrolling; it could be either a reconnaissance patrol or a fighting patrol, more usually the former which consisted of an officer and two or three men. The principal purpose was to find out where the holes were in the German wire which had been made by our shell fire. We were also supposed to try and see where their machine guns were situated; unfortunately, this was virtually impossible because although you can very easily see the bright light of gunfire after dark, you also lose any idea of distance. Anyhow, we used to try and get an idea and we would get into shell holes and wait and see what happened.

I took enormous trouble over the first patrol that I ever commanded. I was told to find out if there were any gaps in the German lines and any new German posts. I spent the afternoon explaining to the patrol what we were going to do, where we were going out, where we were going along, and where we were coming in and the time. I also went round the company posts and told them

exactly what I was going to do. "I am going out at No 1 Post at 9 o'clock tonight. I shall be travelling with 6 men and we shall return at No 8 Post at midnight".

Unfortunately, on this occasion as we crawled along outside the wire, with the Germans shooting at us, we were not at all sure where the shooting had come from. We bobbed down into a shell hole and listened. We moved on very slowly and the shots came again. I looked out of one end of the shell hole and the corporal from the other, only to be seen by our own troops with a Lewis gun, who thought we were Germans and immediately fired on us. Tragically two of our men, including the corporal, were killed; they said afterwards that they had expected to see six of us, not two; the sentry said he challenged us and that we should have been much further down the line by 11.00 pm but I never heard any challenge. I jumped back pretty quickly to the shell hole; then I popped my head up again and he had another go while I lay in the bottom of the shell hole shouting the password, till an officer heard and stopped the firing and we eventually got back. We had only covered 600 yards in 4 hours. Of course plans are always going awry in war; if things had gone entirely according to plan, we would not have been at that spot when we were.

Fighting patrols would go out to raid the German lines and to try to capture a German alive to find out what his regiment was and what their dispositions were. These patrols were highly dangerous and I was glad they did not happen too often.

We would spend four days in the front line, four days in the support line and four days in the reserve line. But it certainly wasn't all rest when we were out of the front line. We trained endlessly in different forms of attack, how to co-operate with artillery and how to use our bayonets; and if it was not training, it would be a kit inspection to a very high standard.

Chapter 5

Advancing to Victory

During the summer of 1918, the American army started coming over to France and before long we had one of their officers attached to us. I have never forgotten his name which was Lieutenant Champagne! On the day of his arrival, when it came to time for stand to, he asked if he could remain at Company Headquarters and not go forward and stand with the other men as he was rather tired after his journey; so he was allowed to do this. When we returned, later in the evening from stand to, we found him in terrific form, having consumed the whole of our rather meagre whisky ration which was supposed to last the whole week. As you can imagine, he was far from popular!

Somewhat later on in the summer, a whole battalion of American soldiers was sent up to relieve us. As I was the junior officer, I had to remain behind to answer their questions on the routine and what was going on in the line. There was an immediate chaotic muddle because the Americans were not aware of how small our platoons had become, as a result of casualties. Our whole platoon strength had reduced, on average to about twelve men, whereas theirs were at least thirty. The American staff officers had allocated one American platoon to relieve one British platoon, so that, initially the trenches were solid with men and you could not move up or down until a total reorganisation had been completed. All of this had resulted in a great deal of noise and talking in loud voices which alerted the Germans to what they thought was a possible imminent attack and they sent out a reconnaissance patrol to investigate.

The American battalion's Commanding Officer had offered a prize to the first man to shoot a German. This had the result that when the men in the line discerned this German patrol out to their front, every single one of them immediately started spraying bullets all over the place; as it happened, they succeeded in shooting a German warrant officer. Almost every man in the line claimed to have been the prize winner and so it was quite impossible to say who the winner was. The next thing I noticed was that our very careful trench revetments, so carefully built up with timber, were being systematically destroyed to make kindling wood for fires. Unlike us, they had no centralised catering facilities. Each man carried his own rations and was expected to cook for himself on whatever fire he could make.

I was asked what rations we were getting and on hearing that our usual hand out was bully beef, bread and margarine, they were not very impressed. "Tinned turkey, tinned salmon, tinned chicken, tinned anything you care to name, we've got it," was the response. Clearly they thought themselves much better off than us; I told them how lucky they were; it was not long, however before they came back to Company Headquarters, asking me if it would be possible to have some of our bully beef. On asking why, the reply was that all their tins only contained beans, irrespective of all the marvellous labels and they were longing for some meat. We were able to help out and they were very grateful.

I was only with them four days, but it was very obvious that they had arrived not knowing what to expect and still thinking in terms of what they had done in the American Civil War. For example, they arrived in the trenches carrying a back pack containing a tent; this was what had been used on the plains of Texas sixty years before. There were many problems initially, but the Americans were very good humoured about it all and quick to learn from their mistakes.

By now, we were approaching August 1918 and the final advance culminating in the Armistice and victory. In the first battles we were the reserve battalion behind the Grenadiers and the Coldstream. But in the middle of August we went into action with the first objective being to capture the high ground at St Leger. We attacked at dawn on a very misty morning, having been told to capture the trenches on top of the hill, which we rapidly succeeded in doing, only to find that the trenches had only been marked out and it was just the turf that had been removed. There was no cover at all and it was rapidly getting light. The mist was evaporating swiftly and our situation did not look good; I found myself in charge of the company as Walter Bonn had to go back to battalion headquarters and take charge because the Commanding Officer had been wounded.

The day had already started badly because there had been a muddle about when our advance should start in the morning, as to whether it should be 4.30 am or 9.00 am. The latter would have been a highly unusual time to begin an attack. The message came through "You will attack as planned; the time is as many lives as a cat has". This of course indicated 9.00 am and was further confirmed by talk of "4½ brace" but the signaller later claimed to have said "You know I'm talking double" but the line had been drowned out by falling shells at the vital moment to hear that part of the message. The situation was further complicated by the Commanding Officer being wounded. We, in the absence of further messages, decided that it was correct to attack at 4.30 am but we were the only ones to do so. As a result, we had to withdraw to our trenches, getting back there about 8.00 am, only to be immediately told to start preparing at 8.30 am for a 9.00 am attack. We were very annoyed but had no choice but to obey orders.

We regained the high ground, looking over a valley to a hill on the opposite side whither the Germans had retreated. The company on my left was further forward, so I thought I would go across to see what was happening with them. However, I managed to miss them somehow and the next thing I saw was the Germans just in front of me. I and two men dived into a shelter built by the Germans and not long since vacated by them. They saw me do so and started firing at us. I put my tin hat outside and wobbled it which brought down more fire but after a time all went quiet and I summoned up enough courage to go and look out. I saw a German officer, in a long grey greatcoat, obviously telling his men to withdraw which, in due course, enabled me to get back to the rest of the company on the top of the hill.

While all this was going on, our new temporary Commanding Officer, Walter Bonn thought he should come forward to see what was happening and managed, in the mist, to walk through both our lines and also the German positions. As it happened, they were so busy organising their own withdrawal that they did not notice him coming back the other way.

The following month, on 27th September, saw the last attack of the war for the Guards Division. Our job was to cross the Canal du Nord, which was an enormous canal started by the French before the war but never finished. In some places it was much further advanced than others; for instance, where we were to attack, it was a deep cutting. We were even supplied with ladders to clamber down one side and climb up the other. As it happened, where I crossed there was a workmen's path so that I was able to walk both down and up. I remember, as I reached the top, looking to my left and seeing the German shells coming from Bourlon Wood, falling on Premy Chapel, which the Grenadiers were gallantly holding and which was where their Commanding Officer, Lord Gort, was winning his VC.

I was told to go out to the right and try and find out where the nearest troops were; I started walking along the trenches; there were masses and masses of them because this country in the Cambrai area had been fought over several times. There were derelict tanks lying there, left from the first occasion that tanks were ever used in warfare, two years earlier, in the winter of 1916. That earlier battle is commemorated to this day by The Royal Tank Regiment, and known as Cambrai Day.

I walked along the trenches and before long I was completely lost. Round a corner, I bumped into an enormous Brigadier. "What are you doing, young man?" he said. I replied that I was trying to find the troops on our right. He said "Well you'll never find them while you are wandering about these trenches. It's quite quiet here; you can get up and walk on the top of the trenches and then you'll be able to see something. I'll come with you." So he, his Brigade Major and I all climbed out to the top. We had only gone a few yards when bullets suddenly started whistling past; the Brigade Major was hit in the foot and we all tumbled back into the trenches extremely quickly. The Brigadier, though not exactly admitting that it was his fault, was kind enough to say "Don't you bother about the Brigade Major, I'll take care of him, go back to your battalion. You know now where the next door troops are and you know where the Germans are". Later in life I was to meet that Brigadier, first when he was CIGS and then as C-in-C Home Forces. He was Brigadier Ironside, later to become Field Marshal Lord Ironside and I reminded him of our first encounter!

We advanced from there round the south of Cambrai, out into open country. It was marvellous to get away from those awful trenches and the barbed wire and to find oneself in country that had not been damaged. Although the farms were empty, the buildings and the houses were intact. We had our eye on some attractive billets but, annoyingly, we were not allowed to stop.

We continued our advance to St Hilaire; and No 2 Company was given the task of capturing St Vaast. I was ordered to take my platoon up a valley and then we skirted a low hillock, which took us right to the rear of the Germans, looking down on them without them being aware. The rest of the company attacked the front of the village while I brought in an assault from the rear; I captured the German Company Headquarters, in farm buildings, and we took the men prisoner. We found their breakfast, still steaming hot, on the table, not that it was particularly appetising, and a fire burning in the grate. The Germans were very

short of rations by then and this meal consisted of coffee made from acorns and oak leaves, black bread and cold sausages. Before moving on down to the banks of the River Selle, we took up a defensive position in the farmyard, using the mud walls as fortifications, with hastily made holes for our firing positions.

It was decided that we should mount a night attack across the river and sappers laid white tapes to the river bank. Luckily it was discovered that the Germans were not holding the opposite river bank but were on the high ground up above it. So it was possible to construct makeshift bridges out of duckboards, from the trenches, floating on empty petrol cans. Despite their short length, one could, with care, step across in this way and I and my platoon did so successfully.

We started the long climb up the other side. It was a pitch black night, with no moon visible and pouring with rain. My compass was completely useless; it whizzed round and round due to all the metal I was carrying, such as my tin hat and my revolver. On the way to our objective at the top of the hill, we captured an enormous rifle, the like of which we had not seen before. It turned out to be the first ever German anti tank rifle, very heavy indeed like the first British one. We found quite a lot of ammunition with it. We dragged this weighty object right up to our objective at the top of the hill. At dawn, the Commanding Officer came round and, stupidly, I very proudly showed it to him. He said, "Oh, this is a most wonderful thing; it must not be left behind; your platoon will carry it for the rest of the advance." There was a lot of cursing and swearing behind my back in the platoon about that but the instructions were carried out because, for many years, it was in the museum at the Guards Depot at Caterham and is now in the Guards Museum at Wellington Barracks. We had hoped to use it against a German tank, but we never, in fact, saw one after the capture of the weapon so it was never used.



Prototype armoured car advancing in the final offensive.

Chapter 6

Armistice

No sooner had we reached the top of the hill, after our night attack than I was ordered to take a patrol forward to find out whether the next river, the River Harpies, was held by the Germans. I detailed off Corporal Garn, and six other men, including my servant Private Lakin (the rank of Guardsman did not come in until 1919). Dawn had broken, and it was a very misty autumn morning. We started off down the hill towards the river, across stubble fields not long harvested. Soon we reached a small hedge and I could see the river, a couple of hundred yards ahead, across a meadow. I then went forward with just Lakin accompanying me. I left the rest of the patrol, lying up behind the hedge, with Corporal Garn in charge and the two of us walked down to the river. Just as we reached the bank, I saw a German soldier asleep on the opposite bank, with a machine gun on a tripod, between his legs. But he was not the only German! A large fat German NCO was shaking him to wake him up and pointing straight at us. He let off a burst but, thankfully, his aim was high and the bullets went over our heads. Lakin and I dived into the river: we managed to creep along under the bank out of sight of the Germans until we reached a small tributary brook, up which we crawled. The problem then was how to rejoin the rest of the patrol who were firing from the hedge. Having had a good look round, I decided to run for it, as the patrol fire had silenced the enemy. I sprinted across the open ground and managed to get behind the hedge without drawing any enemy fire. I had expected Lakin to follow me back to the hedge but he did not and I wondered what to do about him.

Back with the others, I decided it was time to withdraw; as there was no longer any sign of enemy activity, we moved off up the hill in extended order, supposing that Lakin would be able to rejoin us but there was no sign of him. The mist had lifted and there was little cover. Just as we were nearly back in our lines, German machine guns opened up and soon every man in the patrol had been hit. Corporal Garn and I fell into a very small shell hole. He was hit in the arm, which bled all over my trench coat which I was still wearing after the wet night. I was hit in the hand and had a bullet through the rim of my steel helmet. Stretcher bearers came out to try to rescue us but were all killed and we had to wait till later in the morning before the wounded, who included Lakin, could be collected, the enemy having withdrawn. It was probably about noon when they brought us into Battalion Headquarters and the Adjutant, Captain Geoffrey Devas, was busy filling in his casualty return. On asking where I was, he was told: "The officer is covered in blood and unable to walk" (the wounded Corporal Garn had been lying on top of me) "so he must be severely wounded in the upper leg." Thus he therefore reported. In fact, unknown to him, I remained at duty. The following night, the Battalion was relieved and went into reserve. In the morning I reported to the self same Adjutant, who was flabbergasted. "Good God", he exclaimed, "I thought you were already in England in hospital, after the report I sent." "No" I replied, "but I really should be there, because I am more than due for leave and it's my leave pass that I've come to ask you for."

So thus I returned on leave to England, not much more than a fortnight before the end of the war. I reported to Regimental Headquarters on my way home, where I was once again the cause of consternation, as they had informed my parents of my severe wound! The Regimental Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel Murray-Threipland, was very put out that he had the wrong information; needless to say I did not share his irritation; I was just thankful to be back in England. I returned home to Shropshire and at 11.00 am on 11th November 1918, I was shooting pheasants at Hodnet with Cyril Heber-Percy, (who was to command a Welsh Guards Battalion in the next war), his brother Algy (who was a Grenadier and rose to the rank of Brigadier) and their father. From where we were standing with our shotguns, we heard the church clock strike eleven and we knew it was all over; I just felt thankful that, on my return in two days time, there would be no more of those whistling bullets and crashing shells.

Thus ended my war, except for a letter that I received, a few days later, when I got back to the Battalion in France.

3888 Pte W H Lakin
1st Bn. Welsh Guards
No 6 Ward
East Leeds War Hospital
Killingbeck
Leeds

28.10.1918

Sir,

Just a line to let you know I have arrived in Blighty as per above address and am pleased to say I am going on well. I am hit in the head, shoulder, back, leg and arm, quite a few, but I am still smiling. There is one consolation I have, that is I am well out of reach of those whistling machine gun bullets. I met Corporal Garn at the Casualty Clearing Station but have not seen him since. I did not notice you go from that brook where we were lying in, so I decided to hang on a bit. The suspense began to get on my nerves and not knowing whether Fritz was working up those bushes, I decided to run the gauntlet. I started. I managed to clear the brook and field and got past the hedge when one of our shells caught me in the back and shoulder. Down I fell, then Fritz contributed one through my arm and one through my leg. Thinking I had not enough, he loaned me another, in the head. After this quite exciting period, here I am, happy at the prospect of being once again in Blighty.

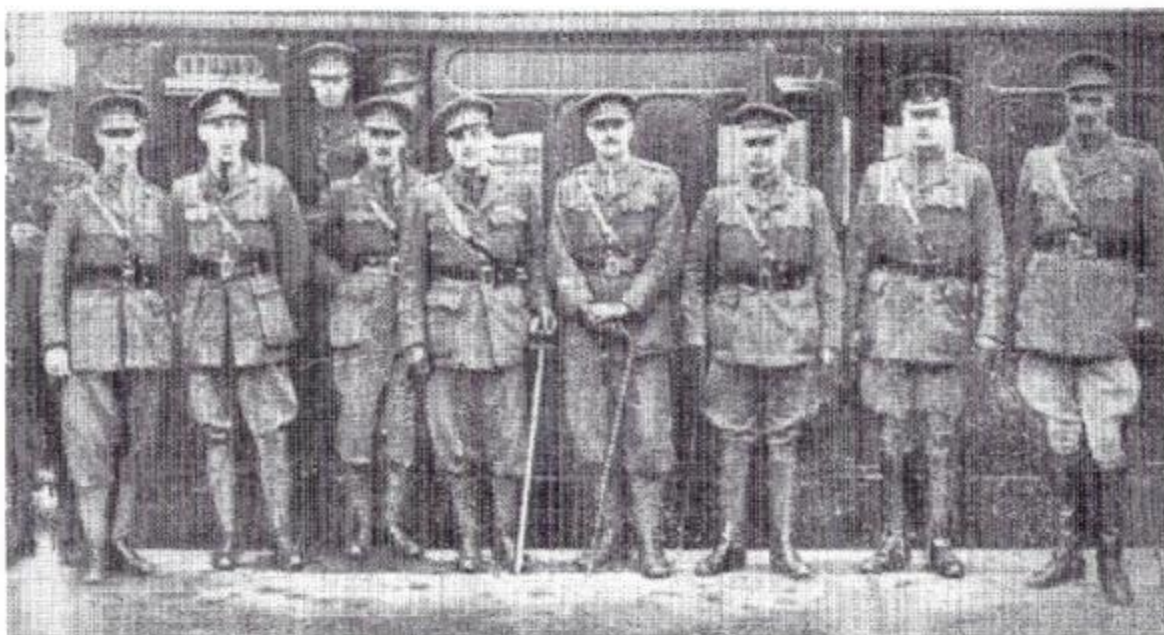
I am quite well at present despite my wounds and hope my letter finds you in the very best of health. I must close now, wishing the Battalion the very best of luck.

I remain, your obedient servant
W H LAKIN

PS – I enclose Washing List should you require it any time. It is the lot that Evans sent down with Mr Hawksley's.

Notes:

1. Lakin was called up again in 1939 as a Reservist; he survived the Second World War and telephoned Sammy on the 50th anniversary of Armistice Day in 1968.
2. Lakin had two sons who both served in the Welsh Guards in the 1950's. The elder served in 3 Company under Major Christopher Bonn, the son of their Company Commander in 1918, Major Walter Bonn. The younger was instructed at the Guards Training Battalion by Captain Billy Stanier, Sammy's son.
3. Evans had previously been Sammy's servant but was killed in action.
4. 2Lt Hawksley was also a Platoon Commander in 2 Company. He was more than double Sammy's age being well into his forties while Sammy was 19 at the time.



At Tilbury, 1919, on returning from Germany.

Left to right: 2/Lt R. Paton, Lt P. G. Coleman, 2/Lt A. Stanier, 2/Lt D. B. Morgan, 2/Lt H. L. Tatham, Captain K. Menzies, Captain V. Copland-Griffiths, Captain (QM) W. B. Dabell, Col. W. Murray-Threipland and Lt Col R. Luxmoore-Ball.

Chapter 7

Marching to Germany

On returning from leave to France, I found that the Battalion had already moved on and started the march to Cologne to hold a bridgehead there which had been agreed at the Armistice. I didn't catch up with them until I got to Charleroi. When I arrived there, it was dark and raining, but I saw a cab nearby which I stopped. I said to the driver, "Welsh Guards"! I didn't know what else to say as I did not know which street it was nor did I have any other directions. When I got into the cab, I found that there was already a man in it. He very kindly made space for me and off we drove. We stopped suddenly at a front door where I recognised a crowd of Welsh Guards officers standing in the doorway, headed by the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Luxmoore-Ball. I got out of the cab, whereupon the Commanding Officer asked me what on earth I was doing. "I am receiving the Mayor of Charleroi and you are in his carriage. How the devil did you get there?" I kept a low profile for the rest of the evening!

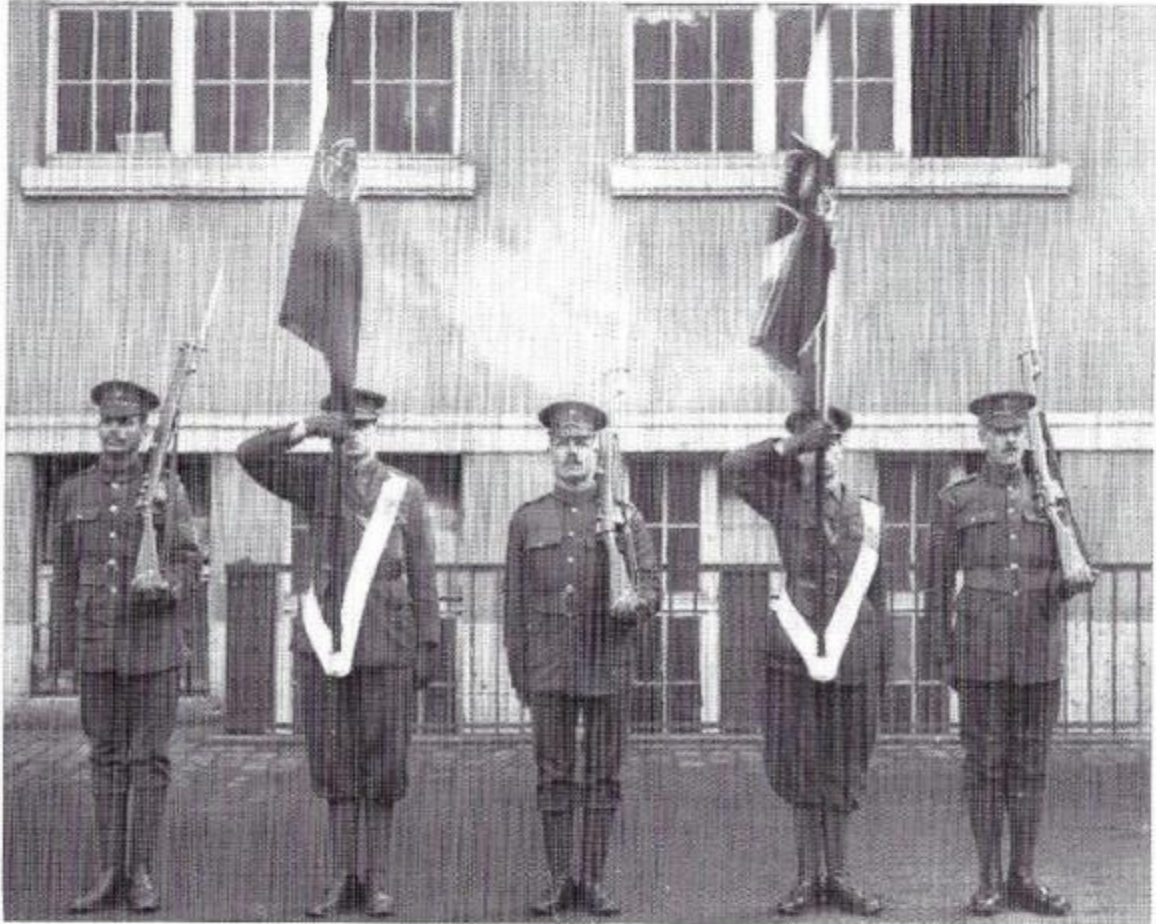
Very shortly we started on our march to Germany, billeting with local Belgians and Germans on the way. Near Cologne, we came across a wonderful castle which we promptly decided was our stopping place for the night. The owner was a very dignified old German, who, to give him his due, felt it would be very demeaning to receive us and refused to do so. He said he would remain in his smoking room, but that we could have the rest of the house and do what we wished. It was not as simple as that because he had a throng of relations who had come, as refugees from other parts of Germany. The castle was pretty full; but we eventually commandeered the best bedrooms and the relations went up to the attics. The Quartermaster was pretty tough about such matters and he even complained about the standard of the sheets!

In the evening, the Corps of Drums played in the courtyard. All the attics had windows overlooking the courtyard and to start with, the Germans kept their blinds tight shut but after a time, the blinds began to go up a little and very soon we had enthusiastic spectators.

Shortly afterwards we arrived in Cologne, and no sooner had we done so than I was told that I was to return to England to fetch the colours. This I and another subaltern did and we were immediately involved in a huge parade at Wellington Barracks. All the regular battalions of the Brigade of Guards were represented. That entailed some twenty different colours on parade. At a given signal, the officers who had come from Germany marched forward and took over the colours which had been brought on parade in their cases by officers of the Reserve battalions. We did a slow march across the square and the colours were handed over to us, uncased and finally a Royal Salute was given to Queen Alexandra who watched the parade. Immediately afterwards, we marched to Charing Cross, where we had hoped to board a train for the continent but there was a strike and we had to billet in the arches under the station for some time. After this delay, we eventually found our way to Cologne. We marched through the city, watched by thousands of Germans, which rather surprised me, but they

were always keen about military matters and, amazingly, nearly all the Germans took off their hats, most punctiliously, as the colours passed.

It was not long before we were ordered back to London and our first task was to participate in a Brigade of Guards Victory March through both the City and West End, before the Guards Division broke up. King George V took the salute outside Buckingham Palace and the Lord Mayor of London outside the Mansion House. Again I carried the colour and by now I was wearing my MC ribbon for what I had done at St Vaast.



*The colours in Cologne, January 1919.
Left to right: Sgt Grant, 2/Lt R. Paton, CSM Pearce, 2/Lt A. Stanier, Sgt Pates.*

Chapter 8

Between the Wars

Early in 1919, I returned to England with the battalion, and we were posted to Warley where we began to learn all the traditions and customs used by the Brigade of Guards in a peace time setting. It was quite an experience, starting off with home service clothing, because the Welsh Guards, having been formed in 1915, had initially no idea of how to put on a tunic, fold a great coat or roll a cape. We managed to do these things somehow, but when the Major General came for his annual inspection, he soon found that my platoon's coats were stuffed with paper and rags to make them stiff but it looked more like a scrap heap than a barrack room. When he departed, he was not pleased but by hard work and learning from others, we rose to be able to take our place among the other battalions in London District.

For myself, I wasn't sure what the future held. I had joined up straight from school, thinking only about winning the war. Was I suited to peace time soldiering? I hadn't given it much thought. On returning home to Shropshire, everything seemed on the surface to be exactly the same as ever. My parents still lived in some state at Peplow. My father, Beville Stanier, was still a Conservative Member of Parliament, though now for Ludlow in south Shropshire rather than Newport in the north of the county. He had spent most of the war organising the beginnings of a sugar beet industry, something which the country had never before had, relying on imported cane sugar in earlier years. For his efforts, Lloyd-George awarded him a baronetcy in 1917.

But things were about to change. My father had an elder brother, Frank, to whom Peplow belonged, but who never wished to live there, preferring instead the French and Italian rivieras, allowing his brother to live there instead. I knew I would never inherit Peplow but, rather, my first cousin Tim. Tim was due to come into his inheritance at the age of 25, in 1920, so my father was already looking for a smaller estate and purchased The Citadel estate, a few miles away. The Citadel was a remarkable house being a triple towered sandstone castle built by the first Viscount Hill, in 1810, as a dower house, in the shape of the Hill family coat of arms, which date back to the thirteenth century, but, strangely enough, also very similar to the design of Almaraz Castle in Spain where Hill had won a great victory under Wellington in the Peninsular war.

I felt there was probably not a job there for me as well as my father and I was enjoying the Army so I decided I would like to stay. Within two years, I faced the same dilemma again. My father was struck by cancer and died very suddenly in 1921. He was only 54 and had been offered a peerage in the New Year's Honours for 1922 but died not long before Christmas. Should I retire to look after things at The Citadel? My mother was, of course, still in the prime of life, and my younger brother, Pip, was just finishing Agricultural College, so again I felt justified in making the decision to remain a soldier.



Peplow Hall, the home of the Stanier family since 1877, when it was bought by Francis Stanier, a wealthy industrialist, coal owner and ironmaster. It was the childhood home of Alexander Stanier.



The Citadel, Hawkstone, to which Alexander Stanier's parents moved when his first cousin Tim inherited Peplow Hall in 1920.



Alexander Stanier's younger brother Edward was tragically killed in a road accident at the age of 21 in 1926. He is shown above in his prized HE sports car made by Herbert Engineering of Reading. Although he had been through pilot training in the RAF, he had changed direction and for some months had been articled as a pupil to Messrs. Balfour and Cooke estate agents in Shrewsbury.

On the day of the crash Edward left the office at 5pm to watch the Shrewsbury School bumping races on the River Severn and then had dinner in Shrewsbury, and was driving home. A motorcyclist following behind him told the inquest - held at the Red Lion Inn, Battlefield - that near the turn to Battlefield Church he saw the car swerve and then roll over, coming to rest upside down. Eddie, pinned underneath, died of a broken neck.

The coroner, Colonel E. Cureton, remarked that "driving at a fast pace is a highly dangerous proceeding."

(Archived in 2021 from the website of the Shropshire Star at www.shropshirestar.com.)



Alexander Stanier's good friend and fellow officer Percy Battye (above) with whom Stanier undertook a remarkable trip around Europe in the 1920s. Battye was a personal friend of the Greek royal family, through whom they mingled with other European royalty. It was through Battye that Stanier met his future wife Dorothy Miller.

Stanier describes Battye thus:

'Percy was very tall, remarkably good looking, lived life to the full and, not surprisingly, women found him very attractive. His mother was Greek and Percy had innumerable friends, both Greek and English, including the Greek Royal Family.'

Stanier explains that 'Sadly, in the following year, Percy's private life had incurred too much comment in certain quarters and he left both regiment and country for West Africa for a time'.

It was decided that I should become the Battalion's Signal Officer, so I was sent to Caterham, in Surrey, where London District ran a small course. I had to learn Morse code, how to wave flags in Semaphore code, use a lamp, a heliograph and telephones. Then I was sent to the Corps of Signals depot, at that time at Maresfield in Sussex which was an excellent course, presided over by a highly amusing Commanding Officer of the Signals who travelled everywhere in a horse drawn dog cart. As for myself, I had taken to riding a Douglas motor-bike; it was an exceptionally wet summer and the rain was perpetually dripping off my mackintosh into the carburettor with dire results. More often than not I was stranded in the lanes of Sussex! My mother thought the Douglas neither safe nor reliable and rather quickly bought me a small car.

I was Battalion Signal Officer until I was appointed Adjutant in 1924. That was a wonderful period in my career because the Adjutant, in practical terms, was almost more the Commander of the Battalion than the Commanding Officer; one was there all the time and one knew all the detail of what was going on. During my time as Adjutant, we were stationed at Aldershot, Windsor and London. Each had its pleasures but I particularly enjoyed Windsor because of the opportunity to become a whipper in to the Household Brigade Drag Hunt whose country stretched from Windsor up to Harrow, across to Heathrow, and down to Camberley; this was a huge area, still undeveloped at that time.

One of my greatest friends when I was a young officer was Percy Battye. Percy was actually thirteen years older than me so that he was already reasonably senior when I was a subaltern. He was one of those who had transferred into the Regiment on its formation in 1915, coming from the Grenadiers. Percy was very tall, remarkably good looking, lived life to the full and, not surprisingly women found him very attractive. His mother was Greek and Percy had innumerable friends, both Greek and English, including the Greek Royal family. Among his English friends was the Miller family from Oxfordshire and he took me there to stay at Shotover.

Brigadier General Alfred Miller's eldest son was Captain Alastair Miller, Scots Guards, another keen drag hunting man, with whom I became great friends. Alastair encouraged me to go out fox hunting which I had done periodically with the North Shropshire and it was not long before he took me to have a day with his father's pack, not far away, the South Oxfordshire. His father had been a cavalry officer with the Scots Greys and was a very enthusiastic Master of Hounds with the very highest of standards. I started to go to stay regularly with the Millers at Shotover, for both hunting, shooting and parties, not realising at this stage that the General would become my father in law in due course when I married Alastair's elder sister, Dorothy, in 1927.

In 1926, I was still Adjutant when the General Strike occurred. We were at Chelsea Barracks by then and we were immediately confined to barracks, being held as a reserve unit. The officers quickly got very bored; there was a billiards table in the officer's mess and, one night the game soon dissolved into billiards fives where you hit it against the cushion hard with the palm of your hand. Billiards balls crashed through the window on to the pavement outside where they were picked up by passers by who reported to the press that the Welsh Guards were stoning their officers!

That incident was soon forgotten when we were sent to the docks to get cargo moving. We escorted open backed lorries with one man beside the driver and another sitting astride the cargo in the back. One of the things we transported was frozen meat; we very quickly discovered the escorts in the back who had sat on the frozen meat were thoroughly frozen themselves and stuck to the meat by the time our westward journey had got as far as Hyde Park and they had to be very carefully peeled off. I, as Adjutant, had an armoured car which I was particularly proud of; I thought, one day, that it was being stoned but actually it was a kind woman throwing sweets!

When the strike came to an end, we received various messages from the Trade Unions about the restoration of services including electricity to the dockside cranes; we took great pleasure in sending a message back to the Unions, saying they need not hurry because we had plenty of electricity for the time being. We had persuaded the Royal Navy to send a submarine secretly up the river, which was able to generate its own electricity and rig up a supply to the cranes!

By now, I was due for some leave and my very great friend Percy Battye suggested we should go to Roumania for two weeks. Percy, as I said earlier, had an amazing number of friends in every walk of life, including, not least most of the European Royal Families. He said we would go to Paris where we would meet the King and Queen of Greece and accompany them to Bucharest where they would be staying with the Queen of Greece's parents, King Ferdinand and Queen Marie of Roumania! I wondered, to start with, how Percy had managed to arrange all this but I became aware, fairly quickly, that the Greek Queen had fallen under the spell of his incredible charm.

He and I set off for Paris in September where we had a few days to really enjoy ourselves going to night clubs, racing, eating and shopping. Then Percy took me to meet King George II of Greece and Queen Elizabetha; a more charming couple you could not wish to meet and I later developed a very great friendship with them both when they were in exile in England in the thirties and during the war. We set off on the Simplon express by Switzerland, Italy and Trieste to Yugoslavia and thence to Bucharest. We went immediately on another train to Sinaia, about four hours journey away in the mountains, where the summer palace was situated. The gathering was of no less than three Royal families, those of Greece, Roumania and Yugoslavia. King Alexander of Yugoslavia was married to Queen Marie's other daughter Mignon. We spent three days there walking, golfing and riding and eating our meals surrounded by a large number of Princes and Princesses who were the children of all these Kings and Queens. We spent three days also at the palace in Bucharest where we rode horses in the streets every morning before breakfast. We returned to Sinaia for a farewell banquet at which I was sitting at the same table as five Queens! They were those of Greece, Roumania and Yugoslavia with, in addition, the Queen Mother of Greece, Sophie, who was the Kaiser's sister and her daughter Helen, married to Crown Prince Carol, who succeeded to the Roumanian throne in 1930.

Next day we set off for home by the Orient Express on the route through Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Germany, bearing gifts of wine and caviar from the King. By the time we got to Dover, we'd finished the caviar! It had been an

amazing holiday and I had been the perfect escort for Percy. Sadly, by the following year, Percy's private life had incurred too much comment in certain quarters and he left both regiment and country for West Africa for a time. He married again in the thirties and came back to the regiment in 1939. He was tragically killed by a motor car shortly after the war.

The following year my time as Adjutant drew to a close and it is customary for the retiring Adjutant to have a change and a job away from the Battalion. I found myself appointed to be Military Secretary to the Governor of Gibraltar, General Sir Charles Monro. However, before I went, I had important personal matters to attend to. I was in love with Dorothy Miller and in January 1927 we had become engaged. We were married in July and on our return from honeymoon, we set off by boat for Gibraltar.

The General was a charming person from whom I learned a lot. In the war he had commanded an army in France and also he had successfully evacuated the Dardanelles. Dorothy and I were allocated a married quarter at 2 Secretary's Lane and I recall that it was not exactly the lap of luxury, in fact about the worst available in the colony; the trouble was, in those days, the Army did not recognise marriage officially until an officer was 30 and I was only 28!

Nevertheless, we enjoyed it enormously when we were there. There was every kind of opportunity for riding; we hunted with the Royal Calpe Hunt in Spain; I played polo and I even won a flat race on the course which is now the airport: we went on pigsticking expeditions in Morocco. The Navy were much in evidence in Gibraltar and not only did I make many friends among them but I learned a lot about their methods and customs which was to be very useful in the Second World War.

My daughter, Sylvia, was born in Gibraltar, the following year, in 1928. We stayed on, in fact, when the Monros retired and worked until 1930 for the succeeding Governor, General Sir Alexander Godley, returning to England in 1930 at exactly the same time as the Battalion came back from a couple of years in Cairo.

It was good to be back with the Regiment and with one's friends in England and I did not have to go abroad again until the war took me to France in 1940. One of the Welsh Guards' finest officers, Merton Beckwith-Smith, had just taken over as Commanding Officer on transferring into the Welsh Guards. He taught me more than anybody as to how to set an example to those one commanded. He was to die in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, having commanded a division in Singapore, where he was captured.

We lived, first at Reigate and then Virginia Water, for the next eighteen years. My postings varied between Caterham, Pirbright, London, Aldershot and Windsor and my son Billy, was born in 1934. I had one spell away, as a GSO 2, on the staff at the headquarters of 2 Division at Aldershot. In retrospect, the divisional staff was an amazing group of officers with brilliant futures ahead of them; the Division was commanded by General Wavell and Jumbo Wilson was a Brigade Commander, both later to be Field Marshals; Cameron Nicholson,

another full General to be, was a Brigade Major. My next job was to command Prince of Wales Company for three years from 1935 to 1938 and I was then promoted to Second in Command of the Battalion. Within the year we had been given orders to move to Gibraltar in the spring of 1939, and I was looking forward to going back to my old haunts.

I had had eight years of continuous postings within an hour or two of London which had enabled Dorothy and me to have a permanent home in the country and to pursue our equestrian activities with great regularity whether it was the Household Brigade Drag Hunt of which I became master or the Bicester foxhounds where we kept our horses at Charlie Kelly's livery stable on the outskirts of the town. We even had time to get involved in golf at Goodwood and sailing in Chichester harbour and built ourselves a seaside cottage at West Wittering. But we were aware, increasingly, that Europe was heading for a crisis, that another war was a possibility. We clung to a hope that perhaps the Prime Minister would be able to persuade Adolf Hitler to restrain himself and that the Munich agreement would be obeyed. Sadly, by the spring of 1939, it was becoming clear that was not going to happen and the nation started to re-arm; as far as the Brigade of Guards was concerned, the initial question to be decided was whether second battalions of Irish and Welsh Guards should be raised or fourth battalions of Grenadier and Coldstream Guards.

In mid April, the first battalion set sail by troopship for Gibraltar. I had only been there with them for a matter of days when I received a message to say that the regiment was to have a second battalion and that I was to command it. Very swiftly I was back in England with plenty to keep me occupied through the summer.



Regimental polo team, Gibraltar 1939.

Left to right: Richard Watt, Stephen Holland, Gerry Fowke and John Miller.

Chapter 9

Preparing to Fight Again

It was a very rewarding experience, building up an entirely new battalion from scratch. I started with, literally, two men at Chelsea Barracks in May 1939. The battalion staff came principally from the first battalion in Gibraltar and some from other establishments in England, with a few transferring in from other regiments. One or two squads of recruits soon joined us from the Guards Depot and eventually we had our first battalion parade in mid June. From then on, we were calling up reservists to train them in the “new” weapons – the Bren gun, the 2 inch mortar and the anti-tank rifle.

Gradually we built up our strength till we had to move out of Chelsea and went in August to The Tower of London where our numbers had reached close on 400 and we took over the public duties there. So, we were at the Tower when war was declared on 3rd September. The immediate impact was that large numbers of reservists started arriving and we had to move the battalion out temporarily to Theydon Bois in Essex, in order to cope. Two companies were left at the Tower to undertake public duties until we could get the organisation in place for a Training Battalion; once that was sorted out, a quick return was made to the Tower and we became responsible for all the public duties including Buckingham Palace and St James's. Our first King's Guard did not go unnoticed; we celebrated with a dinner party at the Officers Mess at St James's which included the Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, the CIGS, Field Marshal Lord Ironside and both the Colonel of the Regiment, Lord Gowrie and the Regimental Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel Murray Threipland.

I was assured that there would be plenty of time for field training before being required for active service but training at the Tower was not exactly easy and we were kept busy with public duties and we had to have a permanent body of men ready to cordon off areas should there be heavy bombing. In February 1940, the King presented colours to us.

In the meantime, a British Expeditionary Force had been organised to go to France, including our comrades, the First Battalion, who moved to Arras in North East France, from their station in Gibraltar. Our instructions were to remain at the Tower but to be ready, at short notice, to move wherever ordered.

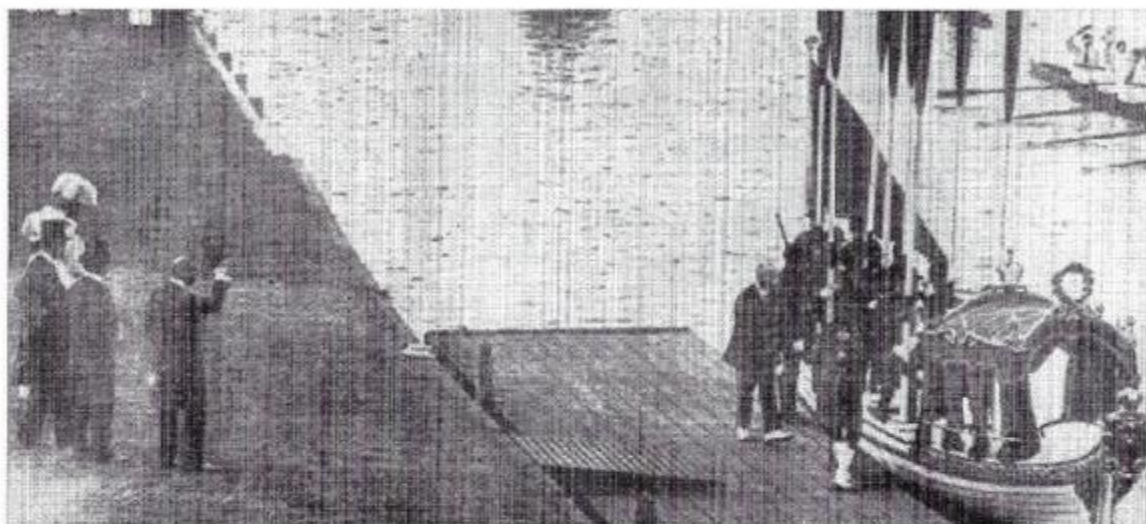
We did all the normal Tower Guards, dressed in khaki of course. These guard duties included the Crown Jewels and the Ceremony of the Keys, though the Crown Jewels were, actually, already hidden away down at Windsor. We trained intensively, which did not exactly endear us to some of the elderly gentlemen who administered the Tower and its museums. They simply could not understand our impatience to get on with things and we had some difficulty when we had to close the Tower on occasions, and we had to take over some of the museum rooms for barrack and mess rooms; in practice, all the smaller exhibits were carefully packed away and all that was left out were some of the heavy guns that were immovable and I am sure we did not do them any harm!

Through the winter, the battalion waited and trained and from time to time, regularly, there would be an alarm and we were given a warning order for embarkation to Norway. I had to protest to the Major General that we were not ready and that we had not even been allowed to draw our mobilisation equipment for fear of damaging it before active service. He pointed this out to the War Office. Nor had any proper field training been done except for a few platoon exercises in Richmond Park. Each time that we said that we were not yet ready, the official response was that our skis would be coming along shortly. Needless to say, hardly anybody in the battalion knew how to ski! It was, in the end, quite immaterial, because the campaign in Norway was finished off by the Germans before the skis were ever issued.

Our next instructions were to move to the Camberley area in order to rectify our lack of field training. We went to a tented camp at Old Dean Common as part of 20th Guards Brigade, commanded by my very old friend and regimental compatriot, Billy Fox-Pitt. The brigade also included 2nd Battalion Irish Guards.

I had also had to point out to my superiors that nobody had had any leave, whatsoever, since the outbreak of war, six months earlier. It was therefore approved that all ranks should have a week's leave over Whitsun, the second weekend of May. Hardly had they all disappeared on leave than I received a message to say that Germany had invaded Holland and that we were to go there immediately. This was easier said than done with everyone on their way home to Wales and elsewhere by varying means of transport. Surprisingly, quite a few men returned during the day. The Irish Guards found it easier to recall their men because they had organised a special train for those travelling to Ireland and this was stopped and the men sent back. Later in the day, all those in camp were taken by buses and lorries to a camp on the showground at Tunbridge Wells in Kent.

Billy Fox-Pitt gave orders for the majority of 2nd Battalion Irish Guards to proceed to the coast and embark for the Hook of Holland, accompanied by No 1 Company of 2nd Battalion Welsh Guards whose Company Commander was Captain Cyril Heber-Percy. The idea was that I would bring the remainder of the Welsh Guards Battalion and any remaining Irish Guardsmen, following on, once they had all been rounded up from leave, but we never got to Holland as planned. The contingent who did go to the Hook had orders to hold it at all costs until the Dutch Royal Family could be evacuated back to Britain and also the Government and various other VIPs; they were also to sabotage as much as they could of anything that might be useful to the enemy. In this they were remarkably successful; in high spirits, they enjoyed themselves; they blew up petrol tanks, blocked roads and caused general confusion so that the Germans could not get into the port. They nearly overdid it, however, and only escaped back to England by the skin of their teeth and had to leave all their kit behind except their personal weapons. They came back with virtually no casualties, enthusing about their experiences. "War is better than foxhunting" said one officer!



King George V bids farewell to the Eton boats escorting him home after his visit to Eton, July 1912.



Welsh guardsmen asleep in the trenches at Boyelles, August 1918.



The Commanding Officer, Lt Col R. Luxmoore-Ball DSO, DCM and The Second in Command, Maj C. H. Dudley Ward, DSO, MC, Cologne 1919.



Sammy on the first King's Guard mounted by the Welsh Guards in full dress, October 1921.



Sammy as Adjutant, Guard mounting, Chelsea Barracks, 1923.



Sammy rides alongside the Prince of Wales, Household Brigade Drag Hunt, near Maidenhead, 1924.



*On leave in Roumania 1926.
Left to right: Percy Battye, HM Queen Elizabeth of Greece and Sammy.*



Sammy arrives at Pirbright for training, 1922, at the head of HQ Company.



Sammy with Colonel Chicot Leatham, OTC training camp for Public Schools, Aldershot, 1926.



*Sammy and Dorothy's wedding, July 1927.
John Miller, the bride's brother, is the page in Drum Major's uniform.
South Oxfordshire huntsman, Jim Wardle, blowing horn.*



*The Duke of York's visit to Gibraltar 1927.
Left to right: HRH The Duke of York, Sammy, General Sir Charles Monro (Governor),
HRH The Duchess of York (now HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother).*



*Sammy's son, Billy, aged 4, receives a leek from the Regimental Lieutenant Colonel,
Colonel W. Murray-Threipland, St David's Day 1938, Pirbright.*



German bombs and shells landing on Boulogne as 2nd Bn. Welsh Guards evacuate, 23 May 1940.



Sammy is invested with D.S.O. at Buckingham Palace, July 1940, accompanied by Dorothy and Sylvia.



Monty visits 183 Brigade, following which he chose Sammy to command 231 Brigade on D Day.



*Leaving Shotover for France by helicopter, D Day anniversaries, June 1994.
Left to right: Johnny Moss, Annabel Moss, Bettie Simmonds and Sammy.*

We were swiftly sent back from Tunbridge Wells to our tented camp at Old Dean Common; the message, yet again, was that 20th Guards Brigade would not be needed in the foreseeable future, as the BEF, we were told, had consolidated its position on the Franco-Belgian border.

The situation deteriorated rapidly, though, by as early as the 21st May. On that day I was doing a reconnaissance for an advance guard exercise through the grounds of the Royal Military College at Sandhurst to Harford Bridge Flats. Here a despatch rider arrived to say the Battalion was to move and proceed at once to France. This time we were complete except for the Anti-tank Platoon who were training at Hythe and the President of the Mess Committee of the Officers Mess who was buying up stores at Fortnum and Mason; these were shortly to be abandoned in France and presumably eaten by the enemy.

By early that afternoon we were on the move by bus and lorry towards Dover. All our own Battalion transport was to be left behind, so we assumed we would get a fresh lot on arrival. On reaching Folkestone, just as it was getting dark, we encountered problems. Air raid sirens were sounding, and civilian car drivers were jumping out of their vehicles and abandoning them causing traffic chaos with blocked roads everywhere. They were being encouraged to do this by zealous air raid wardens who were ordering the extinguishing of all lights and stopping of all engines because of the raid. We were not only having difficulty getting through these traffic jams but the wardens were also actively trying to stop us moving. In fact, it turned out that the raid was actually taking place on Calais, not Folkestone!

We did eventually make it to the docks at Dover and found our ship, the SS Biarritz, on which we were ordered to embark at about 9.00 pm. When we got on board, we found all the cabins and the holds full of stores, such as barbed wire and iron pickets. The boat had been over in the morning to Boulogne, but was unable to get unloaded because the French dockers were on strike! The situation at Dover was nearly as bad as practically every civilian was sheltering from these air raids that were actually across the channel. Eventually the Battalion, less all the stores and transport, did embark. We were told that there would be another ship bringing all the rest, except our transport, on behind us almost immediately. Plenty of transport would be available at Boulogne.



Sammy, as Commanding Officer, inspects reservists joining 2nd Battalion Welsh Guards, Chelsea Barracks, June 1939.



The SS Biarritz, on which Stanier and his battalion left Dover for Boulogne.

Chapter 10

Retreat from Boulogne

On arrival at Boulogne, we found the quayside filled with many troops ordered to return to England: they were principally staff from the rear headquarters and men from the lines of communication: I remember seeing the Duke of Gloucester's groom with his two chargers and I have often wondered whether they made it home or not. The scene was not chaotic like we had encountered at Dover; an orderly withdrawal was going on at that time with everybody doing what the movement control officers told them to do.

I was anxious to get my men moving to wherever we were going so I told the Adjutant everyone was to stay on board just for the moment while I and Charles Hayden, who was commanding the Irish Guards Battalion, sought out Brigadier Billy on the quayside to find out what we were supposed to do.

The Brigadier told us that our job was to hold Boulogne from the enemy till the withdrawal was complete. The Irish Guards were to be on the right at St Martin while we, on the left, should hold from Boulogne out to Mount Lambert and back to the sea. We covered what we could, but it was not possible to cover all of the left flank towards Wimeureux and the sea. There was no accurate information regarding the enemy, no transport and no artillery or tanks. Any transport found in the streets was to be taken and used. Luckily, I did find a car, but with no ignition key; however, an ingenious person got it to work with the aid of a sardine can opener. Maps were issued but when they were unrolled, they turned out to be maps of Kent with Calais in the bottom right hand corner! We did eventually get two proper maps, but somebody immediately spilled ink over one, so that I had the only serviceable one. I could only therefore issue very simple orders to the Company Commanders such as: "Follow the tramlines and when you come to a railway bridge, stop." Or "Go up there past the church and stop at the first crossroads and I will meet you later."

Our situation was really very dire though we didn't realise just quite how bad; you see, we were still at that moment expecting all that we had left behind at Dover to be rejoining us only a few hours later. We had no idea how far away the Germans were but we guessed about thirty miles and we were expecting to be reinforced by tanks coming down from Calais to support us.

It took us about two hours to deploy and then I did a tour round in my requisitioned car. One keen guardsmen told me "I can see the enemy across the valley, I can see his face now". On getting out my binoculars, I found that it was only a Frenchman sitting with his trousers down under a hedge! We had no barbed wire and very few tools with which to construct defences except the shovels that every man carried. We blocked the road junctions with carts and furniture.

That afternoon, the Germans did arrive, in tanks, and started shelling our positions. We had brought our anti-tank guns with us to Boulogne and these we

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used to good effect at first despite the fact that we didn't have our own transport with which to move them. We had managed to commandeer lorries in Boulogne harbour and with the aid of ramps, to load up the guns, but once unloaded at our initial defensive positions, they could not be reloaded and could only be moved a short way by manhandling; so, on our withdrawal, they were abandoned. We returned fire with rifles and Bren guns, which, I am afraid to say, only helped to give away our positions; we could not fire our two inch mortars because there was no ammunition.

At dusk, the enemy withdrew. I was having an extremely difficult time communicating with the Company Commanders because we still had no signalling equipment and all I had was two despatch riders with French commandeered motorbikes for the whole battalion. I kept on sending men back down to the harbour to find out where our stores had got to: these men never returned! Eventually I sent an officer down with strict instructions not to get involved in anything but to report back to me as to what was going on. He returned, in due course, to say that every half hour, the senior embarkation officer shuts the gates, takes everybody on the inside down to the quay, and puts them on a boat back to England, so all my investigators had gone home without any choice in the matter! We still did not have our stores and never got them.

Once we got our positions organised, I moved Battalion headquarters back to the Boulogne waterworks. Late in the evening I returned for some much needed supper at about 10.00 pm, to be greeted by the Second in Command, John Vigor, and the Adjutant, Robin Rose Price, with worried expressions; the French managing director of the waterworks, was apparently extremely angry and wished to see me. He was in a towering rage because, he said, my men had trampled all over his flower beds and rose garden. While he was declaiming loudly and at great speed about our sins, there was a big explosion; I thought we were being shelled but it was only a petrol cooker blowing up, with my precious supper on it. Captain Bray, the Quartermaster, with great presence of mind, threw an old mattress on the flames, which thereupon gave off such fumes that we had to put our gas masks on. The Frenchman did not have one so he fled, coughing and crying and was not seen again.

We wondered whether or not some element of the French Army would turn up to give us some help. At one moment three French Generals arrived and sought my advice as to whether they should send their troops to England or try to make for the South of France. My suggestion that they should stop and help defend Boulogne was not popular and they left quickly. The only French troops in the area had locked themselves into the fort overlooking the harbour, where they had quite a big artillery gun. Unfortunately, later in the battle, they surrendered rather quickly to the Germans, who promptly used the gun on us as we were embarking for home.

Although the French civilians in Boulogne were, I am sure, grateful for what we were attempting to do, there was little opportunity, in the rush, to explain ourselves and the incident at the waterworks that I described above was not the only time that relationships were strained; which was, perhaps, not surprising as we were requisitioning not only transport but plenty of other useful things as well.

We also had to guard against espionage and fifth column activity. I remember coming across a lady that night who was continually flashing a large lantern; I thought she was signalling; she assured me she was only trying to rig up a light to her cellar where she intended to shelter and that the light wouldn't go through the only narrow opening in the wall. I never got to the truth of the matter. But there was very definitely a spy up in a church tower. A man was signalling from there and he most certainly was not doing it for us so he was quite clearly doing it for the Germans. Cyril Heber-Percy noticed him and so he hauled up one of our anti-tank guns. At first, he couldn't get the elevation but then he propped the gun on a ramp and knocked the top of the church tower off and down came the man with it. There was also a priest with a note book under his cassock: the intelligence officer reported that the notes were without doubt not theological: the priest was taken away and I never saw him again but I was told that he was taken down to the quayside and thrown into the harbour where he drowned. His notebook was taken back to England and a full examination showed the extent of his espionage.

The German tanks had withdrawn at dusk: we needed badly to get some intelligence on their strengths and dispositions. So each company sent out reconnaissance patrols up to about a mile forward but saw absolutely nothing. The French in the villages said that the enemy had retreated but, of course, a tactical withdrawal, which is what it was, was something very different. They had withdrawn about six miles down the road and were enjoying a comfortable night and a meal, well beyond our patrolling range.

The following morning I was up at dawn and touring the company positions from 6.00 am onwards. I had got about half way round by about 7.30 am to No 3 Company on the left at Mount Lambert. As I was there, I saw the light Panzer tanks bursting out of the village, firing at our anti-tank guns which were down in a hollow below and one or two shells came perilously close to me peering over a wall at the farm where No 3 Company Headquarters was situated. The enemy fire was directed on the platoon holding the cross roads, but then the tanks swerved away as if heading for Calais; there was a momentary lull and I drove off to complete my rounds. As I with the last company, where the Brigadier had also arrived, we suddenly saw some tanks which in the first instance we thought must be British, but suddenly, to our horror we realised that it was the self same German tanks which had done a rapid outflanking movement round our left side.

The Germans were concentrating on destroying our roadblocks which was relatively simple because a few bursts of small arms fire from the light machine guns mounted on the tanks quickly set fire to the piles of furniture. Our response was not easy because there were hundreds of French civilian refugees pouring out of the villages down towards Boulogne and the German tanks were following down the roads right behind them so that they were effectively screened by the refugees. I do not think the Germans did this deliberately; they just happened to be there. In practice, once the gunfire started, the refugees all leaped into the ditches, and many were killed.

The enemy at this point consisted solely of armour and no infantry was evident. The Germans thus did not actually capture anything on that day; they stood off

about half a mile and shot up whatever took their fancy whether that was houses or roadblocks or whatever. The attack lasted all day. We were suffering casualties because every time we moved, the tanks noticed and tried to shoot us up. One very gallant officer, Hexie Hughes, having noticed that the German tanks had got behind his position, decided to withdraw so that he would have a better opportunity to fire at them. Unfortunately, he only got half the platoon back safely and the other half attracted fire from the tanks, with Hexie being killed.

At this point, late in the afternoon, Brigadier Fox-Pitt ordered us to withdraw into the town. By 6.00 pm it was decided that we should withdraw further on to the quayside. The order had to be got personally to all of the companies, so I detailed someone to take the message for each and I undertook to go to No 3 Company myself. They were in a white house in the middle of the town. When I got there, they were under heavy fire as was I myself. I banged on the door of the house which was locked but nobody came to open it and all my efforts to attract attention were unavailing. Eventually, I couldn't stay there any longer. There were too many bullets flying around. I jumped back into the car and my driver took me back down the street. I learned later that one of the men had gone to Jim Windsor Lewis, the Company Commander, and told him that somebody was banging on the door and had asked whether he should open the door. He was told to go and look out of the window to see who it was. It took a bit of time to open up the barricaded window and they were just in time to see me disappear down the road. They were aware it was me but not of the importance of my visit.

I went back and I met Billy Fox-Pitt on the bridge which gives access to the quay and we checked everybody through except, of course, No 3 Company. He said, "I can not wait any longer, I am going to blow the bridge" which we then did, rather unsuccessfully as it happened, but we did enough damage to prevent vehicles getting through.

We proceeded on to the quay where things were frantic and solid with troops. The German tanks had followed us through the town and were by now accompanied by half-track reconnaissance cars. The Royal Navy destroyers were firing back at the German vehicles and I saw a direct hit on one of the half-tracks. I told my Battalion to get on up to the far end but it was easier said than done with the crowd of every type of staff and corps already there. At this point the Germans started bombing us from the air. I recall a lucky escape. I actually saw a bomb falling; I dived under a railway truck together with a padre and a young officer. The bomb went off not far away but did not hit us. I got up and so did the padre but the young officer was dead. We had all three lain close together. We were all trying to embark on the destroyers but it was not easy with the amount of shelling and bombing that was going on. It became easier when the tide went out because the destroyers went down below the harbour wall and were no longer a proper target for the German tanks. The Captain of the destroyer that I eventually got on to, had been killed because the bridge of his ship was the only thing that remained a target. Eventually, we set sail; unfortunately not only No 3 Company was left behind; there were others from 2 and 4 Companies who never managed to get on board. The destroyer in front

of us was ablaze, a spectacular but awe-inspiring sight. As we passed the other side of the harbour we fired at the German cars travelling down the sea front. Later that night we arrived at Dover but minus No 3 Company. The Company, it later transpired, having been surrounded, found that on the next morning the Germans had withdrawn again, so they were able to walk down to the harbour and clamber over our bad bridge blowing attempt on to the quay; but we had all gone and there were no ships. They had to resign themselves to becoming prisoners of war.

On arrival at Dover, we were sent by train to Aldershot and thence to Colchester where the Training Battalion looked after us before we went to Halnaker, a small village near Chichester on the South Downs. This was to be one of our defensive strong points should a German invasion take place along the Sussex coast. Later in the year, we were moved to Byfleet in Surrey as part of the London defence shield but I had moved on, on being promoted to Brigadier.

We had had our first taste of action and there were now families who had lost a man either killed, wounded or taken prisoner. A families association was formed, of which my wife became chairman and which also administered the "comforts fund". She and her committee of wives operated from an office in Buckingham Gate right through the war, through the blitz and later the V1 and V2 rockets. They continued until their efforts were no longer needed well after the end of the war.



Three Welsh Guards Commanding Officers, 1940.

Left to right: Sammy (2nd Bn.), Lord (Bill) Glanusk (Training Bn.), 'Cop' Copland-Griffiths (1st Bn.).

Chapter 11

Back to Training

In the autumn of 1940 I was given command of 223 Independent Brigade, consisting, rather appropriately, of East Anglian units i.e. the Essex Regiment, the Northamptonshires and the Suffolk Regiment. Our job was to defend the sea coast from Harwich to Southend, not a great distance as the crow flies, but if you go up and down all those East coast creeks and round Mersea Island, it is well over 100 miles. Over such a distance, three battalions fade into insignificance but summer turned to autumn and nothing happened to disturb our peace.

At Harwich, I had the Essex Battalion with some artillery and also an armoured train which was run by a group of Poles. The train used to run from Manningtree down to the coast and then along the shore right up to Harwich. They were wonderful people and one day, I decided to visit them. I was greeted by the colonel and taken up to the station platform where they kept their train. On the opposite platform, a guard of honour was drawn up. As the Poles presented arms, I noticed that the right hand man had an eyeglass. I had never seen a private soldier with an eyeglass before. As I walked to inspect the guard of honour, I gathered from their colonel that most of them spoke good English, so I asked the man with the eyeglass what he normally did for a living. "I work on the land" he said. "Oh, yes" I replied, "a farmer, I see, very interesting". As we walked back, the colonel expressed his pleasure that I had spoken to the right hand man, "You see, he's one of the biggest land owners in Poland."

There was another occasion when I used them to transport me to Harwich on the train. We started early, so as not to disrupt the commuter trains to London. All went well till we reached Harwich itself. Unfortunately nobody thought to tell them whether I wanted to go to Harwich Town or Harwich Quay where the naval station was. The Poles assumed it was the Town which was further on than the Quay; we rushed through the Quay station at high speed; the Admiral was expecting me and he and his staff were left standing on the platform saluting as we sped through, with me also stiffly at attention, saluting them as we went by. Shades of Dad's Army! Luckily, I was able to get them to stop quite quickly, and I walked back.

On another occasion, Winston Churchill and his wife came down to inspect the coastal defences. As he got off the train on to the platform, I thought he said "The Nazis have arrived" which shook me somewhat. In fact, I had misheard him and he was saying "The Nazis have arrived at Tobruk" which was also very bad news in its own context. He was not very fit at all and I recall him finding it hard work, walking up to the church at Ramsey at the top of the hill. Dressed in the Trinity House uniform of blue reefer jacket and sailor's cap, he was gasping a bit when we reached the vantage point at the top of the church tower, to view the coastal defences. He pointed out all our guns to Mrs Churchill, with great relish and told her what a great fortress it was, with its mines and everything else. I told him that we were quite satisfied with the number of guns but that there was a great shortage of ammunition for them; however, he wiped

that aside! When we came down, Mr Churchill got in a furious temper because he had laid his cigar on a tombstone before ascending the church tower and, now on his return, it was missing. Somebody had clearly pocketed it as a souvenir. Churchill turned to me and said "What have you done with my cigar?" I felt

like saying, but did not dare, "Well, I've been up the church tower with you, so I don't think I could have winched it up".

He then said to me, "And now I want to see the grave of Captain Fryatt". This completely threw me as I had no idea about whom he was talking. With great presence of mind, I recalled that there was a very big cross at the far corner of the churchyard at the end of a broad path, so I took a chance and took him over there. I guessed right, as it happened. Churchill stopped and saluted and said to me "Whenever I come to Harwich, I always salute the bravery of Captain Fryatt".

Churchill then told me the amazing story of Captain Fryatt. He had been the skipper of the ferry boat which brought quite a number of important Belgians from Bruges to England in 1915. Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, sent for him to thank him and for some reason asked him if he could go back to Bruges just once more for a special consignment. Fryatt decided, having given it due thought, that it was perfectly feasible to undertake another trip and agreed to do so. Churchill was so delighted that he presented him with a gold watch on the spot. Fryatt asked whether it would be possible to have it engraved to say that it had been given to him by the First Lord of the Admiralty. Churchill thought that would be no problem and told him to return to Harwich, where the watch would be waiting for him. Inevitably, it took a day or two longer and Fryatt waited for it before setting sail. When he got into the English Channel, he encountered a German U Boat which he bravely rammed but he and his crew were taken prisoner and brought into Bruges. When the Germans discovered the watch with Winston Churchill's name on it, they decided that Fryatt must be a spy and he was immediately shot dead. The rest of the crew were released at the end of the war and Fryatt's body was reinterred at Ramsey. The Prime Minister said to me "I always feel very responsible for his death".

Not long afterwards, my war very nearly came to an end. I was asked to be Chief Umpire on a Division exercise in Norfolk near Thetford. I had a chap with me who had a supply of explosives with which to simulate artillery fire. Suffice it to say that he made a miscalculation with his fuse when not many yards from me; there was a huge explosion at what seemed almost under my feet and he, I, and my driver were immediately hospital cases. The explosion had hit me on the upper part of the head at eye level. I could see nothing; I was taken to hospital for an emergency operation and very quickly they realised that they could not save my left eye; the right eye was heavily swollen with deep cuts which went within millimetres of the eyeball. However, as the swelling went down, it became clearer that my right eye was undamaged, and my sight in that eye recovered. The nightmare was over; I had thought that maybe I was completely blind and would be totally dependant on others for the rest of my life; thank goodness I was not!

I spent several months recuperating; I certainly did not know what further use I would be to the war effort. I was very surprised and delighted to find that they still felt I was capable of commanding a Brigade. This time it was 183 Infantry Brigade, consisting of Worcestershires, Gloucesters, and Sherwood Foresters. They had a terrific Brigade Headquarters with whom I struck up a marvellous rapport. The Brigade Major, Peter Hadley, of the Royal Sussex Regiment, became a close friend for the rest of my life but sadly, our training throughout 1943 was never translated into active service under my command.

We had thought, at 183 Brigade, that our Division, 61 Div, was a potential assault group, but when General Montgomery returned from commanding the Eighth Army in the Middle East, he was determined to use a proportion of seasoned troops, as a result of which 61 Division was relegated to reserve status.

Montgomery came down to inspect 183 Brigade one day. It was a bad day for me, or so I thought; Monty asked me a lot of searching questions to which I had felt I had given many wrong answers. He was a bully and had a go at me by saying that my men were indisciplined because they remained standing at ease after I had given the command to stand easy! At the end of the day I was thoroughly gloomy.

To my great surprise, the next day, I received a telegram from Monty, offering me command of 231 Infantry Brigade. This consisted of Hampshires, Dorsets and Devonshires and had already been told that they would be part of the spearhead when we moved to invade the continent of Europe.

I took little time making up my mind; it was an honour to be selected for action on such a momentous occasion, however dangerous.



The Prime Minister Winston Churchill inspects the defences with Sammy at Harwich January 1941.

Chapter 12

The D Day Assault

As I have said, it was a major surprise to be taking over 231 Brigade but I did not have much time to think about it. It was January 1944 and I moved the very next day from Kent, where 183 Brigade were stationed, to Essex to join my new command. Much to my surprise, 231 Brigade, which was part of 50 (Northumbrian) Division, contained no Geordies at all, but was entirely made up of south coast regiments ie Dorsets, Devonshires and Hampshires. They had just come back from a long stint in the Middle East and were pretty tired and battle weary. Nevertheless, as soon as they knew what they would be doing, morale bucked up enormously and I am sure it was a help that it so happened that each Battalion had a new Commanding Officer at this time. Though none of the three of them had experience of landings, they were fresh, well trained people who had recently been through the Staff College.

We did not stay in Essex for very long as we had to practice assault landings and the east coast beaches were not exactly the best place to do this in full view of enemy aircraft and of course our south and east coastlines had been heavily mined against a possible German landing. So we went off to Scotland and did it there on the Duke of Argyll's estate at Inverary. Each Battalion would take it in turns to take the landing craft out on to the loch and attack the shore, firing live ammunition as they went.

At this stage, I had to leave them in the capable hands of their Battalion Commanders, while I went to London for intensive planning. I was given a flat, just by Westminster Cathedral. The Divisional Commander described his plan and told me to make my own Brigade plan.

His instructions to me were short and precise:-

"You will land on the Normandy beaches to the east of Asnelles at Le Hamel; proceed inland as far as the village of Ryes; turn right to capture the high ground towards Arromanches; continue along the coast until you link up with the Americans at Port En Bessin."

My own plan was not difficult to compose; when you are making a frontal assault on a beach, you are doing just that and you can not really vary your tactics at all! We had excellent intelligence reports on the area with masses of aerial photographs showing the gun emplacements and minefields, though when we got there, we found many to be dummies. We were told, correctly in the event, that the German Division opposing us consisted of low grade men, including many Asians captured on the Russian front. One moment they were fighting for the Russians and the next they were fighting for the Germans. They were the high cheek boned sort from quite close to the Himalayas.

The next thing was a big Corps conference at Cambridge. We met in the Cambridge Union building and each commander described his plan in turn, starting with the Corps Commander, and then the Divisional Commanders and

finally Brigade Commanders. Artillery and Sapper Commanders were, of course, also there but I, as a Brigadier was just about the most Junior Officer present. I had an opportunity to meet the Brigade Commanders who would be on either side of me; Brigadier Knox had 69 Brigade which would be on our left: they were also in 50 Division. On our right were the Americans, 16th Regimental Combat Team, under Brigadier General Taylor.

I now had to write my orders to my Battalion Commanders. As I have already said, I was determined to keep it simple and I gave the maximum amount of discretion to the Commanding Officers as to how they deployed their companies. Of course, when the orders were actually typed, there were pages and pages of them because there were the loading tables, the transport lists, ammunition details, etc, etc. It had to be absolutely clear as to the order in which loading was to take place and to remember that first on would be last off and vice versa and the first men off must have all their weapons and vehicles close to hand. Guns and tanks had to be loaded so that some could fire from their craft as they approached the beaches.

Reconnaissance reports and aerial photographs showed that the beaches were protected by mines and shells fastened to posts together with other obstacles all designed to stop landing craft. Because of this, frogmen and sappers had to be some of the first to land. The beaches themselves were found to have big areas of soft clay, which track vehicles could not cross. After experiments on The Wash in Norfolk, where we found the same conditions, we decided that the only solution was for the first tanks to land to have rolls of coir fibre fitted on drums on their front end which unrolled underneath them like cricket matting as they crossed the beach. It worked but it made the tank drivers completely blind as they went forward.

By now, we were meeting up with our supporting arms such as engineers and artillery; in view of what we were undertaking, I had been allocated two artillery regiments instead of the usual one; I had 147 Field Regiment, my normal support, but just for the assault there was also the Essex Yeomanry who had converted to artillery; they were actually part of an armoured division whither they quickly returned after D Day.

As regards training for the assault, units went on special courses to learn how to disembark from ships into landing craft and how best to carry big weights. It was a problem to know what to leave behind; for example, we decided to do without gas masks which at that time all troops were carrying, on the supposition that, if by any chance there was a gas attack, the sea breezes would quickly disperse it.

There were two major rehearsals for our assault troops with live ammunition. We would go on board at Southampton, go round the Isle of Wight and then land at dawn in Studland Bay between Bournemouth and Swanage. The exercise plan was exactly the same as the real thing but nobody below the rank of Lieutenant Colonel knew that. We would mark Dorset villages to represent Normandy objectives; for instance Corfe Castle was Ryes, as it was precisely the same distance inland as our furthest objective on D Day.

The administrative tail also practised at Hayling Island. These exercises gave us the opportunity to meet the Royal Navy who would be transporting us over and who, most importantly, also would be providing additional gunfire from offshore. I used to go to see them at the Polygon Hotel in Southampton where the Navy had their Headquarters and our relations were excellent throughout.

We were now just about ready to go; a huge number of men were massing on the south coast while others, like my old 183 Brigade, were creating deception on the Kent coast at Ramsgate with dummy boats.

In May we were confined to our camps, incommunicado, and only very special leave was granted. One man's initiative paid off. He asked for special leave as he said his wife was having a baby. On his return, his Commanding Officer asked him whether it was a boy or a girl, to which he replied "I shall not know, Sir, for another nine months!" My newly appointed Liaison Officer, Charles Hargrove, had the greatest difficulty reporting to Brigade Headquarters because, such was the level of secrecy, nobody either knew where it was or, alternatively would not tell him!

At the beginning of June, units moved on to their ships and landing craft. Infantry Battalions were accommodated on passenger or cargo ships, with their landing craft on board. The larger landing craft were to make their own way across the Channel, timed to link up at various control points. I was extremely busy rushing up and down the Solent in a Motor Torpedo Boat, visiting various ships and checking on arrangements. My own headquarters was in a frigate, HMS Nith. My Naval Liaison Officer was a red bearded officer by the name of Captain John Farquhar RN. The last time we had met was 40 years previously as pages at a wedding, wearing kilts! We felt we had something in common and got on exceptionally well.

Just before we were due to set sail, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill toured the ships, accompanied by the Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin. "Will we get our jobs back?" shouted one soldier to him. As the time came on 4th June to give the order for the slower boats to start, the sea began to get very rough and it was decided to postpone the assault for 24 hours. Enforced inactivity was the last thing any of us wanted at such a moment. The only source of amusement was a small supply of gin which we mixed with water and drank in the minute ward room. The forecast improved and next day the order was given to go.

HMS Nith set sail with three merchant ships, each carrying one of my Infantry Battalions, in close proximity. We could not communicate on the way over as it was essential to maintain wireless silence until just before the landing. We just had to hope and pray that we would all meet up at the other end. Half my staff were in another boat in case of casualties, that is to say, the Brigade Major, the Signals Officer, an Artillery representative and a Liaison Officer. With me was the Artillery Commander from the Essex Yeomanry, a staff officer with a wireless set and my Liaison Officer, Lieutenant Charles Hargrove, Royal Fusiliers, who was to act as my interpreter since my French was virtually non-existent. I also took with me the BBC commentator, Howard Marshall. Despite the improved weather forecast, it was pretty rough. Strangely, I never



During the D-Day Normandy landings, HMS Nith (above) acted as the 231st Infantry Brigade HQ, delivering Brigadier Stanier to Gold Beach.

HMS Nith was then detailed with the task of coordinating landing ships going ashore off Courseulles, and as a result of craft not being able to identify her, the Nith had her bridge painted orange. On being stationed offshore, a crewman from the Nith recollects seeing a German mini-sub moored to a British minesweeper aft of HMS Nith. The mini-sub still contained the dead pilot in its cockpit, with a shell hole through the mini-sub canopy clearly visible. Subsequent efforts to trace the history of this mini-sub have proved fruitless.

On the night of 23 / 24 June 1944, HMS Nith was attacked by a Mistel, a German prototype drone aircraft packed with explosives, remotely controlled by a mother aircraft that released the drone after being previously attached to it. Nine crew were instantly killed and were buried at sea, with a tenth succumbing to his wounds shortly after. An American hospital ship took off the twenty six wounded and the Nith was then towed back to Whites shipyard at Cowes on the Isle of Wight for repairs. HMS Nith was then sent to the Far East theatre, where on occasion she transported Japanese PoW's.

In 1948, she was transferred to the Egyptian Navy and given the name Domiat. As part of the Suez Crisis, on the night of 31 October 1956 in the northern Red Sea, the British light cruiser HMS Newfoundland challenged and engaged the Egyptian frigate Domiat, reducing it to a burning hulk in a brief gun battle. The Egyptian warship was then sunk by escorting destroyer HMS Diana, with 69 surviving Egyptian sailors rescued.

felt the slightest bit seasick. I slept extremely well for a few hours, knowing there was nothing more I could do till the battle started.

As dawn broke, I saw, from the bridge of HMS Nith, the coastline of Normandy about a mile and a half off, the same coastline that we had studied so much for so long from aerial photographs, with its cliffs, its sand dunes and its particular houses marked down on our maps.

Precisely on H hour at 0725 hours, all the guns opened up from the warships and also from tanks firing from their landing craft. There were hundreds of aeroplanes droning overhead. It was a sight and sound I shall never forget. However, it was not many minutes before the view closed in, the whole area being covered in smoke and flames. At 7.30 am, the first of my troops landed, the Hampshires being on the right, and the Dorsets on the left, with the Devonshires following in the centre as reserve. Within half an hour all three Battalions had signalled that they were ashore but it had not been easy to gauge the depth of the water. Some men had disembarked too far out and had been in danger, as a result, of drowning under the weight of all the equipment they were carrying and had had to be fished out.

During this period, and for a further half hour, I remained out at sea; I felt this was the right place for me to be at that stage as I was where the communications centre was and so could actually manage the situation which I almost certainly would not have been able to do if I had been right up in the front line, having to keep my head down. (Monty had regularly been telling me on rehearsals that I was far too far back.)

At about 8.30 am, I decided to take Brigade Headquarters ashore and we got into our landing craft which already contained my jeep. Howard Marshall was with us as was my orderly and driver, Guardsman Swaffield. We made for the shore, to the sound of cheers from the crew of HMS Nith, as we moved away. They had given us as a parting gift a bottle each of gin and whisky, scarce commodities in those days! As we came towards the beach, I told the young naval officer in charge of the landing craft to go full steam ahead so as to give us a dry landing but this he would not do as he had to go back and fetch other people and could not risk getting stuck on the beach. Suddenly there was an awful jerk and we came to an abrupt halt, having got caught on a sea defence post. The craft swung round and hit another post; this post had a mine on it which exploded, ripping a hole in our side. The next moment a mortar shell hit our stern. I jumped out into waist deep water and waded ashore. As I waited for my jeep to come off, just as it was being pushed into the water, the landing craft lurched forward and crushed it, together with its precious cargo of spirits. Luckily nobody was hurt. There was, in fact, only one other jeep with Brigade Headquarters which Charles Hargrove, my interpreter had got ashore safely, so I used Charles as my driver for the day. Little did I realise that he had only just learned to drive. Being driven around by him proved rather more dangerous than the actual landing!

Howard Marshall got his notebook very wet, gallantly helping to salvage equipment. Later in the day, he returned to England to give the first eyewitness account of the landings, from some very wet notes, on the nine o'clock news.

Captain Sir Harold Campbell RN was also with 50 Division that day, as personal observer for HM the King; when he reported back to Buckingham Palace that evening, the King very kindly sent a message to my wife, telling her that I had landed safely and that all was well; an incredibly thoughtful gesture on his part.

I reached the beach on the far left of my brigade sector and crossed to some low sand dunes by a small farm called Les Roquettes and crawled up a lane to the outskirts of Le Hamel. The Hampshires had been badly held up by enemy pill boxes and 88 mm guns further inland. Their Second-in-Command had been killed and their Commanding Officer, Colonel Nelson-Smith was wounded. This unexpectedly heavy opposition was partly because due to poor light, the RAF bombers, which should have softened up Le Hamel, had missed their target. However, the Dorsets were progressing well and in due course managed to capture the high ground at Meuvaines, above Asnelles; this I had always considered a vital objective. I took my Brigade Headquarters, immediately, up there and into some slit trenches vacated by the Germans, as the beach was becoming very congested. Two shells promptly landed much too close for comfort, but there were no more, thank goodness. The Devonshires were then able to come through and advance up a tiny brook, called La Grande Riviere and close in on the objective of Ryes; this we had already decided was to be the limit of our first day's advance inland. With the help of artillery, the Hampshires had got round the back of the pill box and cleared it out in the afternoon. They were then able to complete the taking of Asnelles and to move on westwards to take the town of Arromanches before nightfall.

I recall meeting the Mayor of Asnelles, Monsieur Sabire, that afternoon. He told me that there were quite a lot of civilians in the village but that they all had dugouts and had watched the battle and had seen the armada coming in in the morning. He was a farmer, and what had really upset him was that all his cows had been killed out in the fields. Being summer, the cattle were not in the habit of being brought into the farm buildings and they had not appreciated how much at risk their animals would be during the battle. Very shortly after the war, I persuaded Southampton to adopt Asnelles and I flew out there with the Mayor and Mayoress, the Chairman of Southampton Football Club and the French Consul with supplies that were impossible to obtain; that, of course, did not include food which was the one thing that was plentiful in this rich farming area.

Asnelles later, very kindly, named their square, Place Alexander Stanier and one of their principal streets, Rue de Southampton. To this day, the people of Asnelles commemorate the anniversary of D Day each year at the square where, some years later, they put up a memorial to 231 Brigade and to me. At one of these D Day anniversary ceremonies, I was standing next to the British Ambassador to France, Sir Edward Tomkins, who remarked that he had laid wreaths on many memorials, but never before on one to the man who was standing beside him! By nightfall, we had rounded up over a thousand Germans as prisoners. I slept that night in the garden of a chateau at St Come de Fresne near Asnelles, well satisfied with our progress.

69th Brigade, consisting of the Green Howards and the East Yorkshire Regiment, also, like us, part of 50th Northumbrian Division, had landed on the



Men of 231 Brigade on the high ground above Arromanches, after its capture on D Day.

left of my Brigade. Company Sergeant Major Hollis of the Green Howards won the Victoria Cross for his single handed bravery that day, clearing two German pillboxes just to the east of Asnelles.

That evening, Charles Hargrove went to the chateau at St Come de Fresne to try to get a kettle of water to make me a cup of tea. Only after repeated hammering on the locked doors and shuttered windows did one open a crack and an elderly spinster told him that she had barricaded herself in because she was "terrified of being raped by the rough British soldiers!"

Next day, we continued westwards, with the Devonshires, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Cosmo Nevill, capturing the heavily defended German battery at Longues by 9.00 am. I went up to see the captured German soldiers who had been on the receiving end of both heavy bombing by the RAF and non-stop shelling by the Royal Navy. I asked if any of them spoke English. One man put his hand up. "What was it like in there?" I asked. "It was like being in a cocktail shaker!" replied the German "and what do you know of cocktail shakers?" I enquired. "I was a barman at the Savoy Hotel before the war" he answered.

The village beyond Longues was badly battered in the overrun of the bombing of the battery; I remember Cosmo telling me that two girls were there who had had all their hair brutally shaved off by their fellow French, because it was said that they had been sleeping with the Germans.

I had already sent some Royal Marines on through to take Port En Bessin, a leading French fishing port and an important capture as it was the place selected for the terminal of the Pluto pipeline. This was as far west as our sector went and I was thus able on the following day to link up with the Americans who had had such a hard time landing at Omaha Beach. I met the American Battalion Commander who was wearing only his shirt as he was still trying to dry his trousers after a wet landing.

I recall that the Dorsets were sent off at about this time to try to capture the high ground surrounding the village of Audrieu and the village. Madame Livrey-Level whose family owned the chateau there, came out and asked permission to evacuate civilians before we attacked. This was allowed and shortly she reported that "The village is clear except for the Germans who are in my chateau." After a short sharp battle, the chateau was liberated. Years later, when I took my children there, Madame Livrey-Level much enjoyed saying "I am sorry my chairs are so damaged but your father smashed them up on his last visit!" Her husband was at that time a pilot with the Royal Air Force in England (he resisted all of de Gaulle's blandishments that he should transfer to the Free French Air Force). She asked if we could get a message to him to say that their village was once more free. We did so and found he was at RAF Tern Hill in Shropshire just near my mother's home and, extraordinarily, at the exact time of our attack, he was having coffee with my mother. M. Livrey-Level ended the war as a Squadron Leader with the DSO and DFC and bar.

By now, 56 Brigade had captured Bayeux and the division was advancing on all sides of the bridgehead. We were ordered to relieve 56 Brigade and push on further. We were now heading for the Bocage country. This was an area of small fields and orchards surrounded by high banks, hedges and trees. Tough days of fighting ensued, literally hedge by hedge through the small fields against a German opposition which was now ready to counter attack; the German reserve divisions were beginning to arrive.

I was at that stage looking for somewhere to put my Brigade Headquarters. Charles Hargrove identified a perfect situation under a large tree in the park of a beautiful chateau at Juaye-Mondaye, about four miles south of Bayeux, where the Germans had lately had their own headquarters in the stables and grounds. I sent him to request permission of the owner, Madame Humann, a lady very short of stature, but with a very commanding presence, and an unmistakeable aristocratic air. She indicated to Charles that she thought the permission was somewhat superfluous with the enemy only a couple of miles away to the south! The chateau was full of refugees from the bombing of Caen and she was trying to cope with a multitude of tasks and made it very clear that she had little time for such civilities. We moved in and I thought I should pay a courtesy call at the chateau. I walked up there and knocked at the front door which was answered by a maid who went to find Madame Humann. She came back to say "Madame

will see you at the back door." Before I could get round to the back door, Madame Humann appeared and seeing my red Brigadier's tabs, was covered with confusion. "Oh dear, I thought you were a Corporal, as Brigadier means just that in French!" She went on to say that she had been unable to work out how a corporal had sent an officer with a message about his headquarters. At that moment, I wondered if the abolition of the rank of Brigadier-General had been a good thing. She was deeply disturbed that I would not accept her offer of a room in the chateau, preferring to sleep in my tent in the park, for obvious reasons. She was convinced that my refusal was prompted by the fact that the place was marked as a target on German artillery maps and would soon be shelled. In fact, in spite of its being so close to the front, the only damage it suffered was a chimney pot, knocked down by an artillery shell.

Although I did not want to sleep in the chateau, I did not refuse the offer of a bath. This was not easy as the power had long since been turned off; it involved pumping the water by hand pump to the top of the house whence it trickled down, having been heated, into the bath.

During the German occupation, the Humann family had lived in a corner of their house while the German Headquarters was there. One night, a villager brought an English officer to them. He had landed from a submarine to inspect the beaches, but had been surprised by a patrol. He had run forward and hidden in the sand dunes, while his companions had jumped back in their rubber boat and returned to their submarine. He had been found by a Frenchman and taken to Monsieur Septime Humann, in the hope that he could arrange for him to be directed through Spain and back to England. Despite the German presence, Monsieur Humann kept him for some days in the loft and then arranged for him to move on. Unfortunately, he was later captured and traced back to Juaye. The Germans then lined up the Humann family and all their employees; they were shown a photograph of the officer and told "This man was in the house here." All replied "Never!". The Germans were very angry but could not pin the blame on anybody. Afterwards, Madame Humann thanked everyone for saying that they have not seen the officer, to which they replied "but it is true, you never had him in the house, you had him in the loft over the stables, where the Germans have their canteen".

Later on, Monsieur Humann was imprisoned and was confronted with the officer in Fresne prison near Paris. He was eventually released and sent home, though the officer was later shot as a spy. He was only released because Madame Humann had endlessly lobbied a French collaborator who had spoken to an Alsatian who was named General Von Humann and who was a distant cousin. He was on the German staff in Paris and arranged his release but Septime's health was unfortunately permanently damaged. He was later decorated by the British for his bravery.

After he was allowed home, he was ordered to cut down his oak trees to set up tank blockades on the roads. It was thought surprising that he worked so hard without supervision by the Germans; however, when I and the British tanks eventually did arrive, Monsieur Humann was shouting to us to knock the posts down as he had practically sawn through them, just below the surface, when he put them up!

He kept a couple of horses on the estate and suggested soon after our arrival that Charles Hargrove accompany him around the park. All went well until they returned to Brigade Headquarters when the former's horse reared at this precise point, landing him squarely at my feet, much to his discomfiture.

For weeks, the front line was only two or three miles beyond the Chateau de Juaye and the children used to bicycle up to my Brigade Headquarters to watch the battle, until their mother found out! This was a period of very fierce fighting, particularly at Hottot-Les-Bagues in the Bocage country, eventually captured by my Brigade. There was a farmer in the village, Monsieur Pierre Bernard, who gave me over a thousand francs as a thanksgiving for their deliverance. After the war, I used the money to rebuild the memorial at the cross roads in the village.

Eventually, as is well known, The British Liberation Army broke out from this stalemate and accelerated across Northern France. XXX Corps, commanded by General Brian Horrocks, and of which we, 231 Brigade were part, crossed the River Seine in the last week of August and General Brian immediately ordered a further advance to the Amiens area. The Guards Armoured Division were to lead, while we were to mop up enemy left in the wake of the tanks. 2nd Battalion Welsh Guards therefore moved through our positions before the move started. Rufus Dent recalled, many years later, how he had recognised me as the Battalion's tanks passed by and he had given instructions on the wireless that I, as the Battalion's former Commanding Officer, should be properly saluted by every member of his troop.

As we crossed France, it was a great relief to find ourselves in country undamaged by the ravages of war. There was no immediate sign of the Germans as we pushed on and it was a nasty surprise when suddenly, when we had stopped to eat our sandwich lunch, shells started to explode near by. It was found that a young Frenchman had tossed a cigarette unwittingly into an abandoned German ammunition dump. The villagers very nearly lynched him before we could calm things down. As we continued, I actually stood on the side of the road at Ayette where I had joined the Welsh Guards in 1918 and where I had first been called Sammy and then where Lieutenant Champagne drank all our whisky ration. We stopped at Arras where I made my headquarters for a short time in the castle. The Welsh Guards were just down the road in Arras and there I found my brother-in-law, John Miller and dined with him. Arras Castle had a dry moat in which was a row of graves; these were men of the resistance who had been shot by the Germans and buried there.

Swiftly on we went to Brussels where my brigade was temporarily attached to the Guards Armoured Division for the historic advance into the capital. I also had the Belgian Brigade led by General Piron under my command. I took them up to the outskirts of Brussels so that they could enter the city together with the leading British troops. We were in Brussels all too short a time and had to continue on over the Belgian canals to capture Antwerp.

At another small town elsewhere in Belgium I was asked to call on the Mayor. I was met by a footman in livery and white cotton gloves despite the fact that

the town was not yet rid of the enemy. I sat down with him and he produced a bottle of wine, which had been hidden from the Germans. After drinking several toasts, my glass was empty and the Mayor rang for the footman. On getting no reply, he went to the door and opened it, whereupon the footman fell flat on his face, blind drunk with an empty bottle in his hand. I thought it was time to take my leave.

The liberation of Belgium was and still is regularly commemorated and it was at one of these ceremonies that General Piron died. He literally fell down dead, sitting in the grandstand beside me!

While advancing through Holland, I arrived at a small town and sent a message to my headquarters to arrange for me to have a bath. On my return to my headquarters, my staff informed me that they had located two baths. On going to the first one, I found it was only a specimen in a plumber's shop with no water. The second, I found to be occupied and while waiting for it to be vacated, I sat in the sitting room with the owners and their children, unable to speak a word of Dutch. I am no artist, but I amused myself with the children's crayons drawing pictures of Guardsmen in black bearskins and red tunics. The next morning, to my horror, when I was visited by the Division commander, he said, "I had no idea you were a great artist". "Why?" I replied. "Oh", he said, "There are pictures of guardsmen in the square with a notice, saying that these have been drawn by Our Chief Liberator!"

In Nijmegen, when we came out of the line at Arnhem for a few days rest, I had my headquarters at the house of the principal citizen; we soon organised a dance as recreation for the troops. My hostess was not pleased at having soldiers in her house. She pointed out that a high up German General had used it as his residence and had never allowed his soldiers to cross the polished floors without taking their boots off. I had to explain to her that times had changed and that there was a battle going on close by. Having been against the whole idea of a dance, she and her family ended up being life and soul of the party, allowing us free use of the entire house and providing refreshments from their meagre rations.

Early in December 1944, my brigade was brought back from Nijmegen to Ypres and I had my headquarters close to the historic Menin Gate. Each night, even while war continued, a civilian bugler sounded the Last Post at sunset. I thought of all the thousands of British troops in the 1914-18 war, who had marched up that road and past the Menin Gate to the hell of the Ypres salient.

On my first morning in Ypres, I was told that the Mayor would be pleased if I would call on him. (I seem to have been always calling on Mayors!) On arrival at the historic town hall, he greeted me as "the liberator of Ypres." I replied that I thought the Polish Army had done this several weeks before. "That may be so" he replied, "but the only troops who can liberate Ypres are British troops and yours are the first to get here! Will you please, therefore, sign the VIP's visitor's book." I found myself signing my name below that of HM King George V, Field Marshal Lord Ypres and Field Marshal Lord Haig. A few days later, Field Marshal Lord Montgomery visited my brigade and called on the Mayor. I was

highly relieved to see that I had left sufficient space for him to sign above my signature.

Some of my troops were billeted at Poperinghe where the Reverend Tubby Clayton had started Talbot House, better known as Toc H, as a servicemen's club in the first world war. He came out in December 1944 to re-open the house. It was an experience that I will never forget. We assembled in the famous Upper Room where so many men had received their last communion before returning to the infamous Ypres salient between 1914 and 1918. First, Tubby received the original lamp which had been buried during the German occupation. Then, at a given moment, it was relit. At the same time, others were being relit all round the world, so making a circle of light. Never, before or since, have I experienced such a feeling of being surrounded by those who had passed through that room, many for the last time in their lives on earth.

Very shortly afterwards, I was sent home on two months leave, in time for Christmas, and was told that I was to be offered the job of commanding the Welsh Guards as Regimental Lieutenant Colonel at Birdcage Walk in London, but did I mind that it was only a full Colonel's job, not that of a Brigadier?

I suddenly realised that I had been away for too long; it was nearly five years since I had served with the Regiment. The offer was one that I most certainly was not going to turn down.

Chapter 13

A Final Tour of Duty

I started my new job on St David's Day 1945; my first objective was to see as many units of the Regiment as I could as swiftly as possible. The First Battalion returned home at the end of March by which time I was planning a visit to the Third Battalion who were at the forefront of the battle in Italy.

I flew to Naples where John Retallack met me and acted as my guide throughout. We travelled up Italy through Rome till eventually we reached the Battalion at Porto San Giorgio. They were out of the line, training for the final advance. It had been a very tough and testing time for them and I was anxious to ensure that morale was not suffering. I interviewed every Officer and Warrant Officer. Christopher Thursby-Pelham, who had not long given up being Adjutant, was one of the younger officers to whom I spoke. In later years, he was kind enough to suggest that I had been quick to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Battalion.

John and I went on to Perugia and Assisi before returning south and visiting Monte Piccolo and Cassino and found the graves of Welsh Guardsmen who had fallen there.

The First Battalion were only home for six months before they were posted to Palestine. In the autumn of 1945 they went to the Middle East, under the command of Reggie Hodgkinson, looking forward to peace time soldiering in a warm climate. Within six months they were involved in keeping the peace between Arab and Jew; internal security was a new role but one which was to become increasingly important over the next half century, not least in Ulster.

I had the chance to visit them in 1946. I flew to Cairo and then made my way to Tiberias where Battalion Headquarters were; the Companies were deployed in various locations. I visited all of the Companies except 3 Company who were at Metullah. Reggie then took me on a visit to Damascus. On our return we went to Metullah. The local Sheik, Mohammed el Masri, invited us to lunch. He provided a guard of honour of thirty men mounted on horses to meet us at the approach to the village. They galloped beside us as we entered the village. Unfortunately, the Sheik's secretary backed his horse into our jeep and fell off right on top of Reggie who was driving. He was in disgrace for the rest of the day, having to stand by himself behind a screen. The Sheik gave us a most magnificent banquet, reclining on couches in his tent. Course after course appeared with finally the piece de resistance, the sheep's eyeball always given to the guest of honour. Philip Brutton, then a young officer in 3 Company, always says that I palmed it down the front of my battledress jacket with the aplomb of a professional conjuror.

Before I left, I was taken jackal hunting. We rose at dawn and met jointly with the 15th/19th Hussars. James Gresham hunted the hounds. He had had practice pre-war with the Household Brigade Drag Hunt. Geoffrey Gibbon and Nigel

Kearsley were his whippers-in. There were ten of us, five from each Regiment; we had a splendid morning with two separate hunts of quite a few miles. Among the Hussars were the Commanding Officer, Guy Peyton and also Christopher Weatherby, whom I had met before the war in Oxfordshire, and who many years later was to become a very good friend. We had an excellent late breakfast with the Hussars of game pie.

My three years passed all too quickly as I helped to demobilise our wartime strength with the Second, Third and Training Battalions all disappearing. I handed over to George Browning on St David's Day 1948 while I pondered an offer of a Brigade in Berlin as my next posting. My mother was not well and over 80; I felt that my home in Shropshire needed me and that it was time to retire, after 32 years in the Regiment.

Chapter 14

Post Script

Sammy's mother died in June 1948 before he had even moved to Shropshire. He immediately became involved in a wide range of local affairs taking on the following responsibilities: Shropshire County Council, Severn River Board, Justice of the Peace, County President of St John Ambulance, Deputy Lieutenant, Governor of Wem Grammar School and of Wrekin College, President of Salop Motor Club, Chairman of Ludlow Race Course and of the Hawkstone Otter Hounds and he founded the Montgomeryshire and Shropshire Branch of the Welsh Guards Association.

Despite the loss of an eye in the war, he shot extensively for many years but he never again got on a horse. He became a great traveller and went abroad every February without fail. To celebrate his 60th birthday, he went round the world taking six months to do so with Brigadier 'Cop' Copland Griffiths with whom he shared many years service in the Welsh Guards, staying on the way, in Canberra with the Governor General, Field Marshal Sir William Slim, to whom Sammy's son, Billy was at that time ADC.

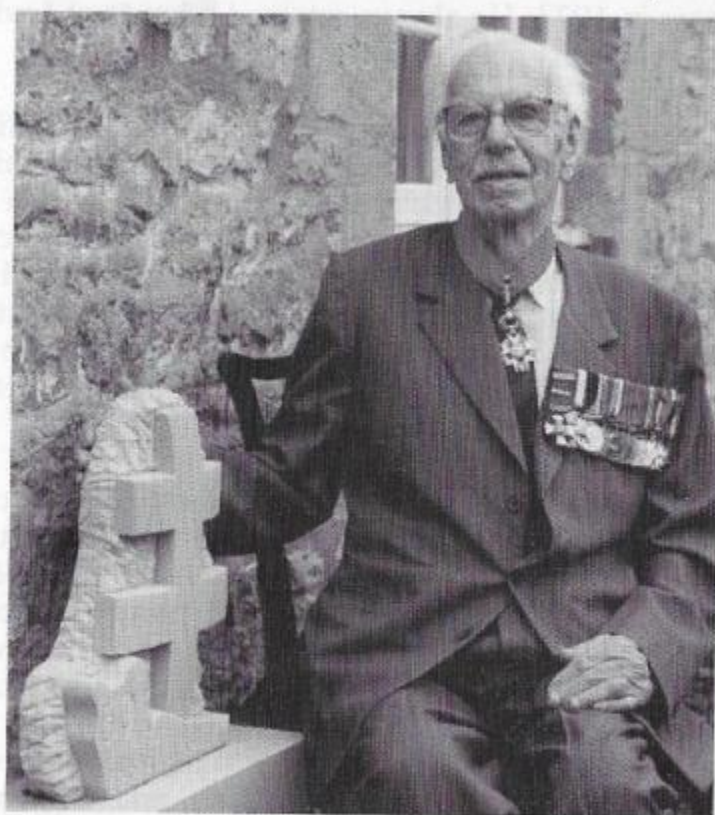
Sammy moved house three times; first to Warwickshire to a farm at Dorsington near Stratford-upon-Avon, then to East Farndon in Northamptonshire, close to Market Harborough and finally, for more than 13 years he lived on the estate of his brother-in-law, Sir John Miller at Shotover near Oxford. Dorothy, his wife sadly died of cancer in 1973. He always retained a house at Ludlow so that he could remain involved in his beloved Shropshire.

He was a regular visitor to his daughter-in-law, Shelagh, and Billy, at Whaddon in Buckinghamshire, which was less than an hour from both East Farndon and Shotover. He adored his three grandchildren, Henrietta, Lucinda and Alexander and took the greatest interest in whatever they were doing, particularly wanting to know everything about any foreign country they had visited. He himself was the keenest of travellers to many different lands, even after his ninetieth birthday; his final forays were to Sotogrande in southern Spain where he was able to catch up with the several former officers of the regiment living there, such as Mac Reynolds, Geoffrey Gibbon and Paul Makins.

He maintained a keen interest in Normandy and the French people, taking his family over there, in the immediate post war years, to meet the many good friends that he had made in the war. The village of Asnelles called their square, Place Alexander Stanier. He was one of the prime movers behind the establishment of the D Day museum at Arromanches. He did several battlefield tours with the Staff College, lecturing on his wartime experiences. His contact with Normandy was fostered by the permanent presence there of his wartime liaison officer and interpreter, Charles Hargrove, who had married a French girl, had become The Times correspondent in Paris and had houses in both Normandy and Paris. Sammy was awarded the Legion of Honour by President Mitterand in 1987 for his work in the field of Anglo French relations.

At the great age of 95, he was becoming increasingly frail and pondered whether he had the strength to attend the 50th Anniversary of D Day. However, he suddenly had the brilliant idea of reducing the strain by making the journey by helicopter and he was quickly in touch with Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Moss, formerly Commanding Officer of the Army Air Corps and before that a serving officer in the Welsh Guards. Johnny not only retained his licence to fly helicopters but was able to hire a four seater helicopter and to take time off work to pilot it. He and his wife Annabel flew to Shotover and picked up Sammy and his housekeeper of twelve years, Bettie Simmonds and flew them to Charles Hargrove's house in Normandy, two days before the D Day anniversary. He was in the forefront of those watching the march past on the beach at Arromanches and attended ceremonies the next day at Asnelles where he had landed in 1944. The people of Asnelles presented him with a commemorative stone carved in the shape of the cross of Lorraine. Such was the weight of this, that it was a considerable problem taking it back home in the helicopter and thought had to be given to what to jettison from the baggage! But all was well in the end and a safe return was made to Oxford.

Just before Christmas 1994, he received a letter offering him the freedom of Arromanches. In early January 1995 he replied that he would be honoured to accept it on D Day 1995; two days later he died, just short of his 96th birthday. In the event, his son, Billy accepted the Freedom posthumously on 6th June 1995 with a detachment of Welsh Guardsmen on parade at Arromanches where there is now, set into the sea wall, in front of the remains of the Mulberry Harbour, a magnificent memorial to the Generale de Brigade.



Sammy returns home from the 50th anniversary of D Day, June 1994, with the commemorative stone presented by the people of Asnelles.

Principal Medals Awarded to Sir Alexander Stanier 1918 to 1948

1919: Military Cross.

For his part in the attack on St Vaast, October 1918.

1940: Distinguished Service Order.

For his part in the defence and evacuation of Boulogne, May 1940.

1944: Distinguished Service Order.

For his part in the D Day Landings, June 1944.

1944: American Silver Star.

For his part in the link up between British and American Forces on D + 1 Day.
(Awarded in the field by General Omar Bradley).

1944: Belgian Croix de Guerre.

For his part in the liberation of Brussels.

1944: Order of Leopold.

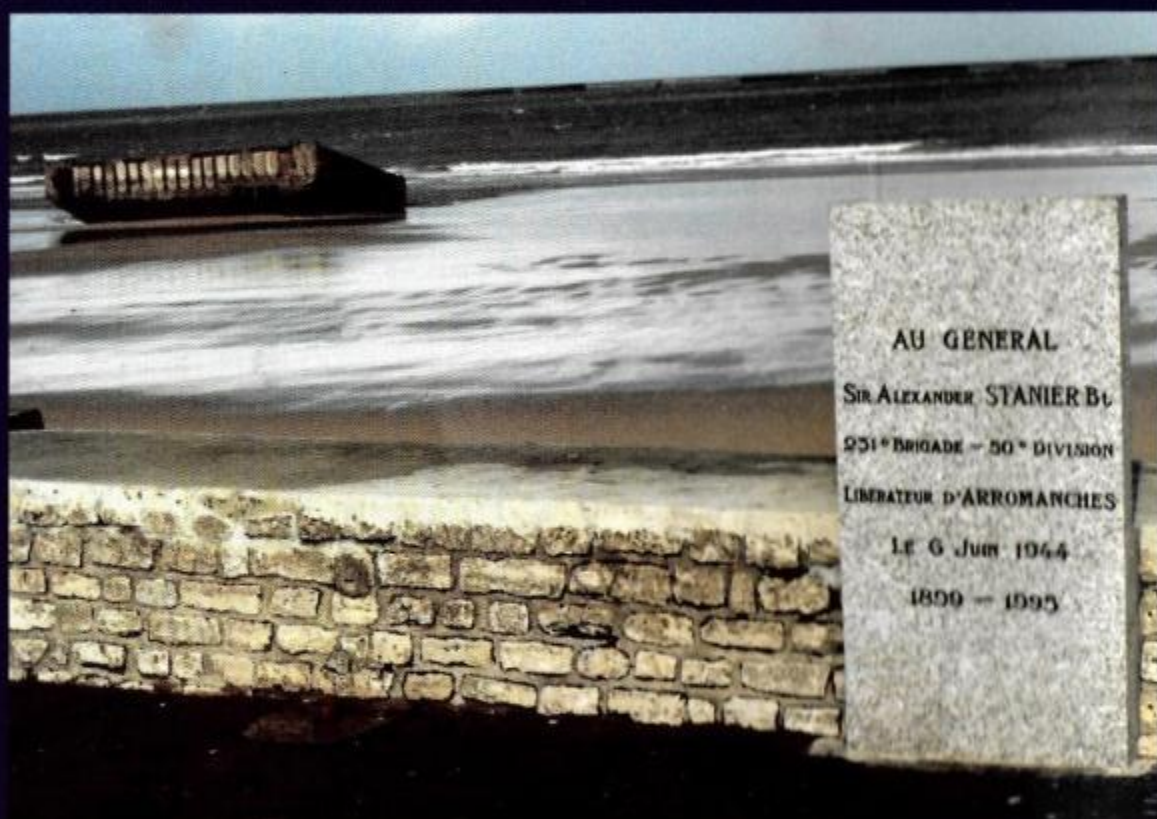
For his part in the liberation of Brussels.

1988: Legion d'Honneur.

For his part in Anglo French relations post war in Normandy including the setting up of the D Day Museum at Arromanches.



*Sammy receives the American Silver Star, in the field, in Normandy, July 1944, from
General Omar Bradley.*



AU GENERAL

SIR ALEXANDER STANIER Bt

251^e BRIGADE - 50^e DIVISION

LIBERATEUR D'ARROMANCHES

LE 6 JUIN 1944

1899 - 1995

15. Addendum: Arromanches

This chapter, which describes the important part Sir Alexander Stanier played in the 1944 D Day landings, was archived in 2021 with acknowledgement and thanks from Wikipedia.

On 23 February 1944 Stanier took command of the 231st Infantry Brigade. The brigade was composed of three Regular Army battalions from Southern England that had formed part of the garrison of Malta all through the siege of 1940–42. They had then become an independent brigade group for the amphibious operation against Sicily (Operation Husky). Now they were to use that experience to spearhead the assault landings on D-Day.

The 231st Brigade was one of three (the others being the 69th and 151st) which formed part of the 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division, another TA formation, then commanded by Major General Douglas Graham, who had recently taken command. Stanier's 231st Brigade were tasked with capturing 'Jig' Beach, the westernmost section of Gold Beach. The coast here is low-lying and sandy, but with soft patches of clay on the foreshore, and soggy grassland inland, both of which would cause heavy vehicles to become bogged down. The beach was defended with beach obstacles and covered by fire from the German strongpoints at Asnelles sur Mer and le Hamel. Once ashore, the brigade was to push westwards along the coast to capture Arromanches-les-Bains, the planned site of the artificial Mulberry harbour that was crucial to the invasion plan.

The plan began to break down from the beginning. Bad weather and enemy fire delayed the amphibious DD tanks and Royal Marines Armoured Support Group tanks, so the first wave of infantry landed at 07.25 without any support. Two control vessels were hit during the run-in, which meant that the planned artillery shoot on le Hamel did not happen, and an attack by Royal Air Force (RAF) Typhoons had failed to suppress its garrison. The leading companies of the 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment lost their senior officers, wireless sets and artillery observers, and were unable to call down supporting fire, but when the rest of the battalion arrived 20 minutes later they organised an infantry attack on the le Hamel position. On their left the 1st Battalion, Dorset Regiment had better luck, and with the help of flail tanks of the Westminster Dragoons began to clear beach exits and move inland.

At about 08.15, the brigade's reserve battalion, the 2nd Devonshire Regiment, began landing, closely followed by No. 47 (Royal Marine) Commando and then Stanier's HQ. The Commandos lost a number of men and vital equipment during the landing, but with a wireless set borrowed from brigade HQ, they set off westwards to make contact with the US troops at Omaha Beach, while Stanier organised an attack against le Hamel, supported by 147th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery. By nightfall, both le Hamel and Arromanches were in British hands: the 231st Brigade had taken the Arromanches radar station and the German artillery battery was abandoned without

firing a shot after being shelled by the cruiser HMS Emerald (D66). Stanier had also been able to send the Dorsets to help 8th Armoured Brigade take Loucelles from the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend.

After the war, Stanier was treated as a hero by the liberated people of Asnelles and Arromanches, who named a town square after him. He attended the 40th and 50th D-Day anniversary celebrations, and was a leading instigator of the Arromanches museum. In 1988, he was awarded the Legion of Honour for his outstanding services to Anglo-French relations.

After D-Day, Stanier led his brigade in all of the 50th Division's operations for the rest of 1944. On 14 June, the brigade captured la Senaudière during Operation Perch, and after weeks of fighting in the bocage it headed the division's attack on Caumont on 30 July during the break-out from the Normandy beachhead. By late August the 50th Division was supporting the British armoured divisions in their thrust across the River Seine towards the River Somme and the Belgian frontier. On 3 September the 231st Brigade, under the command of the Guards Armoured Division, helped to liberate Brussels.
