

A Sapper's Tale

A SERGEANT SAPPER, ROYAL ENGINEERS MAY 1944

Invasion June 6th 1944

The Company of four sectors plus Headquarters entrained at Coatbridge, Scotland at 6am, with me in charge of baggage as usual. Our destination was unknown, but the train travelled south and eventually we passed through Hackney and into South London. It was then that we assumed we were heading for the coast, and probably the invasion. To our surprise, we pulled into Hailsham station and arrived in an area that I was not familiar with. Outside the station, Lorries were waiting for the baggage to be loaded, and we went to a large tented area in Arlington Woods.

It was near the weekend and a notice went up on the board for local or London troops to apply for a leave pass. As I lived in London, of course off I went, it seemed only fair as all the Northern lads had been on leave whilst we were in Scotland, but no Southern leave was allowed. I returned on the Sunday and we continued with the training.

From the Boship Hotel all the way down to the Yorkshire Pantry, (now the Country Kitchen), the central reservation and both sides of the A22 was packed nose to tail with army vehicles, tanks, armoured cars etc, and of course we were in no doubt why they were there. But the question was when? Well that was in the lap of the Gods.

On the lighter side, we were allowed to walk into the town where the cinema was open and of course the public houses. Now I favoured The Railway and got very friendly with an ex Grenadier Guardsman and his wife who were so very kind, as all the folk around were. The man was a farm hand, the wife employed in the rope works and their son was at school. They lived in Terminus Place, number 7, and one evening in The Railway the lady suggested I asked the wife to come down, but as this was a restricted area, I was doubtful she would be allowed.

I approached my officer but he remarked that it was on my own head if I was able to arrange it. I then applied for a pass to London and off I went to explain to my wife the position. She arrived on the following Tuesday and to my surprise, when I went to The Railway she was already there, having a drink with my friends. Every morning my wife was treated to moorhen's eggs from the Common Pond which were collected early by the lad of the house. What a difference today!

Well for the next three weeks we were all on a knife edge, and then on the 3rd of June my officer approached me and asked if my wife was still here. I had to put her on a train the next day and then we were confined to camp.

On the morning of the 5th, we were paraded around a platform of tables and told to be quiet - and who should arrive but Monty! He gave us a pep talk and after he left, I was called to the office with ten more chaps and my own officer, who had been promoted to Captain. It was explained that we were to pack our valises, etc and spend that night in 2 tents, with the Captain in one and myself in the other. At 3am the next morning, we were roused, already dressed, and put on to a truck. The journey was to Newhaven where from a jetty below the bridge, we embarked on a landing craft and off to the invasion!

One of the Lucky Ones.



Originally published in the 'Hailsham Historian & Naturalist'. November 1991