**Behind the Lines**

**War stories from a journalist’s notebook**

**Don Chapman**

with gratitude to all who shared their stories

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**Introduction**

For someone the Army, Navy and Air Force rejected for National Service military matters have played a large part in my life. The consultant Oxford University’s Bodleian Library asked to give me another medical before employing me as a junior book clerk took one look at me and asked: ‘Young man, how do you expect to get through life with a body like that?’ Yet here I am, still reasonably fit all these years later, looking back on a career in journalism peppered by war.

Hitler came to power in 1933, the year I was born, and the threat Nazi Germany posed to world peace was already alarming people before I went to school. At one point Oxford City Council seriously debated erecting a steel canopy over the university city to protect it from bombs. At the same time the memory of the carnage of the First World War was still raw. Housewife after housewife with maimed husbands rose to her feet at the eve of poll meeting for the famous Munich By-Election in 1938 to plead: ‘Never again!’

Quintin Hogg, the future chairman of the Conservative Party, Lord Hailsham, on a platform in support of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement with the Nazi Führer won the ‘safe’ Oxford City seat from the independent anti-Hitler candidate, the Master of Balliol College, Sandy Lindsay, but with a reduced majority. A year later Britain and Germany were at war for the second time in the twentieth century, and twenty-five years on as an *Oxford Mail* reporter I found myself turning back the pages of the paper to relive the outbreak.

Since I first became a trainee journalist at Keighley in 1956, I have come to realise you don’t have to be in uniform at the sharp end. It is enough to have a notebook and a ballpoint to appreciate and report the horrors of war. Every First World War veteran I interviewed broke down sooner or later as he saw his lost comrades dropping dead before his eyes on the Somme or in the Flanders mud. Giving me the reason why she had never married, a North Oxfordshire woman said: ‘The church bell started tolling on Friday and it didn’t stop ringing for a week. It wasn’t just my sweetheart. Every young man in the village died in that battle.’

A pensioner from Marston begged me to come and see him, he wouldn’t say why. When I arrived, he produced a brown envelope full of photographs he had never opened. He was present at the liberation of Belsen. For 30 years he hadn’t spoken about the dreadful scenes he witnessed in that concentration camp to anybody, not even his wife. Before he died, he felt he had to open it and chose me to share his mind-numbing experience with the world.

John Couch wept several times as he relived his experiences as a medical orderly with the Desert Forces. He walked the length of Cairo Railway Station cradling a legless, armless Italian prisoner-of-war in his arms, thinking what future has he got. Arthur Titherington, a man the world would come to associate with the campaign to win compensation for those who suffered in the Far East, wept too as he recounted his life-scarring experiences as a young soldier in a Formosan copper mine.

At the end of the 1950s in the second town I worked as a trainee journalist, I shared digs in Swindon with a telephone engineer from the Forest of Dean. His sole topic of conversation was his baby daughter and the dog-eared clutch of photographs of her he carried in his wallet. One night I found him alone in the kitchen munching one of the cheese-sandwiches the landlady had left out for our supper. ‘Where’ve you been, Don?’ ‘*Bridge on the River Kwai*. Great film, you should go.’ ‘Couldn’t. Too many painful memories. Like a lot of other chaps from my part of the world, I worked on that railway. Of the few who came back I’m the only one who has had a child.’

He and Arthur Titherington were thankful for the bombs that dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending their misery as Japanese prisoners of war. So were most of us. It heralded the end of the Second World War and offered the prospect of peace and prosperity. The future chairman of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Olive Gibbs, was one of the handful in 1945 who sensed the awful significance of those instruments of death and destruction. She was at a dance on Boars Hill. When she heard the news on the radio, the former Lord Mayor of Oxford wrote in her autobiography, *Our Olive* (Robert Dugdale, 1989), she had to make her excuses and cycle home. ‘I knew for a certainty the worst crime in the history of man had been committed and that the world would never be the same again.’

By the 1960s opposition to nuclear war had become a battle cry every bit as potent as today’s Black Lives Matter and Climate Change protests. Friends who were extras in *Cleopatra*, the Joseph Mankiewicz blockbuster starring Elizabeth Taylor, told me that as they marched through ancient Rome in their togas they chanted: ‘Ban the Bomb!’ Soon after I joined *Oxford and County Newspapers*, I found myself covering a number of demonstration marches to what was then the American Air Force base at Brize Norton.

In the summer of 1960, I spotted three chaps in brown suits with brown ties and brown boots filming the protesters. I included the fact in my copy but neither I, the editor, news editor or subeditors appreciated the significance of their presence. The reporter from the Communist *Daily Worker* to whom I pointed them out had sharper antennae. His shock-horror story about secret US servicemen spying on peace marchers prompted questions in the House of Commons and a solemn undertaking from the Americans that it would not happen again.

After a war people want to put the past behind them and move on with their lives. As memory of the late conflict begins to fade, they become interested in their roots again. It was my good fortune to enter journalism at a time when they were in retrospective mood and some were still alive who could look back a very long way. I interviewed veterans of every military action from the Boer War to the Falklands Campaign. Not just men, women too.

It helped that in 1964 Mark Barrington-Ward, the second editor of the *Oxford Mail* I worked for,received a directive from London to brighten up the leader page, introduced the Anthony Wood Column and commissioned me to write it. The then still somewhat novel conversational tone I adopted, already a mainstay of radio and television programmes, encouraged readers to write in or phone me, and my readiness to write about anything that interested them led to some remarkable encounters.

A good story can be a matter of luck: the sort of luck that made a news editor with a hunch tell me to follow up a small ad for a lost budgerigar, the sort of luck that made one with a light diary dispatch me to interview an unknown Indian sage holding court in a hotel bedroom, the sort of luck that prompted the third editor of the *Oxford Mail* I worked for, Terry Page, anxious to make a splash on his arrival, to send me to Ireland to cover the first Pope to set foot on the island.

Friday the second of April 1982 went down in history as the date when Argentina invaded the Falklands in a vain attempt to claim the British overseas islands for the Argentine republic. After the dust had settled on the seventy-four-day campaign my fourth and final *Oxford Mail* editor, Eddie Duller, said to me: ‘Don, just pop over to RAF Brize Norton, will you, and do a quick feature on their involvement.’ Four days later I returned with six bulging notebooks.

It turned out the base had been engaged in every stage of the campaign from the beginning to the end. It not only resulted in four full-page features. A few months later it earned me an invitation to become one the first quartet of journalists the Ministry of Defence flew to Ascension Island to take a detailed look at the RAF staging post. It was our privilege to tell the back story: the efficiency and professionalism of an airlift that enabled British troops to reach the remote islands in the South Atlantic.

Even luckier was the commission from Eddie in 1984 to compile the supplement to mark the fortieth anniversary of the D-Day landings. The Automobile Association tempted a bunch of provincial journalists to publicise the new campsites it was launching for British motorists in the grounds of French chateaux by promising them their invitation would include visits to the landing beaches. The French aristocrat they recruited as our chaperone was more interested in exploring the cuisine and cellars the Michelin starred chefs of Normandy had to offer.

Lavish lunches and evening meals took up most of our three-day visit and gradually did for the digestions of the most gluttonous and bibulous reporters. Finally, another journalist and I got our guide to organise brief visits to the Bayeux military cemetery and Arromanches, site of the Juno landing beach. We would have liked to linger longer and visit some of the other beaches, but it was enough.

My real luck came after I returned to Oxford. One after another I stumbled on remarkable stories. My biggest stroke was tracking down Freddie Wells, the don at University College who masterminded the creation of the cross-Channel landing guides. When I rang, a college secretary answered the phone. ‘How strange,’ she said. ‘His widow is coming to see me this weekend. I’ll ask her to phone you.’ She couldn’t help me, but she knew a man in Cornwall who could. Two days later a package arrived stuffed with priceless material.

In the pages that follow I have tried to give you a flavour of the stories relating to war that flowed from my pen over the course of 38 years. They are but a fraction of the millions of words on various subjects I produced in that time, a fraction too of the stories I wrote on military matters. But I hope they provide an insight from a different point of view into a remarkable period in our history.

**1 — Oxford and the Second World War**

*In 1964 Mark Barrington-Ward, asked me to write a series of articles to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. Things had moved on since councillors in the 1930s discussed the idea of erecting a steel net over the university city to protect it in the event of an air raid, but the war still took some getting used to.*

**Prepared and unprepared**

Oxford was not unprepared for the Second World War. For some months the heads of the City Corporation’s various departments had been making plans for it under the direction of the Chief Constable, Mr Charles Fox, Oxford’s Air Raid Precautions Controller. But when it came, it was something of a shock. Suddenly everything was to be put to the test and nobody knew quite what to expect.

There were planes. There were bombs. There were submarines. There were torpedoes, and although they seem harmless enough now in comparison with their more terrible successors, they were frightening and unpredictable then. So frightening and unpredictable in fact that in the early days of the war Oxford City Council seriously considered hiring four marquees to erect at Bayswater Rise to house refugees walking through Oxford after the blitzing of London.

It was 1939. It had been a hot, stifling summer, and at the beginning of September it was still warm. The nature and duration of the coming hostilities were hard to envisage. Super grade petrol was 1s. 5d. a gallon. A city garage was advertising a 14-horsepower tourer saloon — 60mph, 28 miles per gallon, brake test: 16ft at 20mph — for £129. You could sit in the best seats at the New Theatre for two shillings.

Yet the area was not affluent. The angry letters in the correspondence columns of the *Oxford Mail* about the payment of ARP wardens and the resignation of a Banbury councillor over Banbury Emergency Committee’s handling of the borough finances proved that. Rather it was the hovering on the brink of a social change, which but for war one suspects might have taken very much longer.

The calling up of most of the area’s able-bodied men meant alterations to its day-to-day life that in some cases would be forever. Dairymen published notices saying that in future they would make only one delivery a day. Garages withdrew their twenty-four-hour service. Bakers ceased baking as many shapes and sizes of bread. The bus service was cut by half. Shops curtailed their opening hours to 6pm from Mondays to Wednesdays and 7pm on Fridays and Saturdays. [*Thursday was their half-day.*] The *Oxford Mail* stopped issuing its readers with free insurance. In the situations vacant columns advertisements for part-time workers began to appear and housewives began to answer them.

It was the year and the month that John Cobb broke the land speed record and said he didn’t see any reason why one day it shouldn’t be 400mph, that Grubbs, the corn merchants in George Street, announced that there was no truth in the rumour that they were to close, that the Rev. J.P. Thornton-Duesbury succeeded the Rev. C.M. Chavasse as Master of St. Peter’s, and that Balliol College had a woman bursar. But as the month advanced such peacetime preoccupations became of less and less moment.

A couple were celebrated in print for carrying their gas-masks to their wedding. The Vice-Chancellor and Proctors were berated for not taking theirs to the university parliament Congregation. The country was at war and so was Oxford. Shops sold out of blackout materials, candles and 20-watt bulbs. Luminous buttons were in great demand for lapels, dog collars and door- knockers. Some folk took to nailing metal tips to their boots so they could hear one another coming in the dark, others to smoking cigarettes at bus stops so they could wave down approaching vehicles with the glowing tips.

A great deal of sense and nonsense was written and perpetrated in aid of the war effort. John Masefield advised wisely on books for the long winter evenings. A Fellow of All Souls, having observed with disgust ‘the only sandbags properly laid… are those outside Christ Church; the efficiency of the other structures varies from seventy to ten per cent,’ proceeded to instruct readers of the *Oxford Mail* with enviable scholarship in the art of sandbagging. Another college, realising the danger of a shelter that had only one exit, procured a pickaxe so that its members could dig themselves out in an emergency, then deposited the implement in the porter’s lodge 200 yards away.

Most charming of all, a farm labourer from Clanfield, much vexed by the shortage of harvest helpers, wrote in saying: ‘As there are sure to be spies about ready to do us all the damage they can, I suggest the Government should at once employ men to guard the farmer’s corn stacks at night. Also, they should be allowed to carry a shotgun with orders to shoot any person in the legs they catch in the act of firing ricks or buildings.’

But if there was confusion in the public’s mind about the nature of the war, there was no real panic and people were probably much more patriotic than they are now. From reading the back files of the *Oxford Mail* one gets the impression that Oxford in 1939 was much nearer to Oxford in 1918 than 1964. When war was declared the residents of Great Headley estate immediately called off a threatened rent strike, the members of the Oxford Speedway Club immediately offered on bloc to act as dispatch riders for the ARP.

Of course, some people tried to cash in. Ald. Mrs Kathleen Lower went into one shop to buy a pair of 2s. 11d. stockings and was asked 3s. 3d. The Rev. H.J. Haggett went into another to buy a 3s. 9d. shirt and was charged 4s. 1½d. A thief went thieving in the blackout at a Cowley Road footwear shop and came away with a load of odd shoes. A rash of bicycle stealing broke out when petrol rationing was introduced.

There was some anger over the way people’s needs were calculated when fuel rationing was introduced. *King Coal* of Oxford wrote: ‘For three years I have not used an ounce of coal!’ — best coal by the way cost 53s. a ton — ‘but now I have a stock in, in case I may want it, or to share with my neighbours if necessity arises.’

At least in September the need did not arise. Very early in the month the *Oxford Mail* Air Correspondent wrote: ‘More than four days have elapsed since we entered the war and not a single German aircraft has penetrated our defences or crossed the coast.’ So, while the number of air raid shelters continued to increase and sandbags — under the tutelage of the Fellow of All Souls — began to look more like bricks and less like sausages, a lot of the tension went out of the atmosphere.

The cinemas reopened and played to packed houses despite the hot weather. Sandy Powell managed to summon his company from the ends of the country in time to present a show at the New Theatre the following Monday and it was not long before the repertory company were advertising a new production at the Playhouse: Hugh Wakefield in *Room for Two*. Children did not return to school until September 18, but that was mainly because the authorities were still trying to cope with the problem of educating the evacuee children as well, who since the beginning of the month had been pouring into the area.

There were some immediate shortages like that of building materials, which posed Witney Urban District Council with the problem of what to do with its half-finished houses. But on the domestic front the month fizzled out like a damp squib. The declaration had not produced the expected bang.

On September 29 the terms of the Russo-German Pact were blazed in banner headlines across the front page of the *Oxford Mail*, but lower down there was room to state: ‘The Fifth of November next may be the first all-black Bonfire Night in history,’ while inside in the correspondence columns an East Hanney reader produced mathematical evidence to prove that the war would end that year.

‘The Kaiser was born in 1859. The Kaiser came to the throne in 1885. Years of the Kaiser’s reign 33. The Kaiser’s age in 1918 59. Total: 3,836. Divided by two: 1918. Hitler was born in 1889. Hitler came to power in 1933. Years of Hitler’s power eight. Hitler’s age now 50. Total: 3,878. Divided by two: 1939.’

He wasn’t right of course. As another reader pointed out on the first of October, the calculation was hopelessly rigged to provide the desired answer. In fact, it could just as easily have provided the right answer: 1945. But in comparison with the dull months that lay ahead the first month of the war had been quite exciting, some people might say the most incident-filled of the whole war — in Oxford anyway.

*Oxford Mail* 2 September 1964

**Increased dangers and bureaucracy**

Officially the Chief Constable, Charles Fox, became Air Raid Precautions Controller of Oxford on the first of September 1939, though he had been in charge of operations for some months, and one of his first acts was to cancel St. Giles Fair, the annual two-day street fair in the city centre. The same evening the first blackout in the area’s history was organised. Buses drove through the streets without lights on their upper decks, motorists ran into one another in the dark, householders blacked out the fronts of their homes and not the backs, and for the first time the ominous cry was heard: ‘Put that light out!’

Not everyone was worried about war. ‘Along the river banks,’ the *Oxford Mail* recorded, ‘moonlight bathing was to be seen,’ courting couples snatching their last bliss-filled hours of peace together. The county regiment was almost completely mobilised and men fit for active service, who had not already answered the call had not long to wait. On Sunday 3 September war was declared while the City Emergency Committee was in session under the chairmanship of Ald. Rogers.

Mr Fox recalled: ‘He was a very able and deeply religious man, and I well remember his first act when the news came over the radio. He asked us all to rise while he said a brief but very sincere prayer that success might attend our efforts and a just peace speedily come.’ Similar prayers were said in churches as news boys carrying special editions of the *Oxford Mail* spread the tidings along the streets, which after dusk echoed with song, many favourites of the First World War coming into their own again. That night all the city’s first aid posts were manned and the following day twenty couples gave notice of their intention to marry at Oxford Register Office.

The same afternoon came news that the *Athenia* had been torpedoed on the way to Canada 200 miles west of the Hebrides. On board were an Oxford School of Technology [*now Oxford Brookes University*] lecturer, his wife and daughter. The same evening the first fatal accident occurred — a pedestrian was knocked down and killed by a motorcyclist.

The lecturer’s wife wrote in an article to the *Oxford Mail* later in the month: ‘At 8pm there was a fearful crash and all the lights went out. I put on a coat and was about to dress Rosemary when my husband burst in, saying: ‘Up on deck at once.’ We put our lifebelts on and rushed up just as we were in our pyjamas. There seemed no chance of getting into the lifeboats already lowered so we handed Rosemary to a sailor, who threw her in. We then saw her boat pull away before we dashed to another lifeboat station.

‘Eventually by jumping we both got into a boat — almost the last one off — and then there was a serious mishap. The rope at one end of the lifeboat broke and the boat fell head-on into the sea. We all fell, but owing to the presence of mind of the man lowering the boat, the other end was dropped immediately. The boat righted herself.’ The lecturer and his wife were picked up and brought back to England, but there was no news of their daughter, Rosemary, until September 11 — the day her mother’s article appeared in the *Oxford Mail* — when it was learned she was safely on her way to the city of Flint in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Such incidents, however, were not calculated to boost public morale. They rather served to emphasise the increased dangers of the new war. Oxford’s first and, as it turned out, only bombing fatality and the death of its first son on active service — an ex-Magdalen College Schoolboy — before the end of September underlined them. Ironically, the bombing was a mistake. A smoke bomb dropped accidentally by a Royal Air Force plane exercising in the early hours of September 24 wrecked the interior of 97 Stanway Road — home of Mr and Mrs F.W. Love — and fatally injured a young London evacuee.

The identity of the aircraft was never discovered. At the inquest an officer in evidence said only that planes were exercising in the area at that time and one of them could have dropped the smoke bomb. The evacuee was Trevor Thomas, a six-year-old Poplar boy, who was sleeping with his brother in an upstairs bedroom. The missile, which did not go off, struck him on its way through from the roof to the kitchen, and he died in the Radcliffe Infirmary some hours afterwards.

Meanwhile the City Fire Brigade had removed the bomb from under the kitchen floorboards and handed it over to the military authorities at Cowley — much to the annoyance of the Ministry of Defence. Mr Fox recalled: ‘One of the problems of the Controller was to endeavour to keep pace with the enormous spate of regulations and instructions which poured from the Ministry of Defence, the Regional Commissioner, to say nothing of those on the police side coming from the Home Office. It was obvious that many of them were produced by “chair-borne” officials who had no idea of their practical implications’.

One such was the missive that resulted a week or two after the bombing incident in two officials from the Regional Commissioner’s office at Reading calling on Mr Fox. ‘They wanted to know why I had not observed the regulations regarding the disposal of unexploded bombs — that is sent for the bomb disposal squad at Salisbury. Innocently, I asked which regulation they were referring to. They quoted the number of one, which of course I had previously perused, and I was able to inform them that that regulation referred to unexploded bombs following an air raid — “we haven’t had the raid yet,” I pointed out. They returned to Reading.’

Mr Fox was not the only one. The ordinary citizens were also finding the increased paperwork in which their day-to-day lives were wrapped a nuisance. The first air raid warning on September 6 — alert 7.40am, all clear 9am — resulted in some minor confusion. ‘What’s it like outside?’ an inmate of Christ Church’s sumptuous shelter, where there were deckchairs and magazines, asked a late arrival and received the reply: ‘Like Abingdon on a Sunday.’

A man at Banbury was fined £1 for not having a proper blackout. A man at Bicester failed to turn up to answer a charge of not driving without due care and attention because he had enlisted. The superintendent of Banbury Police had to appeal to people to clear the streets for workers from the Northern Aluminium Company changing shifts. But these were the practical effects of the war and were appreciated as such.

Application forms for petrol and coal — petrol was rationed about the middle of September and fuel at the end of the month — were harder to understand, and if anybody could have foreseen the documents with which the ordinary citizen would be loaded as a result of the compilation of the National Register, then those responsible for it would not have found their task half as easy to carry out as in fact they did.

The announcement was made on September 18 that every man, woman and child would be given a number, which would be used as a basis for food rationing, and in Oxford 125 enumerators, as they were called, under the control of Mr J.H.B. Wright, lately Public Assistance, now National Registration Officer, started calling on householders and issuing identity cards. Everywhere they were greeted — as several grateful letters to the *Oxford Mail* pointed out — with friendliness, cooperation and tea and in fact the only trouble they ran into was over their pay, which was ‘£2 plus six shillings after the first 100 names.’

Most of them were teachers and, especially in the villages, it was thought they were well enough paid already and the job should have been given to the unemployed. One can imagine the chaos that would have resulted in some cases if it had. Nevertheless, it was done and by the end of September everybody was registered and had a number. All was quiet and in order on the Home Front. It was what was happening elsewhere that troubled people.

Since the beginning of September tempers had been rising over the reluctance of officials to divulge facts about the military situation. Cartoons had been drawn. Articles had been written, and at the end of the month the *Oxford Mail* published a photograph, which was quite as satirical as anything that has appeared since in *Private Eye*. It showed a large room divided by rows of long tables piled high with dusty papers and scattered with unused typewriters, at which sat four or five recumbent figures, one of whom rested his head on his hand and stared vacantly at the camera. The caption said simply: ‘The Ministry of Information.’

*Oxford Mail* 3 September 1964

**The evacuees arrive**

On Friday 1 September 1939 three million children, mothers and handicapped people — nearly half of them from London — started leaving the big cities for safer destinations elsewhere in the country. Most were children between three and thirteen and they made a poignant sight as they stood on station platforms carrying gas-masks, food and a change of clothing — the young ones fingering the labels which they had been told not to suck or eat, the older ones speculating what the journey’s end might have in store for them. ‘I hope it’s going to the seaside,’ said one boy. ‘I’ve brought my swimming costume.’

Oxford expected 16,000, Abingdon and district 5,000, Banbury and district 5,000, and the various other towns and districts in the area between 2,000 and 3,000. Shortly after 10am the first contingent of evacuees arrived at Oxford Station — some 800 children from East Acton, Old Oak Common and Shepherd’s Bush. By the end of the day 4,000 children and teachers had passed through the hands of Stationmaster Frank Buckingham, not to mention several hospital trains, mostly composed of patients on stretchers in cattle trucks, smelling most unhealthy in the heat.

The fleet of buses and coaches waiting for the new arrivals had been stepped up from a hundred to 150 and the Chief Evacuation Officer, Mr Stewart Swift, had succeeded in billeting some 3,200 evacuees in the city alone: a task which was to become more and more thankless for his officers in the days to come as they tramped from street to street at the head of weary columns in the boiling sun. By Sunday — the day war was declared — so many were reckoned to have flooded into the city that some had to be sent back to London and the Mayor of Oxford, Dr H.T. Gillett, appealed for fresh accommodation.

His plea brought an angry response from those householders the billeting officers had overlooked. By Tuesday there were reported to be more than 13,000 evacuees in the city. But, unless some of them were later moved on, the figure must have been an exaggeration. For much later in the month a county spokesman said that under 10,000 of the 18,000 evacuees expected in Oxfordshire had been received, and the city’s figure was probably down by the same margin.

Nonetheless, there were enough to cause problems. 8,000 children had to be added to Oxfordshire’s school rolls — an increase of fifty-eight per cent — not to mention the 500 teachers that came with them, while Oxford City had something like an extra 4,500 to cope with, including Clement Danes Boys and Burlington Girls Grammar Schools.

In their new homes the visitors’ Cockney cheek was at first much appreciated and many jokes were retailed of the order of this one. Man to wife: ‘Well, mother, I’m off to chapel.’ Evacuee: ‘Arf a mo, guv’nor, I’ll come wiv yer and mine’s a ginger beer on the back step.’ The very nature of the jokes made it unlikely that many of them were authentic. But they expressed the average Oxonian’s attitude to the evacuees and soon a note of moral virtue began to express itself.

This remark: ‘They are having not only fresh air. But some of them are enjoying fresh vegetables and butter for the first time,’ was made by a head teacher, and by the end of the month even a Medical Officer of Health could express similar sentiments. He told a reporter: ‘Quite a number of the teachers in schools I have visited speak of improvement in their children. This is shown by the return of colour to their cheeks and increased alertness due, I think, largely to the fact that many of the children have for the first time in their lives had regular meals, adequate sleep and, perhaps most important of all, quiet in which to sleep undisturbed by either vermin or traffic.’

Fortunately, most of the children cannot have read the *Oxford Mail*, but was the East End of London still as sodden and impoverished as it was in the days of the gin palaces at the turn of the century? It would seem so. The jokes took on a harder edge. Woman: ‘Johnny, don’t you think it’s time you went to bed?’ Johnny: ‘Wot, in daylight?’ Woman: ‘Well, what time do you usually go to bed?’ Johnny: ‘I allus wait till the old man comes home from the boozer.’ Charity? That word ceased to mean anything in a number of Oxford area households after a week and, in some cases, one could hardly blame the womenfolk.

On the first Sunday after the declaration of war the evacuee children’s parents flocked down to see them and though the Press in reporting the visit confined itself to remarking discreetly: ‘It is interesting to note that some of the children from the poorer parts of London have put on several pounds in weight since they were evacuated,’ some of its correspondents were not so tolerant.

What right, demanded one angry mother in a letter had these people to descend on the poor, harassed Oxford households, adding to their already crowded numbers, unsettling the children just as they were getting used to the idea of living away from home — and here we have the nub of the matter — daring to make complaints about the way things were done?

Perhaps the death of the first evacuee, the seventeen-month-old daughter of an RAF wireless operator, who ran away from her sister at Fifield Manor, fell into a fast moving stream and was drowned delayed the onslaught, but it was not long in coming. Two days later another correspondent chimed in: ‘I would like the people of Wolvercote to start from a point in Wolvercote and march some of the children to the Town Hall and take them back only when they are in a fit condition.’

Some days previously fears had been expressed about whether there would be enough accommodation for the 2,000 undergraduates expected back at the beginning of October. Christ Church, Corpus Christi, Exeter, Hertford, Jesus, New, St. Edmund Hall, Trinity, University College and Worcester remained open to the men, Lady Margaret Hall and St. Hilda’s to the women. The colleges were flooded with offers of rooms. Undergraduates would be better any day it seemed than those rude, dirty, uncouth evacuees.

Someone signing herself *London Mother* wrote: ‘My child has not had a bath since we came here on September 2 as there is nothing to bath her in. The total absence of privacy makes life a torture to me. We are right in the slums of Oxford.’ Immediately Newspaper House was inundated with offers of accommodation, causing the Evacuation Officer, who had been trying in vain to find accommodation for mothers and children, to raise his eyebrows.

But gradually the situation sorted itself out. Mothers and teachers in most cases were able to find someone they could get on with or at least put up with. Children who had cussed and stayed out half the night learnt to say their prayers and go to bed at half-past-seven. Others attributed the peculiar habits of the households to which they were sent to the rougher ways of country cousins. Many acquired Oxfordshire accents, and the Women’s Voluntary Service, the churches and every type of organisation worked wonders, providing cradles, toys, clothing, socials and entertainment and all the things the evacuees had had to leave behind them.

Meanwhile, the most potentially noxious of them — Billingsgate Market — had come and gone. It had been hoped to make Oxford the centre of the nation’s fishing industry. The Director of Fish Supplies, Mr J.T. Bennett, had set up his headquarters at St. John’s College, porters had been photographed in their striped aprons. But within a fortnight the scheme had been declared a failure and the real Billingsgate had reopened in London.

Other businesses made the move more successfully and some stayed after the war. Barnet House became the headquarters of the Evacuee Co-ordinating Committee. Ruskin College rejoiced under the name of the City of Oxford Ruskin College Maternity Hospital for Evacuees, and every type of building from dance halls to churches saw service of some description or other including the Majestic Cinema — later the marmalade factory [*today a branch of Waitrose*] — in Botley Road which housed surely the most determined bunch of evacuees ever after the blitzing of the East End, when Oxford was at saturation point.

Mr Charles Fox, the City’s Air Raid Precautions Controller, recalled: ‘Everything possible was done for their comfort, but the building was quite unsuitable for such numbers. They, however, settled in, removed seats, blanketed off little areas for family privacy and generally made themselves at home. After about three weeks the Health Department decided that the building must be cleared for cleansing and fumigating and arrangements were made for the transfer of those remaining to Wolverhampton by special train.

A sigh of relief went up as the last ones departed, but in the evening some thirty or forty arrived back by bus saying that Oxford was better than Wolverhampton any day. Alternative accommodation was offered but they refused to move and finally had to be ejected.’ In a snowstorm! Oxford’s popularity had grown since that sweltering day on the eve of the war when it was first one of the places at the receiving end of the greatest mass movement of people this country had known.

*Oxford Mail* 4 September 1960

*The Oxford Mail features department had doubts about publishing the fourth and final instalment in the paper’s Saturday Personal View slot after my three seemingly authoritative articles on the outbreak of the Second World War but the editor must have overruled them!*

**Through salmon-tinted spectacles**

Truth to tell, I do not remember the start of the Second World War. I was only six at the time. But strangely, the moment is as clear in my mind as if it were yesterday. The siren rose on the morning air like some disembodied banshee. My mother rushed to the cupboard under the wireless. Out flew our gas masks and my sister and I had ours half on before my father restored order and the spaniel stopped barking. It was the start of a new phase of my existence or perhaps — more significantly — the end of the old one.

No longer did the assistant in Sanders in the Windmill Road desert her counter to find me a biscuit when I went shopping with my mother. No longer did the proprietor ransack the riches of her tuck shop at Headington Carfax to yield me a just pennyworth. Yet although these losses were sad, they were nothing like as sad as the disappearance from the family larder of pineapple chunks and tinned salmon.

I remember with a small boy’s determination and unrelenting disbelief challenging all possible sources of canned fruit and tinned fish, quite sure that sooner or later I should run these lost luxuries to earth. But no, it seemed they came from foreign parts and were cargoes too frivolous to risk on the broad ocean, when German submarines lurked beneath. And, oh, the wicked Germans! — how I prayed for their discomfiture from the heart of my stomach when I learned that.

It was to no avail. The war continued and I went to school clutching my gas mask in its cardboard case and guarding it carefully from the big boys’ gaze. I never could understand what possessed them to swing theirs together like conkers until the visors cracked and the stuffing hung out of the mouthpieces. They might have all been gassed.

From time to time I trooped with the rest of my class into an air raid shelter smelling of dank cement and stale sacking, brushing past bare knees in the dark, tripping over feet, hanging like grim death onto the coat-tail in front of me until, at last, I sank onto a splintery form, unable to understand why a building that appeared so uncomplicated from the exterior should seem like a rabbit warren inside.

I even did my bit for the war effort, though I must confess it was not nearly as efficiently and carefully done as it should have been. At Margaret Road Infants School we were all encouraged to do our bit, the clever ones knitting scarves for the soldiers, sailors and airmen, the not so clever making them fluffy woollen balls. I never did discover what the forces did with them.

All I know is one day my teacher plonked a large pile of very knotted wool and a hoop of cardboard on my desk and told me to start unravelling and get winding. At first the thought that lives might depend on my application and industry made me carefully undo every knot. But later, when it dawned on me that I was not so quick at the task as the others, I began to wind knotty lumps of wool surreptitiously into the band and later still, when some started having theirs slit open and trimmed by the teacher to spherical perfection, I only bothered to unknot one strand in seven.

Then conscience hit me. What would happen when my band was cut open? And as the hole in the middle shrank to the size of a sixpence I lived in fear and trembling of that evil day. Luckily, I progressed to grammar school before it arrived, but I often wonder what happened to the poor child who inherited my handiwork and how he felt when it fell to pieces under the scissors.

I acquired a shilling map of the world, which I hung on my bedroom wall and festooned with flags, listening carefully to the news as the Soviet Army drove the Germans back across Russia and altering the position of my flags every day. But even with the aid of a newspaper to spell out the names it was impossible to find the villages through which the grim struggle was passing and the lines of both armies were frozen forever in a long ugly straggle across the steppes one day when I grew tired of guessing where they really ought to be.

Instead, I developed a passion for reading and fought my way through the blood and thunder of *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, then progressed by a series of curious chances to a book called *The Dolphin Hits the Air Trail*, which I took with me to Slough, where my father was working in a factory as an instrument maker. On page thirteen — in a strange bedroom — I read in simple realistic terms of the shooting of a pilot and for the first time realised what death meant.

It still haunts my memory far more strongly than many things about the war that actually happened: bombing out of relatives in London, their evacuation on us, and the nasty road accident that was to keep my mother in bed for nearly a year\*. Yet even that did not bring the grim realities of war any closer and as for imagining the Germans might beat us, it never occurred to me.

Hurtling down Shotover in soapboxes on pram wheels, we would sometimes pause after a spill to gaze through the wire at the Italian prisoners-of-war camp in Old Road. I had two inseparable companions at the time and once we were spoken to by one of the inmates, who seemed a decent enough chap. But though the Americans and their girlfriends who sought solace in the bracken provided the odd sixpence or packet of chewing gum for those bolder spirits brave enough to stand and stare, then be bribed to go away, I do not recall having any strong feelings about enemies or allies.

In the spring of 1944, I sat for the scholarship — what they call the eleven-plus now — and much to everybody’s amazement but my own got as far as the oral, went to Oxford with a group of young hopefuls, was interviewed — was it in the Town Hall? — and afterwards had my picture taken by the *Oxford Mail* on an anti-aircraft gun in St. Giles — or rather would have done if the others hadn’t stood in my way.

Then in September I went to the City of Oxford School for Boys and Latin and French in liberal doses of homework carried me away from my mates. We teamed up again on VE Day or soon afterwards at our street party. But on that day, something happened that really marked the end of our friendship. There was a competition and I got up and sang *Land of Hope and Glory*, then they got up and sang the same, and I won third prize. The party was at their end of the street.

At the time I was broken-hearted. But the truth was that nobody had the foggiest idea what three little boys had been singing that afternoon and how well they had sung it. And nobody cared. For them the war was over. For me it lingered on for ages as I awaited the return of certain unmentionable delicacies and then, when the first came, it was a disappointment. The pineapple was in rings, not chunks.

The other though, that was different. The loss of it must have preyed on my mind throughout the war for I developed such a passion for it that even today the mere mention of it sometimes still makes my mouth water. Lucky little boy that I was in retrospect, I didn’t see the war through rose-coloured spectacles. They were salmon-tinted.

*Oxford Mail* 5 September 1964

\* *My mother was dragged off her bike by one of those six-foot long Queen Mary lorries, which carried aircraft bodies and wings to Cowley for repair after they had crashed or been shot down. She was in fact in bed only for weeks, but it seemed like a year to my younger sister and me. We tackled the chores under her house-proud supervision while she was bed-bound!*

**2 — The war gets serious**

**Dunkirk of a love affair**

World War Two veterans gathered at Dunkirk Cathedral on Sunday 26 May 1990 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of a rescue operation, which but for the grace of God and the vanity of Hitler might so easily have ended in disaster. Among the proud men and women marching up the aisle to lay their standards at the altar was seventy-year-old Bob Halliday of Didcot, chairman of the Oxfordshire branch of the Dunkirk Veterans Association.

In the congregation watching him were Kay, the lass from Essex he married in 1946, and Eliane, the lass from Lievin in Northern France he might have married if the war that brought them together had not parted them after eight months. Neither woman spoke the other’s language and they were virtual strangers.

They met for the first time on Sunday morning at the entrance to the cathedral, but it was not difficult to imagine them exchanging smiles and tears over their hymn books. The story that brought them together was every bit as remarkable as the story of the armada of small boats that snatched 338,226 troops from the bomb-strafed beaches of Dunkirk in May 1940.

When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, Bob Halliday was an apprentice fitter at the Fairfields Shipyard in Glasgow. Just over a fortnight later he left for France as batman to Major Boyd of the 14th Corps Field Survey. He was horrified. ‘I hadn’t joined up to be an officer’s servant,’ he said. Nonetheless, while the other members of the unit went about the task of mapping the German military emplacements for the Royal Artillery, he fetched the major his tea and polished his boots.

The major made his headquarters at the house of the Mayor of Lieven, a mining village in the Pas de Calais. Bob dossed down with the other lads in the stables, but he spent most of his time for the next eight months at the Cafe Alexis. ‘The proprietors, Alexis and Honorine Delahy, treated me as if I was their son and their daughters, Eliane, who was the same age as I was, and her elder sister, Lucienne…’ He smiled bashfully as he remembered. ‘Let’s say, if Eliane was doing anything in the cellar she tried to make sure I went with her.’

At the beginning of May 1940 Bob came home for his first spell of leave, only to be recalled on May 10, and by the time he got to Boulogne it was being evacuated as the British Expeditionary Force retreated before the advancing German army. Although he did not know it at the time, he was not to see Eliane for another fifty years.

*Oxford Mail* 23 May 1990

**In retreat**

Bob stepped out of the column of soldiers marching in single file along the roadside and went up to an officer. ‘Please, sir, I’ve lost my gas mask.’ ‘You’ll lose more than your gas mask,’ the officer retorted, ‘before this lot’s over.’ He was right. The situation was rapidly becoming a nightmare as troops retreating before Hitler’s army and civilian refugees choked the roads of northern France.

Bob recognised a passing dispatch-rider, cadged a lift on his pillion and an officer from his unit came to collect him in a lorry. But his comfort was short-lived. A couple of days later came the order to destroy all equipment including personal papers and it was back to shank’s pony again, sleeping in barns by day and marching by night to avoid the shells and bombs.

‘Dunkirk, which was where we were making for, though we didn’t know it, was just a pall of smoke. The officers marched us down to the beach and after a couple of days we were a mile-and-a-half further back than where we started. Casualties were very heavy from the constant bombardment by the Germans. Abandoned horses were running wild and a lot of the boys were being washed up on the beach drowned after trying to swim for it.

‘It was obvious we weren’t going to get off there, so we decided to travel towards Belgium and eventually ended up in a little place called Brady Dunes. It was a bit quieter there, but there was not a ship on the horizon. After a couple of days, we decided to build ourselves a huge raft out of lorry floorboards, petrol cans and motor tyres.

‘We’d just finished building it when a naval commander appeared out of nowhere in an immaculate white uniform, gaiters, the lot, and told us boats were on the way to rescue us. We should leave the raft for the rear-guard and wade out into the water. So, we did and sure enough, as the water reached our waists, rowing boats appeared like magic and pulled us aboard.

‘They took us to a Dutch tugboat called *The Hilda*, gave us a huge mug of tea and a great big lump of bread and butter, then those of us with rifles went aloft to man the bridge and those who could row took the boats back to the beach to pick up more troops. The date was May 31, 1940.’ After Dunkirk, Bob went to the Middle East as a fitter with his own mobile workshop, looking after the water-lines and pumping stations in the Libyan Desert until he came home in January 1944.

In June he returned to France on D-Day+4 as part of a team building Bailey bridges for the advancing Allied forces, went ‘missing’ for three days after the liberation of Brussels — joining the citizens in their celebrations — and was preparing to cross the Elbe when the war ended. After he was demobbed in 1946, he married Kay, the lass he had met at a dance in Essex in 1944. In 1960 they moved to Didcot with their son and daughter, where he took a job helping set up what is now the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory. He spent the last twenty years of his working life as a technician at the University Engineering Department in Oxford.

Bob’s parents corresponded with Monsieur and Madame Delahy for several years after the war. Then for some reason they lost touch and though Bob had returned to France every year since 1972 when he joined the Dunkirk Veterans, it wasn’t until October 1989 he had the chance to revisit Lieven. Despite the fact that the village had mushroomed to a town of some 30,000 people he found what used to be the Cafe Alexis without difficulty. It was now a disco.

Sadly, he returned to the market Square and called across the road to the friends with whom he was touring some of the First World War battlefields: ‘There’s no trace of them. I think we’d better press on.’ He recalled: ‘I was aware of someone behind me, then a voice saying: “I speak English. Can I help?”’ Bob was doubtful, but the stranger who remembered the late Alexis Delahy was persistent.

Later that afternoon he took Bob to the flat in Lieven where Eliane and Lucienne lived. ‘I shall never forget it. As the word went round the neighbourhood the flat filled with crying, laughing people and when I next looked at the one-and-a-half litre bottle of duty-free whisky I had taken with me it had all gone.’

*Oxford Mail* 24 May 1990

**Dad’s Army’s defences**

Ask people who protected Britain’s Home Front during the Second World War and the chances are they will remark with a smile: ‘Dad’s Army!’ In real life the members of the Home Guard could be every bit as funny — and incompetent! — as the characters in the ever-popular television series.

I remember my father who was an ARP Warden in Headington telling me about a mock invasion of Oxford. They loaded the ‘casualty’ into an ambulance. Before they could set off, he fell out, breaking an arm. Going down Headington Hill he fell out again breaking a leg. By the time he reached the Radcliffe Infirmary the surgeons found they had a genuine wounded soldier to deal with.

But there is no doubt if Hitler had invaded Britain the makeshift army would have fought like heroes to keep their foes at bay. Stretching inland from the coast was a network of defences every bit as strong as the Maginot Line the German Army skirted round when they made their push across Europe into France and Belgium.

Today most children couldn’t even tell you what a pillbox was. Chemists no longer dish out tablets in cylindrical cardboard boxes. They come in safety stoppered plastic bottles. It was those old-fashioned drug containers, however, that gave their name to the circular reinforced concrete machine-gun emplacements the defence authorities first built along the east coast of Britain during the First World War. Though later such defences were hexagonal, square, oblong and many other ingenious shapes as well as round, pillboxes they remain in military parlance to this day.

The British Army first came up against them at the Battle of Langmarck in 1917. Official records talk of ‘the effectiveness of the new tactical device of the pillbox, for which as yet we have no answer’. They were still difficult to deal with when Allied Forces invaded Europe on D-Day. Hundreds of troops lost their lives in the hail of bullets that issued from their gun-slits as they stormed up the beaches.

Hitler’s hordes, of course, never got round to testing the bunkers that appeared all over Southern England in the dark days of 1940 when invasion seemed imminent. But their strength may be judged by the numbers that have survived. In 1985 thanks to a seventeen-year labour of love by Henry Wills, chief photographer of the *Salisbury Journal*, we at last gained a comprehensive record of these wartime relics.

What began as a routine assignment to cover the demolition of one for his newspaper in 1968 resulted in the publication of *Pillboxes: A Study of UK Defences 1940* (Leo Cooper/Secker and Warburg). I first came across Henry in 1975 when he enlisted the *Oxford Mail’s* help to track down pillboxes in our area. ‘In addition to the basic line of defence along the Kennet and Avon Canal,’ he told me, ‘I have discovered a loop line leading up towards Oxford, presumably to give added protection to the industrial Midlands.’

His book listed the outcome of that particular line of search along with 5,000-odd other pillboxes newspaper readers helped him identify. He documented them all in an impressive atlas and gazetteer at the end of his book and in the main text, liberally illustrated with diagrams and photographs, he told their story.

As interesting and amusing as the uses people had put disused pillboxes to since the end of the Second World War, were the efforts the camouflage experts went to disguise their tell-tale appearance from an invading enemy. They masqueraded as garages, telephone booths, castles, garden sheds, summer houses. One in Hertfordshire even had a board up saying: ‘This property for sale.’

But since we started with Dad’s Army let Corporal J. Smith of the Home Guard have the last word. On the wall of his bastion the would-be hero scrawled: ‘Hitler has taken Poland. Hitler has taken Denmark and Norway. Hitler has taken Holland, Belgium and France. He will not take this pillbox.’

*Oxford Mail* 6 August 1985

**Singapore falls**

The veteran Witney photographer, Arthur Titherington, began to wonder if the words on the scroll he had commissioned from a Taiwanese calligrapher said what he thought they said. Nobody he asked seemed to recognise the writing. In the end he took it to the Chinese takeaway at the bottom of Corn Street, Witney, he had presented with a certificate of hygiene a few months before as chairman of West Oxfordshire District Council.

The young man behind the counter had no difficulty with the first word. ‘War,’ he said. The second word defeated him. Another young man came out of the kitchen. ‘Hostage,’ he said. ‘When two soldiers fight and one loses.’ The calligrapher at the folk museum Arthur asked to write ‘prisoner of war’ for him had been as good as his word. He could go ahead and use the Chinese ‘kanji’ on the flyleaf and dust-jacket of his book.

It added the finishing touch to a remarkable piece of writing. *One Day at A Time*, issued by the Self-Publishing Association, was Arthur’s account of his 1,300 days in a Japanese slave labour camp on the island of Formosa as Taiwan was known at the time of the Second World War.

The former Mayor of Witney acknowledged he was lucky to have lived to tell the tale. As a twenty-year-old dispatch rider in the British Army the Japanese would have had no hesitation in slaughtering him when they overran Singapore in February 1942 had the driver not taken him to the civilian hospital instead of the military hospital by mistake.

Conditions at Kinkaseki, the notorious ‘No. 1’ prisoner-of-war camp on Formosa, where he ended up, were so bad the Japanese used to threaten to send other PoWs there. He might easily have died of malnutrition, disease, or from a fall of rock while working down the copper mine, as many of his mates did. ‘I came within a hair’s breadth of not surviving,’ he wrote.

‘It was about a week before news of the end of the war broke upon us. After the months down the mine with almost no rest, followed by hard labour in the Jungle Camp on very much reduced rations, increased work and increased brutality, I finally became more ill than I had ever been. My weight was down around the six stone mark and my morale was just about zero.’

The physical scars healed quickly. The mental scars took a lot longer. ‘When we came home there were no psychiatrists to help us back to normal like there were after the Gulf War and the Falklands. I had the usual nightmares. One day the family doctor said to me: “Why don’t you write things down? See if that helps.” In the course of the next few months, I must have filled 150 to 200 pages with my memories.’

Gradually he picked up the pieces of his broken life, but the nightmares continued, and other incidents served to remind him. ‘I recall my first grandson inadvertently hitting me across the face in playing and the sudden, almost overwhelming desire to retaliate in the hardest way I could. I had to leave the room very quickly.’

Finally, after a particularly violent nightmare, during which he ripped the headboard from the wall, he decided he would have to go back to Kinkaseki with his wife, Iris, and confront the past. On his return, he dug out the notes he had scribbled all those years ago, started devouring every book on Japan he could lay hands on.

Eventually, he found his way to the Public Records Office at Kew. ‘The whole basis of my research became: “Why?” Why did our government and generals let us down? Why was Singapore not the secure fortress it was supposed to be? Why did the Japanese behave the way they did?’

The result was a book which — as Robert O’Neill, the Chichele Professor War at Oxford, said in a preface — not only gave the reader deep insights into the sufferings of a Second World War prisoner-of-war, but had real value as history. Arthur said two things helped him in his eight-year struggle to finish it. One was the extraordinary friendship he struck up with a Japanese woman, who wanted to know the truth about the late Emperor Hirohito. The other was the purchase of a word processor, which made his constant rewriting so much easier.

‘I haven’t forgotten and I haven’t forgiven. Japan still hasn’t said sorry for what it did in the Second World War. But I hope what I have written will help people to understand. I hope too it will serve as a memorial not just to those who died in the prison camps, but to those who have died since, and those like me who were lucky enough to survive.’

*Oxford Mail* 2 December 1992

**The ‘Kanji’ — sign for prisoner of war**

**The war in the desert**

On Saturday 3 May 1975 members and friends of the Oxford Desert Forces Club from all over the country gathered at the Territorial Army Volunteer Reserve Centre at Slade Park, Headington, for the club’s twenty-fifth anniversary dinner. The date could not have been more auspicious. Exactly twenty-five years ago on that very day — Wednesday 3 May 1950 to be precise — a small band of Seventh Armoured Division veterans met in the café of the Super Cinema [*now Odeon Magdalen Street*] to launch the Oxford Desert Rats Club.

Strictly speaking, it was the result of a publicity exercise. Alec Gray, later to become manager of an ABC cinema in Chatham and an honorary life president of the club, was showing the film *Desert Victory* that week and he thought it would be a good idea to invite some of the ex-servicemen who fought against Rommel in the desert to the first night.

Being an ex-serviceman himself he was anxious to ensure the lads had a good time. So, after the showing of the film, he invited them and their wives to a small reception. At it somebody made the inevitable suggestion: ‘We ought to meet on a regular basis.’ ‘Right,’ he said, ‘you can use my café until you find yourselves permanent headquarters.’ Two nights later as an engrossed audience watched the cinematic version of the stirring campaign that they had lived through in the auditorium below, they met there to elect their first officers.

As the original minute book shows, it was suggested that the club should have three aims: to foster the old Desert spirit among members, to promote social activities and to lend a helping hand where necessary. But members felt that their first aim was a broad enough umbrella to cover everything they wanted to do. The meeting agreed unanimously and, on that basis, they went ahead.

In the ensuing months they met at regular intervals to organise events which would become established features of their calendar in years to come: the coach trip to London for the El Alamein Reunion, the annual dinner — the first one was held in the Super Cinema restaurant on 1 November 1950 — the club dance, the club social with frequent club draws and raffles to raise funds. Membership went up by leaps and bounds.

Before the end of the year there was talk of a club badge and a branch at Abingdon. Then, early in 1951, the club had its first setback. The New Year’s Dance at the Carfax Assembly Rooms made a loss because of illness among folk who had promised to buy tickets. And there were to be other disappointments culminating in the closure of the club — which had moved its headquarters, first to the Jericho Tavern, then to The Victoria in Walton Street — in 1956, after the secretary had fought his way through St. Giles’s Fair to a committee meeting at which he was the only one present.

Drawing the distinction between the ex-servicemen’s clubs set up after the Second World War, most of which had quickly fizzled out, and the bodies of old soldiers dating from First World War days, which were still thriving, the *Oxford Mail* noted: ‘Perhaps the fact that the 1939-45 war was one of movement on a vast scale, which prevented men being together for a long time is the chief reason for the short life of some of the associations.’

The Desert Rats Club decided to change their name to the Desert Forces Club at the beginning of 1953 and extend their membership to anyone on active service with His Majesty’s or Allied Forces in the desert during the Western Desert Campaign between 10 June 1940 and 13 May 1943 or with the Navies and Air Forces operating in close support. But the bid to inject new life into their activities failed.

So, it must have been with some trepidation that a few stalwarts gathered in the clubroom of the Duke of Monmouth, Abingdon Road, on 6 May 1958 to see what they could do about reviving the club. By that time the mood was different. Britain was emerging from its post-war austerity gloom. Ex-servicemen felt more inclined to get together to renew the spirit of comradeship that had bound them in the grim days in the desert and the club gradually went from strength to strength.

By the time of the twenty-fifth anniversary dinner, it had 116 members and though it still had no permanent base — ‘we are more or less as we were in the desert,’ joked chairman John Hewer — no one could doubt its vigour. The club president, Major ‘Jeff’ Jeffcutt, produced a regular magazine called *The Desert Echo*, which ran to sixteen pages packed with interesting information, and the events the committee organised ranged from photographic contests to skittles evenings.

There was an annual El Alamein service at the City Church conducted by their padre the City Rector, the Revd. Norwyn Macdonald Ramm, an annual dinner, an annual muster for the Armistice Parade, and close links with all the other services organisations in the community and beyond.

Anthony Wood Column *Oxford Mail* 29 January 1975

**Medical orderly in the frontline**

On Saturday 23 October 1992 the members of the Oxford Desert Forces Club held a dinner to mark the fiftieth anniversary of El Alamein, the battle in North Africa that turned the tide of the Second World War in favour of the Allies. On Sunday morning the dwindling band of survivors gathered again with friends and loved ones for an El Alamein service in the City Church of St. Michael at the North Gate.

‘When this war is over,’ said Britain’s wartime leader, Sir Winston Churchill, ‘it will be enough for a man to say: “I marched and fought with the Desert Army.”’ ‘True, perfectly true,’ said John Couch. The tears rolled down his cheeks as he sat in the lounge of his home in Riverside Gardens, Witney, remembering.

In two years in the North African desert between October 1940 and October 1942, the seventy-two-year-old chairman of Witney Silver Threads raised a fist in anger once: to stop a frantic young soldier pouring water over his head in the middle of a sandstorm — and then only to save the water!

Yet as a medical orderly in the frontline he knew as much as anybody about the conditions the ‘Desert Rats’ had to endure in their grim struggle with the enemy. Several times during our conversation he pulled out his handkerchief to stifle the tears: the time three members of the Eleventh Hussars staggered out of the desert. ‘They’d survived, first by catching overnight dew, then by siphoning water out of vehicle radiators, finally by drinking their own urine — something they say you should never do. They were blind.’

The time he walked the length of Cairo Railway Station cradling a legless, armless Italian prisoner of war like a baby. ‘I couldn’t help thinking to myself: What sort of a future has he got?’ The two times a German fighter plane appeared out of the blue and shot up the ambulances full of wounded troops he was escorting back from the frontline. ‘After it was gone there was nothing to do but get out the shovel and bury them.’

John Couch enlisted a fortnight after war was declared, put his age on by a year and ten days later found himself back home preparing for embarkation. ‘I ended up at Helmieh Hospital twenty miles outside Cairo. From there I was posted to the Fifteenth Light Field Ambulance. Our job was to leapfrog the frontline, providing medical backup to the fighting forces.’

Warfare in the desert, he said, was more like warfare at sea than on land. ‘Every vehicle was a separate entity and every man was trained for self-preservation. We were constantly on the move. I don’t think we spent more than one night in the same place when we were on duty. When we stopped, the first thing we did was to dig ourselves a shallow trench to sleep in. Water was more precious than motor fuel.

‘We learnt to survive on a pint a day. We washed our clothes in petrol, then hung them out in the sun to dry. The only decent food we got we stole from the enemy. We celebrated Christmas Day 1940 on the move. We didn’t even stop for Christmas dinner. “Have some turkey,” I said to my mate, passing him a chunk of bully beef. “Some roast potatoes,” he said, handing me a lump of biscuit. It was our sense of humour that kept us going.’

One morning in 1941 he asked his mate what day it was. ‘February 3, I think,’ he said. ‘Do you realise,’ said John, ‘it was my twenty-first birthday last week and I didn’t even remember!’ He was too busy patching up wounded troops and treating them when they went down with diseases like dysentery and sandfly fever to have more than a hazy idea about the progress of the war.

‘There were no radios you could carry around in your pocket in those days.’ In the run-up to the Battle of El Alamein he was in the southern desert with the Long-Range Desert and Special Services Groups, creating a diversion behind enemy lines while Lieutenant General Bernard Montgomery marshalled his men and tanks for the bloody offensive against Field Marshal Rommel and his crack Panzer divisions.

Between October 23 and November 4 in 1942 the Allies lost 13,500 men and the Germans 32,000, but John was no longer ‘picking up the pieces.’ Soon after the battle commenced, he went down with dysentery and was sent to Iraq to recuperate. Although he remained unaware of the significance of El Alamein until much later, his experiences of the desert campaign left an impression fifty years had not softened. ‘Anybody who tells me they want another war,’ he said, choking back the tears, ‘must be crazy.’

*Oxford Mail* 22 October 1992

*I had a long association with the club and eventually its padre, the City Rector, the Revd ‘Mac’ Ramm, and I became the club’s trustees. In 1996, when membership had shrunk from a peak of 200 to just six active members, we had the sad task of winding it up. Determined to make an occasion of it, I managed to obtain a copy of Desert Victory from the Imperial War Museum. Mike Rodgers, the manager of the Super Cinema in Oxford, agreed to show it on the morning of October 16.*

*Roy Boulting, the director who won an Oscar for it, who had retired to my home village of Eynsham, introduced it. Following the showing the former Deputy Supreme Commander in Europe, General Sir John Mogg, paid tribute to the Desert Forces, and among those who saw the film and attended the brief service ‘Mac’ conducted afterwards were the Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, Sir Hugo Brunner, accompanied by ‘one of the heroes of the desert campaign,’ Captain Tom Bird, DSO, MC, the Lord Mayor of Oxford, Councillor Mrs Beryl Keen, a party of Oxford City councillors, Captain Rupert Shaw and buglers from the 5th Royal Greenjackets.*

*They sounded the last post with which the service ended. I even managed to persuade a former colleague of mine, John Ezard, to cover the occasion for The Guardia*n.

**3 — The American invasion**

**A new Oxford hospital**

On Monday 27 January 1992 Michael Addison, the general manager of the Churchill Hospital, rolled out the red carpet for Mrs Janice Hogan of Abingdon, the first patient to use the new entrance and admissions office. The informal ceremony commemorated the opening of the Headington hospital by the Duchess of Kent on the same day fifty years before. Later in the year, other engagements permitting, her successor as Duchess of Kent would unveil a plaque to mark the occasion — and this time they’d made sure they’d got the spelling right.

When one of the American nurses from the Presbyterian Hospital in New York, who staffed what was first the Second, later the Ninety-First General Hospital during the Second World war, turned up to inspect ‘her’ plaque, she got a shock. The little tablet the officers’ and nurses’ club had erected at the base of the forecourt flagpole before making the people of Oxford a present of the hospital in September 1945 said Presbytarian!

The Churchill was the first military hospital to open in Britain following America’s entry into the war, less than two months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour, and the team of orthopaedic surgeons and senior nurses from New York were the first U.S. personnel to be stationed in Oxfordshire. Hence the decision of members of the Ridgeway Military and Aviation Research Group to roll up to the hospital on Monday in a Second World War Dodge ambulance, a GMC truck and other period U.S. military vehicles.

According to their expert on the American ‘invasion’ of Britain, Bill King, who was at the wheel of a 1943 Willis jeep, it wasn’t long before the county was teeming with Americans. Although Oxfordshire never hosted the frontline firepower of places like East Anglia, it played a backup role that was second to none.

From early in the summer of 1942 U.S. 8th Air Force C47 bombers were operating from Grove Airfield and soon American Army trucks filled with troops were rumbling in and out of Cowley Barracks on their way to more permanent bases in Southern England to prepare for the invasion of Europe.

As the number of American troops mushroomed to one-and-a-half million in the run-up to D-Day, there were infantry, artillery and tank battalions all over Oxfordshire: Adderbury, Banbury, Bodicote, Chipping Norton, Hook Norton, to name but a few. The 552nd Anti-Aircraft Battalion were billeted in Wallingford and the surrounding villages while they trained for the June offensive. The U.S. Combat Battalion were at Appleton from April until July 1944, when they went to France with the second wave of invading troops.

Probably the most daring pilots were the members of the U.S. aerial reconnaissance units, who flew from Chalgrove and Mount Farm at Berinsfield, first in Lightnings and borrowed Spitfires and Mosquitoes, later in Thunderbolts and Mustangs. With their colleagues from the RAF aerial reconnaissance unit at Benson they provided the photographs that helped guide the Allied bombers to their targets, showed how effective they had been, and formed the basis of the visual aids that contributed so much to the success of D-Day.

Apart from patching up badly wounded troops at the Churchill — the wife of the American president, Mrs Roosevelt, paid a visit in November 1942 — and other local hospitals, Oxfordshire’s key role was as a rest centre. The city’s worldwide fame as a tourist attraction made it a natural place to send Americans in need of respite from the conflict.

Eynsham Hall was one ‘Flak Home’ where American aircrews from East Anglia came to recuperate after a stint of bombing raids on Germany. The Clarendon in Cornmarket Street, now swallowed up in the Clarendon Centre, formerly one of Oxford’s premier hotels, became an American Red Cross Club with facilities that were the envy of all the other Allied servicemen and women. Even college dons did their bit to make our transatlantic visitors feel welcome.

In the garden of remembrance at Dorchester Abbey there is a modest tablet in memory of the forty airmen of the U.S. Air Force’s Seventh Photo Reconnaissance Group who lost their lives during the war, at Berinsfield a rather grander memorial to the same chaps incorporating an aircraft propellor. About three miles along the road from Nettlebed to Pangbourne another monument commemorates the fallen of the 326th Airborne Engineers, and doubtless there are others.

When the hostilities ended, it wasn’t the end of the American chapter in the history of Oxfordshire. For some places it was just the beginning. RAF Brize Norton would become an American Air Force base until 1965 as would RAF Upper Heyford and would remain so until the Americans returned it to the Ministry of Defence in 1994. Brize would continue as an RAF station and is now Britain’s major military air terminal.

*Oxford Mail* 22 January 1992

**Fraternisation and romance**

One picture came to symbolise the American ‘invasion’ of Britain during the Second World War: two GIs chatting through an open window to two English girls. Queenie Trafford sat in her wheelchair at her home in Barton. Headington, clutching a copy. ‘That,’ she said, pointing to the girl on the right, ‘is my sister Joan. She married the chap she’s holding hands with, Emerson Porterfield, and they live in Bucks County, Philadelphia. That,’ pointing to the girl on the left, ‘is my sister Joyce. She married Joseph Guarriera, the other chap, but it didn’t work out. She’s now Mrs Dailey and lives in West Virginia.’

The picture, taken at Wilton, near Salisbury, first appeared in *Picture Post*, was used on the front cover of *TV Times* in 1982 to promote the series, *We’ll Meet Again*, and surfaced again to mark the fiftieth anniversary of American involvement in the war against Hitler.

For me ‘Got any gum, chum?’ is the phrase that conjures up the arrival of the American troops in Oxford most vividly. That was what I and my pals in Headington used to shout at the GIs as they ground along the Slade to Cowley Barracks in their heavy trucks. In the early days at least, it was often followed by a pavement scramble for a packet of Wrigley’s Spearmint chewing-gum, an untold luxury in those far off days of sweet rationing.

When the Yanks tired of responding to the endless chorus of youngsters who lined their route through Oxford and the villages of Oxfordshire, we found other, more subtle, ways of extorting favours from them. A favourite trick was to wait for an American serviceman and English girl as they sauntered hand-in-hand up Shotover Hill, follow them into the bracken and stare at them until they tossed a bag of sweets or bar of chocolate in our direction. ‘Overpaid, oversexed, and over here!’ was the charge some wag levelled at the friendly forces who invaded Britain in the wake of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour and there was some truth in that.

The civic authorities expected a cultural invasion. As the *Oxford Times* put it in July 1942: ‘The ever-growing number of American troops pouring into Britain closely affects our readers for Oxford has so long been a mecca for American visitors to Britain.’ But they were not prepared for a culture shock.

In October 1942 the Mayor of Oxford rebuked local citizens for being ‘cold and standoffish to our American guests’. A year later his successor was bemoaning the rotten treatment British and other Allied troops received in comparison to the Yanks! In place of the somewhat spartan military information bureau Oxford City Council had operated from offices at the corner of Turl Street and Ship Street, the American Red Cross opened a club in the old Clarendon Hotel in Cornmarket Street.

There American servicemen who didn’t fancy a weekend in a draughty Oxford college being lectured to by elderly dons could spend their leave in more civilised surroundings: dining in the Clarendon banqueting hall, shooting pool in its ballroom, or making use of its in-house tailor, barber, or dispensary.

The famous American anthropologist, Margaret Mead, blamed the different courtship rituals of the two nations for the bewildering speed with which English girls succumbed to the advances of one-and-a-half million American servicemen with ‘fistfuls of dollars and uniforms that fitted in all the right places.’ But they weren’t the only ones who found difficulty adjusting to the invasion.

A few servicemen from the wide-open plains of the States literally lost their heads when they tried to ride home from London to bases in Oxfordshire on the roofs of railway carriages. Nobody had told them about tunnels and bridges!

Lots of romances like those of Queenie Trafford’s sisters ended in marriage, in fact nearly 7,000. On 14 August 1943 Father Maurice Beachamp, married Irene Souch of Wilkins Road to American soldier Roger Atoni of Washington DC at St. Luke’s Church, Cowley. What became of them? Or Rose Watson and Corporal Philip Brown of Pittsburgh, who celebrated what the *Oxford Mail* called Chipping Norton’s first Anglo-American wedding at the town’s Register Office on 28 March 1944? Or for that matter any of the brides from Oxfordshire who set sail to join their spouses in the States in 1946?

There it was their turn for a culture shock. Many, according to an American observer, found their new homes were not all they expected. A few even failed to recognise their husbands. Queenie Trafford’s sister, Joyce, was so sick after her voyage aboard *The Queen Mary* she didn’t eat for five days and took another thirty-seven years to pluck up the courage to revisit her family in Britain.

**A musical friendship**

A GI stationed just outside Oxford remembered a night at the American Red Cross Club at the Clarendon Hotel in Juliet Gardiner’s *Over Here — The GIs in Wartime Britain* (Collins & Brown, 1992). ‘An Englishman was playing the piano, taking requests and playing from memory such pieces as *Boop, boop, dittum, dattum, wattum, choo*\* and *Midnight Stomp*… I raised my hand and asked if he could play *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring* from J.S. Bach’s Cantata 147.

‘He turned to me with a huge smile, then began to play with such tenderness and expertise as I, small town boy from the south of the United States, had never before heard. At the end of the piece, he asked me in a halting, stammering voice if there was anything else I wanted to hear.

‘Yes!, and for the rest of the evening he played for me classical music: Chopin, Handel, Beethoven — all from memory.’ It was the beginning of a close friendship between Marshall Williams and Donald Sprinck, the organist of St. Ebbe’s Church, in the centre of Oxford, which lasted until the death of the organist and composer in 1985.

*Oxford Mail* 23 January 1992

* *Boop, boop, dittum, dattum, wattum, choo was actually the chorus to Three Little Fishes (Itty, Bitty, Poo), a nonsense song that began: ‘Down in the meadow in an itty, bitty pool, Were three little fishes and their mama fishy too!’*

**War winning ‘windows’**

The lorry driver was adamant. ‘Look here, guv,’ he said, ‘I’ve been sent down here to collect a load of windows and they’re trying to palm me off with these.’ He pointed to some bales of metal foil, then he added belligerently: ‘I’m not taking them.’ Syd Beckinsale, who had been called from his bed to deal with him, took in the situation at a glance.

He didn’t know why the Air Ministry had christened the strips of aluminium — metallised paper they dropped from the air to upset the German radar system — ‘windows’, but ‘windows’ they were and an RAF aerodrome somewhere in the south of England was going to be very unhappy if the lorry driver turned up without his load. ‘I’ll tell you what I’ll do,’ he said. ‘You take them and I’ll give you a chitty to say we’ll replace them free of charge and reimburse your travelling experiences if they’re wrong. How’s that?’

Reluctantly the lorry driver left the works of the Callender Cable Company at Erith with several bales of what he considered useless material. The incident came to Syd’s mind again when he was watching the programme on radar in the BBC Television series, *The Secret War*, and there were a lot of other stories he could tell you about what went on behind the scenes.

Although you would never have thought it to see him pottering quietly about the garden of his home at Aston, near Bampton, Becky — as he was known to friends in industry — played an important role in the struggle against the Germans in two world wars.

His grandfather earned his living helping to lay the roads of West Oxfordshire, but he advised his son to seek his fortune in South Wales, and so it was in Barry, where his father helped to build the docks, that young Sydney grew up, graduating from the local grammar school to Cardiff University, where he took first class honours in metallurgy, chemistry and geology.

In 1915 he was seconded to the Research Department at Woolwich Arsenal and there he spent the rest of the First World War helping to develop lethal devices like the No. 106 shell fuse and personally solving the problem of cracking cartridge cases, which at one time were a terrible headache for the War Ministry. ‘That’s how I came to enter the cable business,’ he said.

‘The Post Office and others were having a lot of trouble with the lead sheathing to cables cracking. Somebody said: “Old Becky’s the cracking expert,” Callender’s called me in and I was lucky enough to find the answer.’ By the outbreak of the Second World War, he was the company’s chief chemist and metallurgist.

In November 1939 the chap who had just been appointed general manager tripped, fell in the river and drowned and Syd found himself running Callender’s Erith works. His first piece of war work was on the buoyant or so-called floating cable.

The Admiralty had developed a system of cables trailed by minesweepers to explode magnetic mines, which were a great hazard to shipping, but they had to be held up by floats and weren’t one hundred per cent effective. So, Syd, the chief engineer, P.V. Hunter, and head of research, L.G. Brazier, explored the idea of a floating cable.

‘We started to develop it on a Friday and fifty-four hours later we had produced a prototype length using light ebonite cylinders interspersed with soft rubber discs. On the Monday morning the Chief Inspector of Naval Ordnance came to see us test it in our tanks and in the river.

‘The same week the Admiralty instructed us to go into full production. We got £2,500 each tax-free as a reward for developing it. Later we substituted cork for the ebonite and found a method of expanding the rubber discs to form a tight joint. Basically, the same cable remained in production throughout the war.

‘Believe it or not, the timber for the huge wooden drums on which we wound the 525 and 325-yard lengths came from Aston in West Oxfordshire. Elm was in very short supply at the time, but I happened to know that William Baughan and his son had been felling a lot of timber and sawing it into planks and bought the lot off them. Later in the war I ordered a lot of elm slats from a firm of London timber merchants and found they had been supplied by Elliott’s of Faringdon.’

While Syd and his colleagues were still developing the floating cable, he received a phone call one morning from a Mr Sayers at the Air Ministry, with whom he had had dealings when Mr Sayers was an electrical engineer with the London Electricity Board. ‘You keep stocks of aluminium-metallised-paper for screening super-tension cables, don’t you? He asked. ‘That’s right,’ said Syd. ‘I’m coming over to see you,’ Mr Sayers said.

The same afternoon he and Syd ran off a trial run of metal foil strips for the RAF to test. The following morning Syd received another call from Mr Sayers. ‘We tried them last night,’ he said. ‘They were completely successful. Can you go into full production?’ Callender’s chief engineer, G.W.T. Grieve, devised a rotary cutting machine, and within weeks thirty women at the works were doing nothing but produce metal strips. ‘Window’ was probably a term invented to prevent careless talk about a valuable secret weapon in the war effort.

That was certainly true of the third commission Callender’s undertook. It was officially known as HAIS cable, but was to take its place in the history books as PLUTO, the pipeline under the ocean. Siemens developed it to carry petrol across the Channel on D-Day, but they hadn’t the machinery to provide the mileage or the capacity to store it, and so it was on Callender’s sports field that the thirty-foot by six-foot diameter stacks piled up awaiting the arrival of the cable-laying ships.

Of the 650 miles they produced only ninety were actually used. The other 560 were sold to an ingenious scrap merchant, who cut it up into lengths, built a tower, hung the lengths inside, and set fire to them, then pulled the wire strands out of the top and the melted lead out of the bottom. But that was after the war.

In the run-up to D-Day Callender’s got another urgent call from the Admiralty. They had suddenly discovered the sea around the Normandy beaches was too shallow for minesweepers and wanted three-dozen sets of smaller diameter floating cables, which smaller craft could trail behind them.

‘They said that they must have delivery in three weeks and our people worked day and night to meet their deadline. They were really keen. It’s the only time I’ve ever seen women running to and from the lavatory. They finished the cables in two weeks and I got a personal letter of thanks from Churchill.’

But the feat of which Syd remained proudest was carrying electricity under the Oxfordshire countryside at Broadwell, near Burford. ‘Because of the risk to aircraft coming into land they wanted to bury a three-mile stretch of 132,000-volt overhead cable. Now, at the time the highest voltage of underground cable made was 66,000-volts. But I put my most skilled workmen on the job and they succeeded in doubling it. It is still cited in the textbooks as a remarkable leap forward in the progress of cable making. It’s amazing what you can do when you have to.’

Anthony Wood Column *Oxford Mail* 9 February 1977

**Wartime jam supremo**

Without knowing it every man, woman and child who sat down to tea in wartime Britain had reason to bless — or more likely curse — the name of John Nowell Linton Myres.

For some he will go down in history as the man who put early Anglo-Saxon England into clearer perspective through his painstaking study of the broken pots its inhabitants left behind. But from 1943-5 the shy Oxford scholar had influence over the eating habits of the entire nation as head of fruit and vegetable products at the Ministry of Food. From an office in New College, he controlled Britain’s jam rations with a team of young ladies who, he later confided, ‘were inevitably known as the jam tarts, although I am certain their morals were unimpeachable’.

Struggling to find enough preserves to top the scrape of butter with which the nation smeared its bread, he must more than once have echoed the words that other shy Oxford don, Lewis Carroll, immortalised in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*: ‘the rule is — jam tomorrow and jam yesterday, but never jam today.’

But the pressures of his wartime job and the insight it gave him into the need for that wartime exhortation, Dig for Victory, did have one bonus. When he cycled home to the £2,000 manor house in Kennington that he had bought for his family in 1938, he had the perfect excuse for rolling up his sleeves and indulging in his favourite spare time hobby: keeping pigs and chickens and growing fruit and vegetables.

Being an archaeologist, he kept everything of interest he dug up and that in a nutshell is how three cardboard boxes containing thirteen kilos of pottery among other finds found their way to the Oxfordshire County Museum Service when he died in 1989 at the age of eighty-six.

Being an expert on pottery Dr Lauren Gilmour, the Curator of the Museum of Oxford, got the job of sifting through them and gradually it dawned on her. What she was looking at was far more important than she thought. Those cardboard boxes contained the only known archaeological evidence of the thousand-year history of Kennington, a community that has grown since the First World War from a hamlet of 101 souls into a sprawling dormitory of Oxford with a population of 5,000.

The son of Oxford’s Wykeham Professor of Ancient History, John Myres became interested in archaeology while he was an undergraduate at New College and one of his first excavations was at his parents’ home on Boars Hill, where in 1924 he uncovered an Iron Age settlement.

Two years later Sir Mortimer Wheeler, the flamboyant archaeologist who was later to become famous as a television personality, asked him to excavate the amphitheatre at the Roman town of Carleon in South Wales. But he did not like the way his boss presented his findings and expressed his displeasure with a passion which surprised colleagues who thought he wouldn’t say boo to a goose.

At the end of a distinguished university career he demonstrated his determination to stand by what he thought was right with even greater vigour when he resigned from his post as Bodley’s Librarian in 1966. He thought Oxford University’s plan to move the books from the Indian Institute at the bottom of Broad Street and turn it into university offices was ridiculous and, though subsequent events proved him right, he never entered the Bodleian Library again.

Instead, he completed the work on Anglo-Saxon pottery he had begun in the 1930s. He also continued to cultivate his garden until old age forced him to give up, and to turn up the clues to the past of Kennington most of us would have thought were bits of stone and chucked on the rubbish heap.

It is thanks to his careful sifting of the topsoil builders dumped in his garden during the Second World war when they were constructing the Kennington Cold Store for the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food that we know Kennington was, almost certainly, the site of one of thirty-one Roman pottery kilns in Oxfordshire, an industry as important to the local economy as the car industry in the twentieth century.

*Oxford Mail* 4 September 1990

**4 — Oxfordshire and D-Day (40 years on)**

**Introduction**

The Falklands Campaign has reminded us there are no heroes in war, only men and women trying to do a job with death looking over their shoulder. I don’t know who laid out the vast military cemetery at Bayeux, but the effect is heart-stopping. The gravestones kept white by the application of chemical cleaning agents stand eternally to attention like ghosts on some purgatorial parade ground.

There is no sound of marching feet. The manicured greensward in between yields silently like a sponge as you move from slab to slab reading the names, the ranks and the ages. Hardly a soul is over forty, only a handful in their thirties. Most are in their early twenties or late teens. Some are only seventeen. One at Caen, they say, only sixteen.

‘They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old…’ but in attempting to tell the story of the most spectacular cross-Channel invasion since 1066 it is well to remember. When Clementine joined her husband, Winston Churchill for a few moments before going to bed on the eve of D-Day it was that thought that was uppermost in our wartime leader’s mind.

‘Do you realise,’ he told her, ‘by the time you wake up in the morning 20,000 men may have been killed?’ And he was talking only of the Allied combatants, not the enemy nor the hundreds of civilians both sides of the Channel who lost their lives during the campaign.

This is the story of the survivors — in particular the Oxfordshire survivors — and in telling it I am grateful to many people, from the Automobile Association who took me to the landing beaches, to Bill Chiddington, the secretary of the Oxford branch of the Parachute Regimental Association, who arranged a lot of the interviews. It is also an attempt to give my children, who are not much older now than I was on D-Day, an idea of the significance of the Normandy campaign. Let us hope nothing like it ever happens again.

**Invasion that never happened**

A few days before the fall of France in June 1940 Britain’s wartime leader, Winston Churchill, and the French Commander-in-Chief, General Weygand, met for the last time. As they gloomily surveyed the prospect of halting the German blitzkrieg, which had already engulfed Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark and Norway, Weygand remarked: ‘I must admit you have a very good anti-tank obstacle.’

The huge guns and massive concrete formation of the Maginot Line, stretching along France’s eastern frontier from Luxembourg to Switzerland might pose Hitler no problems. He simply drove his crack Panzers round them through the supposedly impenetrable forests of the Ardenne Mountains, but there was no way his armoured divisions could complete the rout of the British Expeditionary Force without crossing the Channel.

That narrow strip of water, across which the Admiralty ferried 233,039 British and 112,456 Allied troops to safety between May 26 and June 3 that year, proved crucial to the winning and losing of the Second World War. It was a psychological as well as a physical barrier. The Führer could have seized Dunkirk before his vanquished foes made their escape.

But so convinced was he that that Britain would give up the fight without further struggle that neither he nor his generals had made any plans for an invasion, and when at last they started thinking about Operation Sea Lion in July 1940 fears of what Britain’s planes and ships might do to their hastily assembled fleet of 1,910 barges and 1,600 motorboats, 168 transports and 419 tugs and trawlers dominated their minds.

So, before they crossed the Channel, Goering’s Luftwaffe was given the job of destroying the Royal Air Force. Throughout the summer Heinkel and Messerschmidt battled it out with Hurricane and Spitfire for the supremacy of the air, and it was the loss of the Battle of Britain that led Hitler first to put off, then postpone Operation Sea Lion indefinitely.

Instead, he launched his Panzer divisions against Russia in June 1941 prompting the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, to call on Britain to invade Europe to relieve pressure on the hard-pressed Red Army. Churchill refused. If Hitler hesitated to hurl his vastly more efficient fighting machine across the Channel, he wasn’t going to prejudice Britain’s war effort by a premature strike with the puny forces at his disposal.

It wasn’t simply the Soviet role in the destruction and dismemberment of Poland that bugged the British premier nor the thought that Stalin had stood idly by when Hitler threatened to overrun the Allies in 1940 after Dunkirk. The Russians, he wrote, didn’t understand ‘the nature of the amphibious operation necessary to disembark and maintain an invasion army on a well-defended hostile coast’.

Not only was sea and air superiority vital. A vast armada of specially constructed landing craft was needed to ferry the troops and their equipment across the Channel and plant them safely on French soil. The war continued elsewhere and when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour in December 1941, precipitating American involvement, not only Stalin was pressing for the opening of a Second Front but President Roosevelt too.

Eventually Churchill managed to persuade his reluctant allies that an assault on the soft underbelly of the German crocodile — the reptile he used in the sketch he drew for Stalin — made better sense than a full-frontal attack.

Before General Montgomery won his famous victory in the desert at El Alamein and General Eisenhower invaded North Africa in the autumn of 1942 there was a brief foray across the Channel that demonstrated graphically the hazards of amphibious warfare. On 19 August 1942 6,100 Canadian and British troops tried and failed to attack Dieppe, losing more than 3,500 men and 106 aircraft in the attempt.

The exercise persuaded Hitler to deflect seven divisions and half his air power from the Russian front, providing much needed relief for the Red Army at a critical time. But Churchill could see only the spectre of another bloodbath and while the military experts, who had been at work since Dunkirk, perfected their plans to avoid that he was engaged in an almost constant battle with Britain’s impatient Russian and American allies.

Toward the end of 1942 the tide of the Second World War began to turn. Backs to the wall, the Russians finally halted the progress of the Nazi fighting machine at Stalingrad, capturing 108,000 German prisoners including twenty-four generals in February 1943.

At Casablanca in January Churchill, under pressure from Roosevelt, had given the green light for work to start on Operation Roundup, the first European invasion plan. At Washington in May he agreed in principle that Operation Overlord, the new code name for the cross-Channel invasion, should take place in a year’s time.

To confuse the enemy intelligence gathering agents there were various diversionary activities. But any spies at work in Britain in 1943 and 1944 cannot have failed to observe the portents. The number of American troops on British soil went up from 238,000 to one-and-a-half million. There was a similar build-up of British troops, an influx of Canadians, not to mention Poles, Czechs, French, Norwegians and Dutch, all eager to have a crack at Hitler.

Every town and village in southern England seemed to have its own airstrip. Every inlet along the south coast hid a boat, and the countryside was stuffed with military vehicles. Oxonians with long memories will remember the columns of tanks and artillery along Oxford’s yet to open Southern Bypass that disappeared overnight. Nobody knew where they were bound.

Lieutenant-General Frederick Morgan, who masterminded the planning of D-Day, said: ‘If the enemy obtain as much as forty-eight-hours warning of the location of the assault area the chances of success are small and any longer warning spells certain defeat.’ The security blanket was total and heaven help anyone who breached it. An American major-general who raised his voice in Claridge’s Hotel was on his way home in twenty-four hours.

There were the inevitable accidents. At Slapton Sands German E-Boats chanced on an American rehearsal for D-Day and sank two landing craft, drowning 700 men, among them ten officers carrying papers that could have given the game away. But after a frantic search they recovered the bodies and Hitler remained in ignorance.

The Führer’s hopes of repelling an Allied attack rested on the German equivalent of the Maginot Line, the Atlantic Wall. To guard himself against surprise invasion he ordered the construction of a massive line of fortifications along the Channel coast from the Netherlands to the Bay of Biscay.

He designed the bomb-proof bunkers and pillboxes with their strategic gun emplacements, backed by a formidable array of anti-tank and anti-landing craft devices, minefields, booby traps and barbed wire. But fortunately for the Allies the sheer length of the coastline made it impossible to build the Atlantic Wall to the same impregnable standard along its entire length.

So, they concentrated their defences where they thought an attack was most likely and that in effect meant the Channel ports. Throughout 1943 according to General von Blumentritt Hitler was in a constant state of agitation. ‘At one moment he expected an invasion in Norway, at another moment in Holland, then near the Somme or Normandy or Brittany, in Portugal, in Spain, in the Adriatic.’ But, according to the General, in 1944 he was the first to realise Normandy was the most likely spot.

He recognised the Allies needed a port as large as Dover which they could protect with a short frontline and he felt Cherbourg best met their requirements. What he didn’t bargain for was that the Allies would outflank him in the same way that earlier in the war the Panzers divisions had outflanked the French at the Maginot Line. Instead of trying to capture one of Hitler’s heavily defended fortresses in the Atlantic Wall they brought their own port across the Channel with them.

If you stand on the hill above Arromanches you can still see the remains of the vast concrete hulks. They were meant to provide safe anchorage for the Allied supply ships for eighteen months: scores of years later they are still there defying the elements, silent testimony to the effort, ingenuity and thoroughness that went into the planning of D-Day.

The evacuation of Dunkirk made Churchill aware of the need for specially designed landing craft that could transport men and their machines across the Channel. The disastrous raid on Dieppe proved his point that artificial harbours would be necessary if the Allies were to maintain the momentum of their attack. In 1942 he told his backroom boffins: ‘Let me have the best solution worked out. Don’t argue the matter. The difficulties will argue themselves.’

The answer they came up with was the Mulberry. Its principal feature was an outer sea wall which could be a floated across the Channel in sections called Phoenixes, then sunk. Once in place on the seabed they provided the breakwaters behind which the deep draught ships could drop anchor and unload their supplies. Nearer to the shore a motley of elderly merchant ships driven onto the sands, then blown up, provided breakwaters for the smaller, shallow-draught supply craft.

The plan was for two landings to take place on 6 June 1944, one in Normandy called Overlord and one in the south of France called Anvil. But squabbles among the Allied commanders over strategy, the unexpectedly heavy resistance they met at Anzio in their attempt to speed up the capture of Rome and the loss of precious landing craft at Slapton Sands in April led to the postponement of Anvil until August.

There were similar disagreements about the most effective deployment of the Allied Air Forces in the run-up to D-Day before the bombing campaigns to paralyse Normandy began in April. In a little over six weeks, they flew 200,000 sorties and dropped 195,000 tons of bombs.

They destroyed most of Normandy’s railway engines, rolling stock, bridges and marshalling yards. They neutralised all German airfields within 130 miles. They immobilised seventy-four of the enemy’s ninety-two coastal radar stations. They blew up tanks, ammunition dumps and supply depots, and in between they kept up a constant bombardment of the dangerous new cross-Channel missile sites being built near Calais.

In the process nearly 12,000 airmen lost their lives and 1,953 aircraft were shot down, but by the time King George VI and Churchill filed into St.Paul’s School, London, on 15 May 1944 for their D-Day briefing the mood was buoyant and optimistic.

**invasion that did take place**

The briefing for one of the most important battles in history took place in the school’s model room. Sitting on a hard, narrow bench King George VI and Winston Churchill heard the Supreme Commander of D-Day, General Eisenhower, explain the broad strategy, then the ground force commander, General Montgomery, started spelling out the details.

The Americans were to land at Utah and Omaha beaches on the Contentin Peninsula with the aim of cutting off and capturing Cherbourg. The British would land at Gold, Juno and Sword beaches between the River Orne and Port-en-Bessin with the object of capturing Caen and Bayeux, Normandy’s vital communication centres.

Everything was planned from the huge concrete barges that would maintain supplies of petrol until the pipeline under the ocean started functioning from Cherbourg to the contraceptives the infantrymen slipped over their rifles to prevent salt water entering the barrels.

The troops who had been exercising in secret all over southern England converged on the south coast at the beginning of June and sat packed in their assault ships and landing craft ready to go. But the weather started to deteriorate so the Germans didn’t pay as much attention as they should have done to the constant stream of coded signals the BBC was putting out to the French Resistance.

Even when the forecast of a forty-eight-hour break in the weather enabled Eisenhower twenty-four-hours late to utter the fateful words: ‘Okay, let’s go,’ there didn’t believe the invasion was about to happen. The response of one German staff officer to the coded message: ‘The dice are on the table. It is hot in Suez’ the BBC put out after announcing the Fall of Rome on June 5 was: ‘Does anyone think the enemy is stupid enough to announce its arrival over the radio?’

Three hours later bombs and paratroopers were raining down on France and behind a flotilla of minesweepers the invasion armada was chugging across the Channel through distinctly choppy water at a steady four to five knots.

At dawn two midget submarines, which had been waiting patiently if uncomfortably at the bottom of the sea for forty-eight hours because of the postponement, surfaced at the entrance of Juno and Sword beaches. Their job was to mark the point where the amphibious tanks should enter the water.

Then the warships began their ferocious bombardment of the enemy’s shore positions. The Germans should have been ready to retaliate. Allied paratroopers had been on French soil for nearly seven hours. Reports had been pouring in from German monitoring stations of a massive build-up of ships in the Channel since the small hours, and there was the unmistakable evidence of the bombs raining down on Normandy.

But such was the success of Allied counter-intelligence suggesting that the main thrust would come at Calais, such was the strength of the Führer’s own conviction that the Pas de Calais was the target, that some commentators believe the Germans lost the Battle of Normandy before it began. In Berlin, Field Marshal Keitel refused to wake up Hitler and, while the German High Command dithered, their commanders in the field were helplessly waiting for orders.

Lieutenant-General Feuchtinger actually decided to pitch the 170 tanks and armoured vehicles of his Twenty-first Panzer Division against the Orne bridgehead, won by the Sixth Airborne Division and now being grimly defended with seriously depleted forces, but before he could move into action he received orders staying his hand and it was the same all along the battlefront.

In a lot of cases the invading troops had greater problems coping with the weather. Whipped up by strong winds, the rising tide made it difficult for the sappers and naval frogmen to clear enough gaps in the booby traps and mines peppering the sands. In many places it was too rough to launch the amphibious tanks or they climbed the ramps of the landing craft too far out from the beach and sank like stones.

The infantry had to rely on Major General Hobart’s ‘funnies’ to clear the way for them. These tanks, fitted with special devices like flame-throwers, launchers to fire ‘flying dustbins’ of high explosive from close range at enemy bunkers and pillboxes, flails to beat a path across dangerous minefields, bridges to cross ditches and canvas roadways to enable them to cross treacherous sands were to prove invaluable in the assault.

The first troops to land by sea were the Americans on Omaha and Utah beaches. The easterly movement of the tide meant that H-Hour fell earliest at the western end of the front about 6.30am. The heavy bombardment from sea and air had no serious impact on the German gun emplacements, but the first landing craft at Utah hit a mine. As a result, the others landed 1,00 yards south of the intended spot and there the fortifications were weaker.

Within minutes twenty-eight Sherman tanks were pounding the German positions. The GIs, led by fifty-seven-year-old Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Junior, rapidly took control and by the end of the morning they were pushing inland.

Their success contrasted sharply with that of the battle-hardened veterans at Omaha. Landing up to 1,000 yards from their target, they found themselves facing the toughest artillery of a well-defended beach. To add to their difficulties only five of their amphibious tanks reached the shore, and by mid-morning the successive waves of invading troops, living and dead, were packed like sardines on a narrow seven-yard-wide ridge of shale that provided their only cover.

In the confusion Colonel Taylor was heard to say: ‘Two kinds of people are staying on this beach: the dead and those who are going to die. Let’s get out of here.’ But the price was high. Only forty-three Americans died and sixty-three were wounded at Utah. At Omaha there were more than 2,000 casualties in the first hour.

There was a similar if less marked contrast in the fortunes of the British invasion forces. It was broad daylight by the time Fiftieth Division reached Gold Beach, followed by the Seventh Armoured Division, the famous Desert Rats, but the enemy was slow to react.

A unit of the crack 352nd German Infantry which was giving the Americans so much trouble at Omaha held out against the First Hampshires for several hours. The other regiments met less opposition and by mid-morning the Desert Rats were mopping up before joining the push to Bayeux: D-Day objective of the Gold landing force.

The Juno beaches, flanking the small fishing village of Consuelles, posed greater problems for General Crerar’s Third Canadian Division, who were anxious to avenge the 3,000 losses at Dieppe. They went in twenty minutes after the British on Gold to give the tide time to cover the rocks (which turned out to be seaweed!) and found themselves facing some of the most formidable defences along the front. By sheer determination they won through and by mid-morning were pushing inland.

At Sword, fifty miles up Channel from Utah, British warships engaged the big German battery at Le Havre, which was in range of the most easterly of the Allied landing beaches and the men of the Eighth Infantry Brigade were soon engaged in fierce hand-to-hand fighting along the promenade. On their eastern flank one section of the First Commando Brigade set off to link with up with the men of the Sixth Airborne Division, grimly hanging on to the Orne bridgehead.

Meanwhile, other crack commando groups were trying to plug the gaps between the invasion beaches. The job of the Fourth Commando Brigade marines was to close the four-mile gap between Juno and Sword by a pincer movement, but though the shoreline was too rocky and shallow for full frontal invasion the seaside resorts at either end were heavily fortified and without tank support it proved impossible to take them.

That failure could have proved fatal to Operation Overlord — German artillery of the dreaded wenty-First Panzer Division occupied the ridge above — had Rommel not gone home to Ulm on the Danube for his wife’s birthday, convinced the weather was against an invasion. Hitler was asleep in Berlin and nobody dared wake him. Worst of all, nobody dared take decisive action without his permission.

Immediately he heard, Rommel tried to act but Hitler remained convinced the Allies were about to mount another, bigger invasion across the Straits of Dover and refused to move his Fifteenth Army. Behind the Pas de Calais were the sites from which he would launch his first flying bombs against southern England on June 13. He believed they would win him the war. That part of the coast must be defended at all costs.

Well over 130,000 men had landed by sea by the night of June 6, 75,000 on the British beaches, 57,500 on the American ones. Some 7,000 British and 15,500 American paratroopers had dropped from the skies, and, for all Churchill’s fears, the death toll of the biggest amphibious operation in military history was surprisingly moderate. The achievements of the Allied landing forces did not measure up to their commanders’ ambitions, but at least the majority had lived to fight another day.

The British forces liberated Bayeux the following day and linked up with the American forces south of Port-en-Bessin, but it required heavy artillery fire to hold down the Twenty-First Panzers east of the Orne and the Americans met equally fierce resistance on the road to Cherbourg at the other end of the frontline. Their slow progress meant the rapid functioning of the artificial Mulberry harbours at Arromanches and Omaha was vital if the Allied invasion was to maintain momentum and their installation began on June 7, D-Day+1.

On the ominous D-Day+13 the worst summer gale in the Channel for eighty years badly mauled the British Mulberry and before it blew itself out two days later completely wrecked the American one. The damage, which took days to repair, underlined the importance of taking Cherbourg and on June 27 the remains of the defending garrison at last surrendered.

If the advance was slow, it was inevitable. By the end of June, the Allies had thirty-two divisions to pit against the Germans’ twenty and Hitler refused to listen to the demands of his most experienced commanders, Rommel and Von Rundstedt.

Over a month later than planned on July 9 the British and Canadians entered ruined Caen and planted their flags on Carpiquet airfield. A week later the Americans took St. Lo. The crucial breakthrough came on July 25, when the Wehrmacht’s superbly drilled forces finally splintered under an American 6,000-yard assault. Instead of retreating and regrouping, on August 4 Hitler ordered his horrified generals to make one last concerted attack. The Allies closed at Falaise and the pocket became a slaughter-ground. It was, the Führer later said, the worst day of his life.

**Oxford’s top-secret role**

Looking back, it is hard to appreciate the sheer brainpower and physical effort that went into making D-Day a success. The world has moved on so fast it takes an effort to remember that in the 1940s there were no computers, no sophisticated electronics, no space satellites, no suborbital spy-planes to keep a watch on the world and monitor enemy troop movements. The people responsible for piecing together the truly incredible back-up information on which the invasion of Normandy was based had often to rely on what seem now distinctly Heath Robinson intelligence gathering methods.

At the centre of the web, in charge of the Theatre Intelligence Section, was the Oxford don, John Austin, who rose without military training from the rank of captain to lieutenant-colonel and after the war became White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy. He carried the whole battle order in his head, subjected generals, admirals and air marshals to the same searching examination he had done his pupils at Magdalen College, and believed in ‘letting the donkey workers work’ but keeping a constant eye on the results.

It was the unfailing acumen with which he interpreted the significance of those results that proved so vital to Lieutenant-General Frederick Morgan and his staff in planning the strategy of Operation Overlord. The ‘donkey workers’ ranged from humble village tradesmen in Europe, who risked their lives to gather small but vital pieces of information under German noses, to ULTRA, the German code-breaking establishment at Bletchley Park. ‘Tall, thin young men,’ a person who worked there told me, ‘would turn up from mental asylums, do absolutely brilliant work for six months, then it would all become too much for them and they would return to their asylums again.’

To this day nobody has succeeded in uncovering the full extent of the intelligence gathering operations at national level, let alone in Oxfordshire. Who for instance knows about the secret code work that went on at Mansfield College? But thanks to the help of a group of men and women who prefer to remain anonymous and Donald McLachlan’s book, *Room 39* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1968), I am able to tell the story of the Inter-Services Topographical Department — ISD — which had its headquarters at a neighbouring Oxford college.

At the outbreak of the Second World War Rear-Admiral John Godfrey, who was Director of Naval Intelligence from 1939 to 1942, was not slow to appreciate the importance of topographical information in warfare. As navigation officer aboard *HMS Euryalus*, he had watched the landings at Gallipoli during the First World War and knew what a heavy price the Allies paid for their ignorance of the terrain and local facilities. Yet seemingly the services had learnt nothing from that debacle. The file on Finland in Room 39 at the Admiralty, the headquarters of the Naval Intelligence Department, contained just two yellowing newspaper cuttings.

Admiral Godfrey turned for help to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and by good fortune found that the Professor of Geography at Oxford was Lieutenant-Colonel Kenneth Mason, a brilliant military surveyor who appreciated immediately what he was after and with great enthusiasm set about providing it. By March 1940 Arthur Frederick Wells, Fellow in Classics at University College, was working at the Admiralty as a naval lieutenant with the daunting task of combing every possible source from trade journals to steamship company files, and the School of Geography at Oxford was churning out reports on all sorts of possible target areas like the inland waterways of Germany that were to prove vital.

Hitler’s invasion of Norway in April 1940 helped to rub home the woeful inadequacy of Allied intelligence sources and three days before the evacuation of Dunkirk what was to become the ISTD moved into a converted lavatory alongside Room 39. In charge was Marine Lieutenant-Colonel Sam Bassett, an ebullient character with great skill at manipulating people and getting things done.

His No. 2 was Freddie Wells, who supervised the work of the department with wit and charm but whose attention to detail was meticulous. ‘He never let anyone forget that a mistake at our end could cost lives at the front.’ Shortly they were joined by Captain Law, a surveyor just back from Singapore, lent by the Admiralty Hydrographer, who recognised the importance of such skills as building up an accurate picture of the invasion coastline.

The bombing of London was intensifying. After a brief spell in an emergency office in the Edgware Road the Department moved to rooms in the School of Geography on 10 October 1940. The Army and the Air Force appointed officers to join the naval officers already working for the department. Suddenly the Admiralty had to find room for an extra 33 technical and clerical staff.

Despite protests from the Unitarian seat of learning the university gave them Manchester College in Mansfield Road and there Freddie Wells became editor-in-chief of a vast open plan office. ‘They weren’t only compiling information for D-Day,’ recalled one of the senior staff who worked there. ‘Until we set up our South-East Asian section in New Delhi the whole global war was being done from Oxford. The place was swarming at the end. There must have been all of 700 people working in the department including a lot of Americans, French, Norwegians, Dutch and other nationalities.’

The college hall was divided up into countries. Naval officers were responsible for coasts and harbours, Army officers took care of military installations, bridges, railways, etc. Air Force officers looked after aerial reconnaissance. Between their desks flitted experts in every sphere of human endeavour from the state of the economy in Normandy to the bugs to watch out for in Burma. The vital information they gathered, then boiled down into quintessential, immediately digestible documents under the direction of Freddie Wells was only the tip of the iceberg.

The Wilberforce Hotel in Queen Street set aside ten rooms every day until 4pm. To them came a constant stream of refugees from Hitler who might be able to add to the Section’s knowledge of a particular country or field of information, and from there they went discreetly by taxi to Manchester College, where a team of Section experts were waiting to pick their brains under the watchful eye of MI5, the secret service organisation which had its headquarters at Blenheim Palace. You had to check: some of them might have been enemy agents!

An interrogator recalled: ‘The work might not sound exciting, but to find a substitute for a spy on your doorstep, indeed someone informed in far greater detail than most spies you could recruit abroad, was exciting, and by the end of the war the Department had no less than 7,000 such “spies” on its register.’

Meanwhile the New Bodleian Library at the corner of Broad Street and Parks Road, built before the war but yet to open to readers, provided a home on its ground floor for the most extraordinary photographic library. Early in the war Sam Bassett and Freddie Wells had the idea of appealing through the newspapers and over the radio for foreign holiday snapshots. Some ten million poured in — the BBC received 30,000 in one post alone — and these now rested on H floor at New Bodley along with a growing collection of maps, architect’s drawings, traveller’s guides and other material that might yield vital topographical clues.

It was this information and scale models and charts other staff at Manchester College assembled from it that enabled troops like Major Howard and the men of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry to carry out daring exploits such as the assault on Pegasus Bridge. With scissors and paste other staff at Manchester College were gradually building up what was to prove one of the most useful aids in getting the Allied troops ashore in Normandy on D-Day.

Every day tin boxes of photographs would arrive from RAF Benson, the headquarters of the Mustang pilots who risked their lives taking continuous sea-level pictures of the enemy coastline from Norway to the Bay of Biscay. The staff would sort them into the correct order and stick them together to form an accurate panorama. Then they would ink in the vital landmarks to enable commanders and coxswains to get their bearings as they homed in on the invasion beaches.

The chap responsible recalled that a few weeks before D-Day they took a few master-copies up to Norfolk House in Westminster to show the top brass what they were up to. General Eisenhower was so impressed he immediately ordered 40,000 copies. They had to ship sixty WRNS to Oxford to work on the project, commandeer the only holiday postcard printing machine in the country capable of reproducing pictures in a strip and for days on end that machine worked round the clock.

‘Then of course the whole damned lot, some 50,000 of them, had to be labelled and bagged and sealed. I don’t think any of us got much sleep until the job was done.’ That was an ‘in-house’ operation. Admiral Godfrey’s wife, Margaret, who did a similar liaison job in Oxford for Colonel Bassett to what Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, did for her husband in London, looked after the bulk of the printing.

Twice a week she would pass on to the Oxford University Press in Walton Street huge orders for maps, reports, handbooks and other printed matter. All had to be produced in the utmost secrecy. The late Charles Batey, who as Assistant Printer to the University was in charge of an operation that resulted in 170 million maps alone, liked to point out to dubious Secret Service men that security presented no problems to the OUP. The staff had been printing four or five million examination papers a year for many years without the slightest leakage.

Nonetheless, his boss, the legendary John Johnson, took no chances with the most sensitive documents. He slept with them under the bed in his office.

But while Colonel Bassett relied heavily on the flood of information flowing in and out of Manchester College, he knew it didn’t present the complete picture. In the winter before D-Day he himself went ashore in Normandy armed with an infrared torch and a trowel to satisfy a sceptical Admiral Ramsay that the beaches were firm enough to land on.

**Monty’s inside man**

Sir Edgar Williams, the historian and former Warden of Rhodes House, had the good luck to brief General Montgomery before his first great victory in the desert against Rommel at Alam Halfa and thereafter was never far from his side. So inevitably he was one of the team of bright young men Monty brought with him when he moved into the headmaster’s study of his old school, St. Paul’s, to prepare for D-Day at the beginning of 1944.

Sir Edgar said: ‘In a way history has been insufficiently grateful to Freddie Morgan (the Lieutenant-General who drew up the original plans of the D-Day invasion) and John Austin (the Oxford philosopher who ran the theatre intelligence section over Peter Robinson’s shop in Oxford Street). Monty insisted on a broader front, a bigger punch, and therefore the delivery of more landing craft. That was why the invasion took place a month later than it was supposed to do. But General Morgan and John Austin had got it all together in so far as they could and we simply took over. We inherited their plan and translated it into action.’

Once Monty made up his mind, he could be fearfully dogmatic, but the thirty-one-year-old Brigadier had two advantages in dealing with him. One was he was a don, a civilian in uniform to whom the ‘three-bags-full-sir’ discipline of the Forces was alien. The other was that he was supposed to represent the enemy. ‘I had to play the devil’s advocate. I was supposed to put myself in the enemy’s position, to evaluate the situation from their point of view and say how I thought they might react.

‘Monty was the best listener I’ve ever come across. This extraordinary little Jack Russell terrier, as General Rees called him, would devote his complete attention to you and he wouldn’t let go until he’d finished with you. So, to brief him was an extremely satisfying experience. He was such a good professional soldier that if there was something you didn’t understand, some scrap of information you couldn’t make sense of, he was onto it in a flash and more often than not he spotted what it meant. So, you came out of a briefing with him feeling you knew more than when you went in.

‘I maintain intelligence is always out of date. It’s always spasmodic and it’s always suspect as a simple result of the way it’s gathered. So, the first thing you’ve got to do in intelligence is own up when you’re wrong. That of course was something that was quite foreign to Monty because he never owned up when he was wrong! But I think he got it in the end.

‘What it boiled down to was better the half-truth on time than the full truth too late because chaps were getting killed as a result of the decisions you were making. Monty’s belief was that you must kill as economically as possible. You mustn’t waste men’s lives unnecessarily in battle and that of course was what good intelligence — and it was good intelligence thanks to ULTRA (the enemy code decrypting system) — enabled him to do.’

Given the size and complexity of the operation, Sir Edgar considered the planning of D-Day went remarkably smoothly ‘until just before the invasion when national anxieties began to show themselves’. In fact, so smooth was it in the run-up to D-Day that ‘the Master,’ as Montgomery was known, sent his aides on a public relations exercise. ‘I went and worked on the nightshift at a place near Chester that made jerry-cans.

‘I wandered around in uniform being not particularly useful and I remember one night I stopped to talk to a girl on the line. She replied in a very educated voice and like a fool I asked her what she was doing there. “Before I came here,” she replied, “I was matron of a girls’ school and now I make the best jerry-cans in this factory.” I thought: How ridiculous. Here I am supposed to boost their morale, and here they are boosting mine.’

Sir Edgar was at Admiral Ramsay’s headquarters in Portsmouth on D-Day, though he did manage to see how the landings were going by hitching a lift ‘quite illegally’ in a reconnaissance aircraft. But soon he was able to drive from end to end of the invasion beaches in a jeep and report back to the ULTRA people at Bletchley how the war was going and how useful their code cracking was proving in the battle for Normandy.

In retrospect he realised the reason the conquest took so long was the British, Canadian and American troops simply couldn’t match the best German divisions as a fighting machine — and without control of the air and the sea it might not have come when it did. ‘But there is one thing I did learn as a civilian in uniform, warfare is a matter of resolution —willpower — and whatever his faults and failings that implacable little man Montgomery couldn’t admit the possibility that he wasn’t going to win.’

**Puzzling crosswords**

The answer to a clue in the *Daily Telegraph* crossword on 2 May 1944 was Utah. On May 22 it was Omaha. On May 27 Overlord. On May 30 Mulberry. On June 1 Neptune. The military bigwigs poring over their favourite newspaper at Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces were thunderstruck. The damned chap must be a spy, giving away the code-names of the D-Day invasion.

But Lieutenant- General Frederick Morgan refused to take their protests seriously. Even in the unlikely event that they were right, he pointed out, drawing attention to the fact would only aggravate the situation\*. Lady Morgan sat in the drawing room of the house in North Oxford where she had lived since the death of her husband seventeen years ago, savouring the memory.

‘Do you believe in telepathy?’ she asked me, putting down her teacup. ‘Freddie and I both believed very strongly in telepathy. It was one of our ways of communicating after he had his strokes and lost the powers of speech. We both thought all those people working away at Norfolk House on D-Day were bound to create vibrations, and if the poor compiler of the *Daily Telegraph* crossword happened to pick them up well, it was hardly surprising, was it?’

General Morgan never knew, so Lady Morgan could not say why he got the job of masterminding the invasion of Europe. His great friend, Major-General Ray W. Barker, the transatlantic staff officer with whom he worked most closely, was fond of saying it was because the Americans decided he was the English general with whom they were most likely to hit it off.

But his background was perfect for COSSAC — Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander. He had served throughout the First World War as an artillery officer in France and Belgium and on various staff jobs near the firing line. He had taken part in the first serious operation involving the Army and Navy while serving at the Indian Staff College at Quetta in 1926-27, ‘and really,’ said Lady Morgan, ‘India was the only place the serious soldier could practise his craft between the wars’.

Since working at the War Office in 1936-37 he had become convinced war was inevitable and should be prepared for and since returning from the front-line after the fall of France he had been engaged in helping to build up an army capable of re-invading Europe.

On 4 April 1943, a Sunday, General Morgan had lunch at Chequers so that Britain’s wartime leader, Winston Churchill, could give him the once-over and he received confirmation of his appointment as Chief of Staff on April 13. By that time General Eisenhower had known for four months that he was to be Supreme Commander of the D-Day operation, but the appointment was not yet official so, as Ike succinctly put it later, General Morgan found himself ‘anticipating important decisions for a commander who did not exist’.

He told his wife Marjorie. ‘He knew he could trust me not to breathe a word to anyone,’ says Lady Morgan. She came of a family that had been in the Army for five generations. In fact, they had met and fallen in love aboard a troop ship bound for India in January 1914, when he was a twenty-year-old lieutenant and she a mere sixteen.

Consequently, she accepted his long absences at military conferences and top-secret meetings without question and for the same reason she never asked him about Operation Overlord. Even on the evening of June 5 when they stood together watching the planes streaming overhead in the direction of France, she didn’t ask the obvious question. ‘I knew he would have told me if he could.’

By temperament Lady Morgan believed her husband was ideally suited for what many historians describe as the greatest feat of planning in military history. ‘He was remarkably easy to get on with and rarely lost his temper. He liked to keep everything in perfect order. He was meticulous in his attention to detail, and he was a pessimist. He thought of every eventuality and always anticipated the worst. I am an optimist by by nature so we suited each other rather well.

‘I remember when we were in India in the 1920s and very hard up, we stayed up late one night trying to make ends meet but aways finishing £100 short. “Oh, let’s go to bed,” I said. “The Lord will provide.” “Nonsense,” Freddie retorted angrily, “that’s my job.” In the morning he received a letter from his father enclosing a cheque for £200. He passed it across the breakfast table with a rueful smile, He said: “It seems you were right!”’

After D-Day Lady Morgan and her family saw even less of him as he followed the victorious Allied armies across Europe to the heart of Germany. ‘The planning didn’t stop on June 6,’ she said ‘In one sense it had only just begun.’ He was still in France in 1944 when Winston Churchill rose to his feet in the House of Commons and announced Lieutenant-General Frederick Morgan had been responsible for the planning of the Normandy landings and was to receive a knighthood.

* On 21 May 1984 the *Daily Telegraph* published its own solution to the 40-year-old crossword puzzle. Apparently, the compiler, the headmaster of a school evacuated to Surrey, was in the practice of allowing favoured pupils to help fill in the crossword grids. A Wolverhampton property manager, who was fourteen at the time, claimed to have learnt all five code-words from Americans and Canadian soldiers stationed nearby and believes, quite innocently, he may have slotted them into the blanks.

**Free agent**

In May 1944 the former MP for Banbury, Sir Neil Marten, then a twenty-seven-year-old major with the Special Forces, dropped into Occupied France with a French Army major and an English wireless operator. Their mission was to link up with the French Resistance movement at Lyon and, Sir Neil presumed in retrospect, to prepare the ground for Operation Anvil, the invasion of Southern France, which was originally planned to coincide with the Normandy landings.

Sadly, the wireless operator’s parachute failed to open, so Sir Neil spent the next two months operating as a more or less free agent doing what he could to sabotage the German war effort. ‘It was all good stuff,’ he recalled. ‘We wore French peasant clothing and went out at night loaded up with explosives to blow up bridges and trains like the IRA do. The nearest we came to danger was when we were driving along the road in a car or on a motorbike. There was always the risk that a German soldier might become suspicious and stop us.’

Like millions of others, the first he knew about D-Day was when he heard the BBC news bulletin on his pocket radio. He remained out of touch with headquarters until a Lysander aircraft picked him up at Avignon in mid-July and flew him to Algiers for debriefing. The invasion of Southern France took place the following month.

**Flying feat of the war**

At sixteen minutes past midnight on June 6 British time, forty-four minutes to midnight French time, a salvo of champagne corks heralded the beginning of D-Day+40. Madame Thèrése Gondrée charged the glasses of Major John Howard and the valiant survivors of the Second Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and together they drank to the memory of the daring exploit that launched the Allied campaign in Normandy and ensured the German armoured divisions did not reach the invasion beaches.

They were standing on the very spot at the very moment Staff Sergeant JIm Wallwork crash-landed his Horsa glider forty years before in what Air Marshal Leigh Mallory described as the greatest flying feat of the Second World War. They were observing a ritual that had become as much a part of the D-Day celebrations as Major Howard’s annual visit to Benouville to explain to students at the Royal Military Academy of Stockholm how he and his men captured Pegasus Bridge.

It was on the morning of D-Day that Madame Gondrée’s late husband, Georges, dug up the ninety-eight bottles of champagne he had buried in his garden shortly before the German army arrived in June 1940 and started the practice the Goudrée family were to maintain for many years after. You will find the full story of ‘the first formed body of men to strike at the enemy’ on D-Day in a book by Stephen E. Ambrose called *Pegasus Bridge, 6 June 1944* (George Allen and Unwin, 1984).

The American professor of history painstakingly pieced together a blow-by-blow account of the operation by talking to the survivors and examining all the papers, including an ammunition box full of maps and other top-secret documents that had been gently gathering rust in Major Howard’s garage at Burcot, Oxfordshire, unopened for twenty-odd years.

A Londoner, John Howard first came to Oxford in 1938 after seven years in the Regular Army and regarded the time he spent as a city policeman as the best two years of his life. He was recalled for duty with his own regiment, the King’s Shropshire Light Infantry, in December 1939, but after being commissioned he elected to join the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

So it was, in May 1942, he found himself at Bulford with the rank of major and the job of turning D Company into a crack combat unit. A story he liked to tell against himself concerned a regimental reunion. ‘One of the chaps walked over to my wife and said: “You know he was a first-class commander, but at times he could be an absolute bastard.” “Why use the past tense?” replied my wife. “At times he still can be!”’

Major Howard trained his men relentlessly until they were reckoned the best company of airborne troops in the Second Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, and it was for that reason that General Richard Gale, Commander of the Sixth Airborne Division, summoned him to headquarters on 2 May 1944. There, Brigadier Nigel Poett of Five Para Brigade handed Major Howard his orders ‘to seize intact the bridges over the river Orne and canal at Benouville and Ranville and hold them until relief.’

The key word in that order was ‘intact’. From intelligence the British knew that the German garrison guarding the bridges had prepared them for demolition in the event of attack, and only a few days before D-Day they learnt from the Goudrées, who ran the cafe at the west end of the canal and, unknown to the Germans, were members of the Resistance, that the explosion button was in a machine-gun pillbox. To stand any chance of success the assault on the bridges must come in General Gale’s words ‘like a bolt from the blue’, or more accurately the moonlight.

Back at Bulford, Major Howard’s training became even more relentless. On Salisbury Plain he taped out the exact layout of the river and canal bridges, and when that theoretical exercise began to pall, he found a site outside Exeter that closely resembled the battle scene. By the night of June 5 when the 180 troops took off from Tarrant Rushton in Dorset in six gliders they were as familiar with their destination as if they had been there and were trained to face every eventuality their commanding officer could think of.

For Major Howard, with the tiny left shoe of his two-year-old son, Terry, tucked into the breast pocket of his battle jacket as a good luck charm, the worst part was the flight over the Channel. Would all his carefully laid plans prove successful? In fact, the assault on the canal bridge was near perfect. The first glider landed exactly where he wanted it. The second followed it in and the third came close behind it.

The assault on the river bridge went less according to plan. Two of the gliders landed some distance from their target and one, due to a navigation error, never arrived there at all: it came down twenty kilometres away on the River Dives. But by twenty minutes past midnight both bridges were in Allied hands. Corporal Tappenden was sending out the exultant victory signal: ‘Ham and Jam, Ham and Jam.’ The sappers were reporting that while the canal bridge was wired for explosives there were none in place under it, and Lieutenant’s Fox’s platoon were radioing that they had captured the river bridge without firing a shot.

One of the troops had died in the landing. Major Howard’s great friend, Lieutenant Den Brotheridge had been fatally shot in the neck while storming across the canal bridge at seventeen minutes past midnight, the first combat casualty of the Normandy campaign. Most of the officers were seriously wounded and there were to be a lot more casualties as D Company waited for the belated relieving forces to arrive, and more still after they had handed over the bridges and pressed on into France, but they had achieved their aim.

German Sergeant Henry Hickman, who arrived shortly after the capture of Pegasus Bridge and decided the best thing he could do was report to his Major in Caen, had to go the long way round and took six hours to do what should have been a fifteen-minute journey.

In the succeeding hours and days there were moments of high drama. Sergeant ‘Wagger’ Thornton managed to wipe out a German tank with D Company’s sole surviving Piat gun and set off such a firework display it convinced the enemy the British had an absolute arsenal of artillery at the bridge. There were moments of low comedy. At 7.30am a party of Italian prisoners-of-war arrived at the field where the British gliders had landed and proceeded to erect anti-glider posts all round them according to instructions.

There were moments of sheer exuberance. When three Spitfires spotted the ground signals indicating the bridges were in Allied hands they peeled off and executed roll after victory roll. As they flew off, one of them jettisoned what Major Howard first thought was a reserve fuel tank but turned out to be a bundle of the morning’s papers.

It was too early for news of the invasion, but the men fought for first look at the *Daily Mirror’s* cartoon stripper, Jane. There was no Page Three in those days.

There were moments of heartfelt anxiety. As a result of a clerical error on D-Day+12 Mrs Howard received a telegram saying ‘your husband has suffered a mortal wound’ — instead or a mortar wound — ‘and is in hospital.’Sadly though, nobody in the War Office thought to keep this crack body of men together. So, there were no specially trained combat troops to capture and hold the bridges at Arnhem and Nimegen for the Allied paratroopers in September.

On Friday 13 November Major Howard was on his way home to Oxford when he collided head-on with an American six-ton truck leapfrogging his mates in the convoy. He smashed up both legs and that was the end of his military career.

**Storming Merville Battery**

The capture of Merville Battery in the early hours of D-Day was as daring and well-planned as the assault on Pegasus Bridge. Colonel Terence Otway had hand-picked the 750 men from the Ninth Parachute Battalion of the Sixth Airborne Division who were to silence the big guns of the key German artillery emplacement before the British and Canadians invaded Sword and Juno Beaches.

He had trained them rigorously and he had rehearsed the attack down to the last bullet and hand grenade again and again on a specially built replica of the battery in the Berkshire countryside four miles from Newbury. The only thing he could not practise was the airlifting of his crack battalion and their equipment from airfields at Broadwell, Harwell and Brize Norton on the night of June 5 — and that proved disastrous.

Lance-Corporal Eric Orr of Kennington recalled: ‘I dropped at midnight and came a bit of a cropper, damaging my shoulder, but it turned out I was lucky.’ He was in the legendary Sergeant McGeever’s team and they had landed safely in the target area complete with their machine gun and the war artist, Albert Richards.

Eric felt sorry for Albert. The little man had spent most of the Dakota flight across the Channel clutching the sick-bucket. But he was to paint some memorable pictures of the Merville assault, many of which now hang in the Tate Gallery and Imperial War Museum.

Hundreds of others were less fortunate. Because of the difficult flying conditions and bombardment from the ground their pilots overshot the landing area. They came down into the muddy water of the River Dives, which Rommel had deliberately flooded, and before they could cut themselves free of their parachutes and equipment the swamp sucked them under.

Worse still, of the eight gliders that had set off from Brize Norton carrying backup troops and essential supplies like flame-throwers and mortars, only two reached the target area. One landed several miles beyond it and the other crashed into an orchard alongside the battery with serious casualties.

At 2.50am when Colonel Otway decided to go ahead with the assault, he had just 150 men of the original 750 with which he’d set off and hardly any weapons apart from rifles, pistols, bren guns and hand-grenades. Eric said: ‘I was in a platoon that was supposed to have forty-two men and four machine-guns. We finished up with eight men and one gun.’

Because they had no mine detectors or marking tape the remnants of the advance party had to crawl through the minefields guarding the battery, locating and neutralising the tripwires with their bare hands and scratching a safe lane with the heels of their boots.

Nonetheless, the attack when it came was brilliantly successful. McGeever’s party took out three German positions with their Vickers machine gun. Sergeant Knight’s party took out three more with their brens. At that moment the glider crashed into the orchard creating pandemonium and twenty minutes later it was all over. Of the 160 Germans in the Battery only twenty-two were still able to put their hands in the air. ‘Of our chaps,’ said Eric, ‘there were only about sixty-five of us left.’

Signals Officer Jim Loring released the pigeon from its container inside his combat jacket to take the glad news back to London, then fired a Very pistol to warn *HMS Arethusa* they had captured Merville and there was no need to shell the position. Although Eric Orr was later mentioned in despatches, Colonel Otway maintained he deserved a medal.

**Journalist wounded in action**

David Woodward, the war correspondent and naval historian who covered D-Day for the *Guardian*, saw the paratroops training in their gliders on his way to Woodstock for two weeks’ embarkation leave. ‘Thank God I’m going in a nice ship,’ he consoled himself, ‘not one of those contraptions.’ A few weeks later he was travelling back through Woodstock, ‘keeping my head well down in case anybody recognised me: it was all supposed to be top secret,’ to take off for France from RAF Brize Norton with the Thirteenth South Lancashire Paras — in a glider.

He recounted the story with a brusque self-mockery worthy of Evelyn Waugh. In the early hours of D-Day they crash-landed near Ranville, one of the advance parties whose job was to secure the Orne bridgehead for the Sixth Airborne Division. ‘We came down in a field of asparagus — our word for the anti-glider poles — but fortunately the Germans hadn’t got round to putting the explosives on top.’

Two paratroopers died on impact, two more were wounded, and David Woodward was hit by shrapnel. Blood constantly filled his one good eye and his right hand was useless. ‘There I was with the greatest story in the world and I couldn’t type a bloody word.’

After a passing patrol had patched him up as best they could, he stumbled to the field dressing station at the local church, then to a school where they fed him tinned soup. From there they took him by wood-burning car to the Chateau L’Heaume. In the garden he found two other distinguished war correspondents, Chester Wilmot of the British and Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Leonard Mosley of the *Sunday Times*, swigging whisky.

In recognition of his wounds the owner gave him grandmama’s bed — ‘she had been evacuated,’ he added hastily — and after a painful night they sent him back to England. He climbed aboard a landing craft at Ouistreham and returned to Newhaven clutching his colleagues’ stories. ‘If I’d had any ingenuity, I would have lost the lot somewhere between the landing beaches and the Ministry of Information and kept the scoop for myself!’

At Newhaven an obliging soldier let him sit on his shoulders and bunked him up the ladder to the quay. A brand-new military treatment centre seized on its first patient with ill-concealed glee. Then he escaped to file his copy.

After a brief spell in a London nursing home, he returned to France in time to liberate Paris where his future wife, Elizabeth Ramsbotham, had worked as a secretary in the British Embassy until the fall of France. Then he followed the victorious Allied armies on to Brussels, into Belsen, and was at Nuremberg to tell the story when the Nazi leaders faced trial for their crimes.

**Never made it**

Phil Busby of Marston went into Sword Beach aboard one of Major General Percy Hobart’s ‘funnies’ — the D.D. (Duplex Drive) Swimming Tank. As a sergeant in the Thirteenth/Eighteenth Royal Hussars it was his job to conduct his troop to Pegasus Bridge and take over from Major John Howard, but they never made it.

He recalled: ‘We were supposed to enter the water from our landing craft about 5,000 yards from the beach but there was such a heavy swell running our Brigadier put it back to 4,000 yards, and, even then, the sea proved too much for us. The swell caught us and caved in the bows. The water came in over the top and after that, with thirty-three tons of tank underneath us, we didn’t stand a chance.

‘It was a case of sitting tight until we filled up with water, then opening the hatches and ejecting with deep sea escape apparatus. I tell you now, if it hadn’t been for a little strip of sand running out into the sea at Ouistreham I wouldn’t be here now, I’d be in America!’

So, on foot, he and his mates teamed up with the commandos and were soon engaged in a flanking operation round Ouistreham. From there they moved on to re-join the regiment and a couple of months later found themselves moving into the Falaise Gap to sever the German escape road from Falaise to Argentan. ‘That frightened the life out of me, said Phil, ‘I don’t mind telling you. There were whole convoys of Jerries sitting in their trucks, all as dead as dodos.’

**Pedalling peacefully in**

No-one would describe war as a picnic, but D-Day might almost have been a training exercise as far as Sergeant William Robertson of Arncott and the chaps from the First Battalion of the King’s Own Scottish Borderers he led ashore were concerned. ‘We were due to land at Sword Beach with the Third Division and our destination was Caen, though we didn’t get to Caen for quite a few weeks.

On the way over I chatted to the coxswain in the way one does and he said to me: “I gave you a rough ride yesterday Scottie, didn’t I?”’ — referring to the aborted invasion attempt the previous day — ‘“Well, I can promise you today it will be a dry landing,” and he was as good as his word.

We had our bikes with us and we put them together and cycled off up the beach until we came to the road. We hardly heard a shot. There was very little trouble at all. As we pedalled along, we kept stopping and chatting to the French peasants we passed to see if we could find out where the enemy were, but there didn’t seem to be any Bosche about.

‘It wasn’t until mid-afternoon that we met any opposition and then it was only long-distance shells. We kept going until we got to Cambes Wood about three miles from Caen. There we abandoned our bicycles and took up our defensive positions. We remained there for almost four weeks throughout the very heavy bombardment of Caen and during that time we were constantly under mortar and shell fire during our reconnaissance patrols into Caen.

Then came the final assault and I can honestly say that my platoon was the first British one to enter Caen. As we marched into the ruined city, we met two nuns and asked them if there were any Bosche left, but they’d all scarpered. We left Caen to relieve the Paras near Troarn and took up our positions on the railway line. Despite the continued German shelling there were intervals of unbelievable quiet before we attacked again, suffering many casualties. During one of these intervals a German NCO suggested a temporary truce to allow us to collect our casualties, to which of course our company commander agreed.’

Captain Robertson, as he was to become, saw plenty of action on other fronts before he came home from Jerusalem — where he met his wife — in 1947 to run a prisoner-of-war camp near Dundee. ‘But really looking back,’ he said, ‘it’s hard to believe how incredibly lucky I and most of my platoon were in the Battle of Normandy.’

**A night on the beach**

Sister Anne Robertson of Arncott arrived off Gold Beach about a week after D-Day in a mail-ship bringing Canadian reinforcements for the frontline. Montgomery was keener to see the soldiers ashore than the fifty women of the Army Nursing Service, but they were not keen to spend another night bobbing up and down in the English Channel so they followed the Canadians down the landing nets and slept the night on the beach in their battledress before travelling on to Bayeux to help the Royal Army Medical Corps and Pioneers establish the Seventy-Ninth British General Hospital.

‘Most of us had done our training in the blitz areas of Britain,’ she recalled, ‘so we knew what to expect and were keen to get on with the job of patching up the battle casualties. The organisation and planning that had gone into the organisation and setting up of the tented hospital by Colonel Helm of the RAMC was terrific. Before we left, we had made up fifty beds for each ward, packed all our drugs, syringes, dressings etc. into ambulances and the rest of the gear into three-tonners.

‘When we arrived, sure enough outside every tent was a three-tonner, an ambulance and a pile of hessian-wrapped bedrolls. We were in business within twenty-four hours, which was just as well because a hospital which was meant to cope with 600 rapidly had to deal with more than 1,200. The tank burns were among the worst and many of the men were dying of the most terrible injuries. But we’d been trained not to show how upset we were, a training which had been just as necessary back home in the blitz.

‘In a way it was easier than the blitz. There were no relatives to think about. You didn’t have to break the news to mum that little Johnny had died, or tell little Johnny that mummy wouldn’t be coming to see him anymore because she’d been hit by a bomb. Being in battledress it wasn’t until our patients caught a glimpse of our lipstick or spotted our voices were softer that they realised we were women so they’d be noisy and swearing in true Army style.

‘But if they did notice, they would always apologise, even though they were losing life’s final battle. You could be holding their hands trying to comfort them in their final moments on earth and somebody else would cry out and they would say: “Oh, Sister, do go and look after him. He sounds far worse than I am.” Those men who gave everything they had for our future gave us the reason to go on.’

**Leading by accident**

The commanding officer of the Ninth Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry, Lieutenant-Colonel Humphrey Wood, put down his glass of port. He leaned across the dinner table at the Haunch of Venison, Salisbury, and fixed his second-in-command with a determined look. ‘I’m going to tell you something I haven’t told anybody else. I’m going to get killed as soon as we get across the other side.’

Major John Mogg didn’t know where to put his face. The thirty-one-year-old former adjutant, who had yet to get his first taste of battle, had only joined the Ninth DLI from the Fifth Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry five days before. Now on June 4 here was his CO intimating he was about to snuff it and in a few days’ time he would be leading a bunch of tough Georgie veterans across Normandy, who had come through the desert, Sicily and Italy.

Humphrey Wood was an old campaigner and he knew when death was at his elbow. On D-Day+8 the Fiftieth (Northumbrian) Division went into action against the Twelfth and Twenty-First Panzers and Ninth DLI was given the task of capturing the village of Lingèvres. Their first assault was not a success. The Georgies, used to fighting in the wide-open spaces of the desert, learnt the hard way that the bocage of the French countryside favoured the defence and demanded different tactics.

Three-quarters of the way across a field of waist-deep corn they started going down like ninepins, caught in the crossfire of the German machine-gun positions. Having suffered only one single casualty since D-Day — a signals sergeant who fell overboard and drowned — the Ninth DLI lost twenty-two officers and 226 men in four hours.

The voice of Humphrey Wood cracked over the radio. He told John Mogg to press on towards the village with the two remaining companies while he tried to pull together the remnants of the other two. Then the radio went dead and three minutes later the colonel was killed by a direct hit from a mortar bomb.

‘I suppose you could call it the luck of war,’ General Sir John Mogg said philosophically, looking back on the event forty years later from the comfort of his family home at Watlington. ‘If he hadn’t died then I wouldn’t have taken over command of the battalion, I might not have had such a good war and I probably wouldn’t have ended up as Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. You have to be lucky is one of the first rules of life.’

As it was, Major Mogg led the Durhams forward into the woods. After bitter close fighting, much reduced in numbers, they eventually reached the village. After more bitter fighting they succeeded in winkling the Germans out of the houses, silencing their artillery, knocking out their tanks and holding Lingèvres against a series of counterattacks.

As suddenly as it had begun the gunfire died away. Somebody found a crate of champagne in the back of a German tank, and in due course General Montgomery awarded Major Mogg the first of two DSOs he was to win during the war for his exemplary leadership of the Durhams. It was well deserved. At one stage during the battle, he had seized a hand-held rocket-launcher from a Geordie private who confessed he didn’t know how to use it, pressed the trigger and blown up a German tank.

General Mogg went with the Allied armies right across Europe and had plenty of opportunities to observe the enemy at close quarters. He agreed with the view that by and large the average German soldier was superior in some aspects to his British or American counterpart.

**Too old at 28**

Albert Ernest Smith of Yarnton should have gone to France with a commando unit of the Royal Engineers but at twenty-eight he was considered too old for the frontline assault. ‘A good thing too,’ he said. ‘Hardly any of them survived.’

Instead, he went out as a sapper with 253 Field Company, landing at Arromanches on June 29, eight days before the Third Infantry Division finally set foot in the ruined city of Caen. The grisly toll of war was everywhere apparent. ‘At night our section lay under a wall to sleep. It was dark and no-one noticed a dead German soldier also lying there.

‘At midnight word was passed down the line of sleeping men from the platoon officer, who woke the corporal with the order: “Move to a safer place.” One man shook the dead German to pass on the order.’

The locals were overjoyed to see them, but entering the town was a sobering experience. ‘We were the first lot in so we didn’t know the Germans had scarpered. We only saw seven people. The place was in ruins. What they hadn’t bombed they’d set fire to. With the temperature in the eighties the stench from dead cattle and humans was terrible.’

D-Day Plus 40 Years! *Oxford Mail* Supplement 6 June 1984

**5 — Oxfordshire and D-Day (50 years on)**

*One of the last assignments I worked on before I took early retirement in 1994 was D-Day+50, the Oxford Mail supplement to mark the 50th anniversary. We cannibalised a lot of material from the supplement to mark the fortieth anniversary, but a lot more was new*.

**Secret war in city and countryside**

The only ceremony of national importance that took place in Oxfordshire to mark the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day was the service at Harwell Stone on 4 June 1994\*. A crowd of about 1,000 VIPs and veterans from all over Britain gathered in the memorial garden beside the old A34 for the event that officially commemorated the beginning of the end of the Second World War. At 4.30pm, as Air Vice Marshal J.A.G. May took the salute, a stick of paratroopers dropped from a Hercules transport plane onto Harwell Laboratory playing field.

The lump of granite records the Laboratory’s Second World War role as RAF Harwell. A plaque on the top says: ‘This stone marks the end of the runway from which aircraft from No. hirty-Eight Group, Royal Air Force, took off on the night of the 5th June 1944 with troops of the Sixth Airborne Division, who were the first British soldiers to land in Normandy in the main assault for the liberation of Europe.’

The inscription is a bit of a mystery. According to the records, the six Albemarle bombers carrying troops to set up beacons in the dropping zones took off from Harwell at 11.03pm. That is seven minutes after the first of the six Halifax bombers towing Horsa gliders, which carried Major John Howard and his gallant band of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantrymen, set off from Tarrant Rushton in Dorset.

The first glider hit French soil at 16 minutes past midnight. The first paratrooper from Harwell, Brigadier Nigel Poett, put boot to earth three minutes later. But whether the inscription is right or wrong, nobody should begrudge Oxfordshire its place in the limelight. The county contributed as much to the success of the momentous cross-Channel invasion as any other in Britain. The impressive 1994 D-Day Exhibition at the Museum of Berkshire Aviation at Woodley in Reading — the only serious attempt to assess the contribution of Berkshire and Oxfordshire — gave some idea of the military scale of the operation.

In January 1941 the Government spent £5m to turn 1,500 acres of Oxfordshire farmland into the largest Army stores in the UK. By June 1944 Bicester Central Ordnance Depot was supplying everything from Bofors guns and armoured cars to clothing and kit. Between D-Day and the end of the Second World War it issued more than 25,000 tons of equipment including one-and-a-half million rifles, 600,000 sten guns, 300,000 pistols and 120,000 bren guns.

At what is now the Milton Trading Estate near Didcot No. Three M.U. (Maintenance Unit) played a similar role as the central stores for the RAF. In the run-up to D-Day staff there were puzzled by the arrival of thousands of gallons of black and white paint. They were to provide identification bands on the wings and fuselages of the 11,500 aircraft and 3,500 gliders that took part in the invasion of Normandy.

The aircraft wearing them took off on June 5 and June 6 from military airfields all over Southern England after months of training on the ground and in the air. Dakota bombers and Horsa gliders left from RAF Broadwell, Albemarle bombers and Horsa gliders from RAF Brize Norton, Albemarles and Horsas from RAF Harwell, headquarters of the Sixth Airborne Division and its commander, General Richard Gale. RAF Abingdon, Benson, Grove, Hampstead Norris, Kidlington, Kingston Bagpuize and Shellingford — to mention just the ones in the immediate Oxford area — all played important backup roles.

RAF Mount Farm at what is now Berinsfield probably played the most crucial role of all. After starting life as a satellite of RAF Benson in 1942 it became the headquarters of the RAF’s Photo-Reconnaissance Squadron and in 1943 headquarters of the United States Air Force’s Photo-Reconnaissance and Mapping Squadron.

While a lot of young men — and quite a few women! — from Oxfordshire rehearsed elsewhere in Southern England for their part in the invasion, the county filled up with British and American personnel and their equipment. Lorries, tanks, even bombs, waited at the roadside. And in an age when there were no computers, no sophisticated electronics, no space satellites, no sub-orbital spy planes to keep a watch on the world and monitor enemy movements, an impressive array of brain-power plotted behind the scenes.

*I went on to summarise the efforts I had already spelled out in more detail in the D-Day+40 supplement*.

\* *The Royal British Legion has held a short service there every year since except 2020 and 2021 because of Covid*.

**Into battle with Lord Lovat**

Ex-Signaller John Pollock of Appleton looked up from his slit-trench in Normandy on D-Day+1 and saw a paratrooper peering down at him. ‘Where have you come from, mate?’ he asked. ‘Oh, you wouldn’t know it,’ said the paratrooper. ‘A little place called Harwell.’ He was right.

John Pollock didn’t know it, but sixteen years later he smiled to himself when the chauffeur taking him from Didcot Station to the Atomic Energy Research Establishment told him it was built on the site of a famous Second World War aerodrome. By an odd quirk of fate, he was to spend the next 27 years working as a health physicist, monitoring radiation levels at the ‘little place’ the paratrooper had dropped from on 7 June 1944.

John grew up in South Wales, where he played a lot of rugby and was a keen cross-country runner. ‘So, if I was going into the Army, I was determined to do something that would give me an open-air life. What did the Army do with me? Posted me to Brecon in the Signals! I was too young and inexperienced to become a glider pilot, but the Commandos were looking for volunteers. By that time, I done my basic training, so I joined the First Commando Brigade as a wireless operator. That’s how I became a member of Lord Lovat’s mob.’

Any lingering doubts he might have had about the toughness of life as a member of one of the Army’s crack fighting units evaporated immediately after he returned to England after his intensive training in the Highlands. ‘The night I arrived in Sussex who should I meet on the train but a whole load of Canadian commandos just back from Dieppe’ — survivors of the disastrous 1942 cross-Channel raid in which more than 3,500 Allied troops and 106 aircraft were lost.

He confessed he thought of them more than once in the run-up to D-Day when he was stationed at Seaford. ‘Every day we went out into the Channel in a landing craft, stormed a beach up the coast, crossed a marsh and a river, climbed a hill and “captured” Arundel Castle.’ But at 7.30am on D-Day, when they arrived off Sword Beach to translate this carefully planned exercise into action, there was no time for speculation. Reality took over.

‘We went down the ramps up to our waists in water. There were shells and there was small arms fire. There were dead bodies bobbing about in the sea. A pal of mine was hit and died from his wounds.’ There was a delay while sappers cut through the barbed wire along Ouistreham promenade, then they waded up to their waists in water again through fields flooded by the Germans. ‘Every 20 yards there was a sign saying: “Achtung Minen!” — Beware of Mines! — but I never saw any.’

The knoll where they paused to clean up turned out to be the other side of the hedge from a German mortar detachment. ‘I thought: “God, this is it!” But another troop of commandos sorted that lot out and we pressed on to our first objective: Pegasus Bridge.’

One of the great legends of D-Day has grown up around Lord Lovat’s arrival at the bridge spanning the Caen Canal. A piper certainly played to let Major John Howard and his gallant band of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantrymen know relief had at last arrived. After a few words with Major Howard, Lord Lovat undoubtedly crossed the bridge to be met by a hail of bullets from the German snipers hidden along the canal banks below.

But John, who was at Lord Lovat’s side, refutes any suggestion his commander took unnecessary risks with the lives of his men. ‘He was eccentric,’ he recalled. ‘He hadn’t got a proper uniform on. He was wearing a velvet jacket. And he didn’t have a regulation Army gun. He was carrying an American sporting rifle. But the men always came first with him. We ran with our heads down and the iron sides of the bridge prevented us from being hit.’

They pressed on up the hill to Amfreville, commandeered a large house at the crossroads and prepared to dig in in the orchard. ‘I’d put my radio down and was debating where to site my slit-trench. “Give me your spade,” said Lord Lovat. “If I was you, I’d put it here. You can see down the hill towards Pegasus Bridge and you can also see what’s coming from the other direction.” Then he started digging for me. He was that sort of chap.’

They stayed put for the next few days, being mortared every time they stepped out of their trenches, while they waited for heavier guns and reinforcements to arrive, then moved on. ‘It sounds daft, not like a war at all. On August 9 somebody cried: “Tea’s up.” I climbed out of my trench to have a cuppa and was hit in the leg with a lump of shrapnel from a mortar.’

After treatment in Britain. he re-joined the First Commando Brigade in Holland in September and went right across Germany with them. ‘So far as we were concerned,’ he said with a rueful smile, ‘the worst bombardment was not D-Day. It was on the Rhine!’

**Hell of landing on Sword Beach**

Hanging on the wall of the Museum at Southsea is an oil painting depicting in graphic detail the moment the Free French Commandos landed on Sword Beach in Normandy on 6 June 1944. It was the work of ex-Able Seaman James Brooker of Abingdon.

The seventy-year-old artist could remember the scene as if it was yesterday. He was assistant coxswain aboard LCI(S) — Landing Craft Infantry (Small) — 527, one of a flotilla of small boats that delivered the troops. ‘Altogether,’ he recalled ‘177 French commandos landed at 6.30 that morning, of whom only twenty-three returned to England unscathed.

‘A huge black pall of smoke hung over the landing area. About half-a-mile from the shore huge spouts of water shot into the air as shells from the German artillery battery behind Ouistreham exploded around us. Then we were through them, only to be met by heavy fire from machine guns and mortar shells.

‘As we beached, I saw two of the crew and a French commando from the landing craft alongside us go down with shrapnel wounds. To our port a tank landing craft was on fire and as I went to the stern to fend her off, I could feel the heat of the flames and hear a man screaming for help.

‘Then to my relief we were pulling away from the beach. There were scores of chaps floating in the water, all dead. All around us landing craft and tanks were on fire or sinking. There seemed to be devastation everywhere. I couldn’t see how anyone could survive it. It was only by luck we survived ourselves.

‘As we left the beach our starboard engine stopped dead. A rope had wrapped itself round the propellor. But by a miracle our port engine kept going and when word came, we limped home painfully across the Channel, were given permission to return to base for repairs and at ten o’clock next morning arrived in the river Hamble, dirty and very tired.’

James wanted to record the scene for posterity ‘to show future generations what it was like to be there’ but when he came to put brush to canvas, he realised there was no way he could paint the picture. LCI(S) 523, the landing craft that beached alongside him, obstructed his field of vision. ‘I could recall perfectly what was happening on one half of the beach but I had only the haziest idea what was happening on the other half.’

Until 1986. ‘Then Brittany Ferries introduced their cross-Channel route from Portsmouth to Ouistreham and I said to my wife I’d like to go back. So, we went on holiday to Normandy. We were at the Free French Commando Museum at Ouistreham when this Frenchman walked in. He said his name was Leon Guitier and asked if he could be of any assistance.

‘It turned out he was an ex-commando and had landed on Sword Beach from LCI(S) 523 on D-Day. When he discovered I was a member of the crew of LCI(S) 527 he couldn’t do enough for me. He took us everywhere and showed us everything. By the time we returned home I knew all I needed to paint my picture.’

**James Brooker’s painting**

**Glider heroes**

One of the biggest threats to the gliders landing in Normandy on D-Day was supposed to be what some wag christened Rommel’s asparagus: the anti-invasion poles the German commander erected to prevent attack from the air. But according to the dwindling band of Oxfordshire glider pilots who gathered to remember fallen comrades and relive their memories over lunch at North Oxford Conservative Club, the poles were a help rather than a hindrance. ‘They snapped off as we ploughed into them and slowed us down,’ recalled ex-Sergeant Patrick ‘Pip’ Senier of Abingdon. ‘It was just like landing on an aircraft carrier.’

The glider Pip and his co-pilot, Sergeant ‘Andy’ Andrews, flew from RAF Down Ampney, near Cricklade in Wiltshire, carried two jeeps packed with radio equipment for Third Parachute Brigade headquarters, medical equipment for the field hospital and Brigadier Hill’s personal kit. They had to divert from their original destination because the Germans had flooded it, but otherwise the landing was uneventful. Other pilots had greater difficulties.

Ex-Staff Sergeant Harry Rathband of Wolvercote, who was aboard one of a flight of four Hamilcars from RAF Tarrant Rushton delivering ten-ton tanks to a landing spot south of Ranville recalled: ‘One disappeared completely. Another hit some trees on landing and turned over on its back so the tank was a write-off. That left two of us more or less intact. The crew of the other one stayed by their plane and were picked off by German snipers. “Come on,” I said to my co-pilot, “we’re not staying here to get shot up.”’

Ex-Staff Sergeant Arthur Procter of Headington was piloting the last of a flight of gliders from RAF Brize Norton delivering backup troops and equipment to the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantrymen at Pegasus Bridge. ‘We got the full weight of the German gunners. We were queuing up in a spiral to land and on the way down the glider in front of me got a direct hit and burst into flames.

‘Like him, I was carrying a jeep loaded with an anti-tank gun and fifty shells and five artillerymen. There was no way I was going to sit on his tail and wait for him to explode and blow me to kingdom come with him. None of us had parachutes and if anything happened to your plane there was not a cat in hell’s chance of coming out alive. I dived away from the target area and came down safely near Breville.’

Arthur and his co-pilot came under fire from a sniper in Breville church tower. ‘I asked for the Bren gun and silenced the opposition and, after a series of adventures too numerous to mention, we reached our rendezvous: the orchard beside Pegasus Bridge.’ Pip Senier also fell foul of the enemy. ‘There was a platoon of German soldiers in one of the farmhouses along the road, but luckily we saw them off and I was back in England by June 9.’

Harry Rathband and his co-pilot encountered trouble of a different sort. ‘Not very far along the road we bumped into this Frenchman. When he found we were English he insisted on inviting us in. He fetched an enamel jug and two large mugs, filled them up, and said: “Drink to freedom!” We tipped them back. It was raw Calvados. We said goodbye, set off again, and a few yards up the road fell fast asleep in a ditch.

‘The following morning Lord Lovat’s scouts found us. We didn’t half get a roasting. It’s a wonder we weren’t put on a court martial. They took us to Pegasus Bridge. The commandos took us on to Sword Beach and from there we hitched a lift home in a large landing craft.’

At least Pip, Harry and Arthur made it there and back. Ex-Sergeant Ken Argyle of Headington ‘had a swim’. About two-and-a-half miles from the French coast the glider he was piloting from Tarrant Rushton parted company from its tug plane. ‘I don’t know whether the rope broke or not. Just after 3am we came down in the drink and the two of us, two artillery officers and three gunners piled into a dinghy.’ An inshore wind carried them to the beach.

Ex-Sergeant Godrey Freeman of Headington didn’t even cross the Channel. ‘We watched the main body of gliders set off from RAF Brize Norton, then we waited and waited. ‘Eventually the message came back. The D-Day operation had been ninety-eight per cent successful. We could stand down. We weren’t needed!’

**Concrete miracle that bamboozled Hitler**

*In D-Day+40 I described the ‘Mulberries’, the artificial concrete harbours the Allies floated across the Channel to fool Hitler who was in a constant state of agitation about which cross-Channel port they would make the target for their invasion. For D-Day+50 I re-interviewed one of the Oxford men involved*.

Percy Trafford of Marston remembered them well. In the run-up to D-Day the ex-Cowley factory worker spent several weeks bobbing around one of them in a boat. In 1942 at sixteen-and-a-half he put his age on a year to join the Royal Marines and by 1944 was coxswain of LCVP — Landing Craft/Vehicle/Personnel — 1254.

‘We had the job of ferrying out raw materials from Bognor and Pagham to the American construction battalions building the massive concrete piers and floating roadways for one of the Mulberries. We weren’t supposed to know what they were up to, but in between trips we practised picking up troops off the platforms and taking them to the beach, so we had a rough idea what they were for. To look at them you’d think: “How the blazes are they going to float a thing like that across the Channel?”, but amazingly they did!”

On the night of June 4 LCVP — Landing Craft/Vehicle/Personnel — 1254 put to sea from Hayling Island with Percy at the helm, but the sea was too rough for the invasion and they were called back to port. ‘I was one of only three men on the craft who wasn’t sick.’

The following night he crossed the Channel behind a flotilla of minesweepers and smoke-trawlers, then waited for the transport ships carrying the troops to arrive while *HMS Warspite* softened up the enemy positions. ‘Our job was to put the marine commandos ashore at Sword Beach near the mouth of the river Orne.

‘Every time I see that shot of the D-Day landings on television I wonder if it’s my boat. I recognise the houses on the skyline. But, of course, without seeing the boat number it’s impossible to tell. The sky went absolutely black with Stirlings and Dakotas and gliders. They hit the ground at exactly the same time that we hit the beach.

‘It was tricky trying to dodge the hedgehogs and other underwater obstacles and some of the craft didn’t make it, but I managed to find a way through. Out went the commandos and back we went for another lot. In all we made five runs from the troop carriers. Then they told us to start picking up casualties.’

For three days and nights they ferried men and vehicles round the clock. Then a relief crew took over and they grabbed a well-earned rest. There was no Mulberry at Sword Beach. They operated from a ramshackle depot ship behind a breakwater of scuttled block ships. Percy’s stint off the French coast lasted six weeks.

‘One day sticks in my memory more vividly than D-Day. About June 21 Jerry really hit back and made a determined attempt to get us out of the anchorage. Shells and bombs were falling at the rate of three or four a minute. Then these acoustic mines started going off. The *HMS Swift* was the first to go, then this large troop carrier loaded with Canadians. Hundreds of them must have drowned. We lost seven craft in thirty-five minutes. The landing craft at the side of mine got a direct hit. It was indescribable.’

**Tom’s five franc ‘tip’**

Before the twenty paratroopers baled out over Caen at 1.20 on the morning of 6 June 1944, their stick commander, Lieutenant Stirling, gave Warrant Officer Tom Holloway, the pilot of the plane, a memento. It was one of the French five franc notes the Allied military authorities issued to the invading troops in the run-up to D-Day. On it he had written the names of the men with the brief message: ‘Thanks for the lift.’

The retired Abingdon builder took it from the wallet in which he had kept it carefully for the last fifty years. ‘My flight engineer was a chap called Eric Keen. We still get together for a beer from time to time. After the Second World War he made contact with a couple of the lads. Two of the paratroopers got killed in the drop. Lieutenant Stirling disappeared without trace. But most of the others had survived.

‘What pleased me: they said they’d landed on exactly the right spot at the right moment. They were in five seconds of their scheduled drop time.’ Things didn’t always go that well. In the six months he was training at Tarrant Rushton to carry paratroopers and to tow gliders he made several trips to France carrying containers for the French Resistance.

‘It was quite a tricky operation. We had to find a particular field in the dark and of course, if Jerry was around, the people who were expecting the drop wouldn’t light up.’ By comparison D-Day was a piece of cake. On the night of June 5-6, he dropped the twenty paratroopers and nine containers and the following day he successfully delivered to them a glider stuffed with military equipment. Spot on both times.

Tom never dreamed he would end up flying a Stirling bomber. When his dad decided in 1941 it wasn’t worth carrying on his building business because of the shortage of materials, he arranged for his son and the other employees to join the MG Car Company. ‘I was a draughtsman and that was a reserved occupation, but I couldn’t stand factory life so I thought I’d volunteer for the RAF as a navigator.

‘“The only way I can take you,” said the recruiting sergeant, “is if you want to be a pilot. We’re desperately short of air crews.”’ He spent ten months learning to fly with the US Army Air Corps in Georgia and Alabama. ‘Because America was supposed to be neutral, we had to wear civvies. We weren’t allowed to wear uniforms until after Pearl Harbour.’

Then he did a number of bombing raids on Germany before moving to Tarrant Rushton in January 1944. ‘I was lucky. In August that year I was posted to Shropshire as an instructor so I didn’t get to Arnhem or I probably wouldn’t have lived to tell the tale. We lost half the squadron in Arnhem.’

D-Day+50 Oxfordshire Remembers *Oxford Mail* Supplement 6 June 1994

**6 - The war after D-Day**

**Heroes of the air crash**

In February 1976 I received a letter from a chap at Ruislip in Middlesex who wanted my help in pinpointing and dating an air crash in Oxfordshire during the Second World War. David Batchelor was a pupil at the school for deaf children at Newnham Manor, Crowmarsh Gifford, where one Saturday or Sunday breakfast time towards the end of the war a lad pointed out of the window and the children saw a plane coming down in flames.

In the hurly burly that followed Mr Batchelor somehow acquired the muzzle of one of the aircraft’s guns, which he had kept ever since, and wanted to know what sort of plane it came from and the details of the crash. Well, that was not the sort of information I kept at my fingertips, but I was sure my good friend, Peter Burton of Wallingford, who was writing a history of aviation in Oxfordshire, would know. So, I put them in touch with each other and sure enough Peter was able to tell him the full story.

It is quite an interesting tale. The aircraft was a Halifax bomber, serial no. NP681, of 426 Squadron of the Royal Canadian Air Force based at Linton-on-Ouse and it had just taken off from RAF Benson with a full bomb-load in September 1944 when the crash occurred.As soon as the plane cleared the runway the American pilot, Flying Officer J.A. Wilding, and Welsh engineer, Flight Sergeant Frank Andrew, realised it was doomed, but they knew if they abandoned it the bomber would crash on Wallingford, killing hundreds of innocent townspeople.

So, after the other five crew members had baled out, they stayed in their seats and steered the blazing Halifax towards an empty field near Crowmarsh, where it crashed with an almighty bang, breaking several windows and causing a few minor injuries, but killing no-one apart from the two young airmen on board.

In 1953 Wallingford commemorated their courage by naming two roads on a new estate after them and in May 1960 the Mayor unveiled a plaque set in Witney stone at the junction of Wilding Road and Andrew Road to explain how they got their names. Peter said he wished there was a similar plaque to commemorate every air crash in Oxfordshire.

Anthony Wood Column *Oxford Mail* 21 May 1976

**Squalor of life on a narrow boat**

All told there were only about three dozen of them, so perhaps it is not surprising that their contribution to the war effort never captured the popular imagination. But for two long years they kept the narrow boats chugging up and down the Grand Union Canal while the professional boatmen were away in the services and it was thanks to their efforts that many a Midlands family kept a roof over their heads during the Second World War blitz.

Olga Kevelos, who kept The Three Tuns at King’s Sutton with her brother, Ray, felt *Maidens’ Trip*, the engaging three-part serial on BBC2, painted a rather idealised portrait of their existence. Her abiding memory was the squalor of life aboard the boats. Young girls fresh from well-ordered homes found they couldn’t cope with the problems of living in confined quarters, keeping a one-hundred-horsepower diesel engine running and navigating a pair of seventy-foot, seventy-ton narrow boats along the canal.

‘We lived in constant wetness,’ she recalled. ‘We had the horrible habit of wearing our clothes to dry them, then taking them off and putting them away. We got no extra rations and seemed to survive on a diet of great loaves, peanut butter and unmentionable stews. But I think the feature of life we found most difficult to adjust to was the bugs and lice. We were covered in them. When I went home to my parents in Birmingham I wasn’t allowed in until I’d had a bath in the shed.

‘Our hobby when we weren’t working was looking for baths and, every time we went home, we said ‘I’m not going back,’ but somehow we always did. I think the saving grace of the job was that we weren’t shut up in an office or factory. We were out in the open air, chugging along the canal through unspoilt countryside. There were times when you hardly saw a soul for days on end and if you hadn’t known would never have guessed there was a war on.’

Looking back, she reckoned only a civil servant in a Ministry office could have imagined that untutored girls would be able to carry out a job with the same professionalism as families of boatmen who had been doing it all their lives. Nevertheless, when the advertisement appeared, she was only too happy to give up her job in the Nautical Almanac Office at the Admiralty for the chance to skipper a vessel of her own, even if it was only a canal narrow boat.

The girls, who had to be over twenty-one, spent three weeks training to see if they were suited to the job, then they began work in earnest, setting off from the depot at Southall for the London Docks, where they picked up a cargo of prefabricated houses and steel strip. After dropping them in Birmingham they went to the Coventry coalfields where they picked up loads of coal, then set off back to London.

They worked a twenty-hour day for the princely sum of £3 a week. Officially there was a crew of three to each pair of boats, but Olga recalled: ‘It was very difficult for three girls to get on together. There was always the odd girl out, and in fact most girls decided to go two-handed. It meant more work, but it was important to have a bit of privacy.’

The first job in the morning was starting the big diesel, which could be a problem, particularly in bad weather. It was as much as two girls could do to turn the starting handle. Then there were the locks to be opened and closed and navigated, which wasn’t as easy as it looked. ‘We had a lot of accidents, took a lot of bumps and knocked a lot of rivets off before we mastered the art.’ They didn’t have to unload the boats, but they did have to sheet them up again afterwards and they did have to keep them baled of water. ‘Every new load seemed to twist the boat in another direction and open up a fresh leak.’

Every other trip they got three days off and if it was at the Birmingham end of their run Olga went home to mum and dad. ‘If it was at the London end, we used to take the opportunity to go up west and go into a hotel and demand a five-shilling meal. The Dorchester was one of our favourites. Despite our appearance they had to serve us, I don’t think I’ve ever been in the place since.’

They attracted the attention of a number of writers and artists, including A.P. Herbert and Augustus John. Clement Freud, then an under-chef at the Dorchester, once came and tossed a salad for them in their washing-up bowl. But the chaps they most liked to run into were sailors from whom they could scrounge delicacies like pots of jam and useful garments like polo-necked sweaters and waterproofs.

Inevitably there were bombing raids, but they learnt to ignore those just as they did the dead dogs and babies that came floating by as they chugged along the canals. ‘I suppose we should have reported the babies, but there was a war on. The G.I.s were here and quite a few unwanted infants must have found their way into the world. As far as we were concerned it was more bother than it was worth because there would have to be an inquest and that meant we Would have to give evidence. It was simpler to pretend they weren’t there.’

On V.E. Day, which marked the end of the war in Europe, the girls’ job came to an end. They handed back the canals to the boatmen and returned to Civvy Street. Olga went first to Switzerland, then to Corsica. Then in 1947 she took up motorcycling and in the next few years was a regular competitor in trials, scrambles and races, winning two gold medals at international six-day events. ‘So much for Women’s Lib,’ she sighed sadly. ‘I don’t think there’s a single woman motorcyclist competing regularly today.’

Anthony Wood Column *Oxford Mail* 27 June 1977

**Olga Tevelos at the tiller of her wartime narrow boat**

**Unforgivable, unforgettable Belsen**

The emaciated figure pushed its way through the bodyguard of Oxfordshire Yeomanry and almost fell into the arms of Colonel Dick Taylor. ‘Mr Dick,’ it cried, ‘Mr Dick, don’t you remember me? I am Anna Marie!’ How could the landowner’s son from the Northumberland Yeomanry, who had taken temporary command of the Queen’s Own Oxfordshire Hussars, remember? It was impossible for him to tell the sex of the bundle of rags which stood before him, let alone recognise its identity from the shaven head, hollow cheeks and toothless mouth that grinned at him.

Yet it was indeed Anna-Marie, the pretty young Frenchwoman who had worked for his father as a lady’s maid before the outbreak of the Second World War. Major Ben Barnett, former High Sheriff of Oxfordshire, broke off from the extraordinary story he was telling about his fellow officer and searched for the right word to describe his feelings. ‘It was the only… heart-warming… thing that happened in the seven or eight days we were in the place,’ the retired Oxford stockbroker said with a sigh. Then he resumed his chilling story with the matter-of-fact understatement you might expect of an ex-military man.

We were in the drawing room of The Stud House just inside Northamptonshire, the home Major Barnett and his wife, Delia, moved to when the M40 carved a chunk out of their old home at Stoke Lyne, near Bicester. The purpose of my visit was to help Major Barnett contact any surviving members of 249 Battery, the unit of the Oxfordshire Yeomanry he led into the notorious Nazi concentration camp, Belsen, in the spring of 1945.

General Bernard D’Astorg, a Frenchman who was held prisoner there, had organised the building of a memorial to the thousands who died there and wanted Major Barnett and his men to attend the unveiling ceremony in Paris on 23 March 1994.

‘We were a unit of about 200 anti-tank gunners,’ Major Barnett recalled, ‘and by that stage of the war there were not that many tanks about. I suspect we got the job because we were the least useful members of the Army’s fighting forces in the advance on Berlin.’

Before meeting the area commander of the German Wehrmacht, who had clearly never set foot in the camp himself, they were given several injections and dusted with pest powder. Then they went inside to confront Josef Kramer, the camp commandant and the one hundred Nazi SS Guards —fifty men, fifty women — who ran Belsen, which contained some 60,000 prisoners.

‘I don’t suppose you know what a crowd of 60,000 people looks like. We certainly didn’t. We hadn’t any idea how to cope with a multitude of that magnitude, let alone deal with their problems. As we walked down the main avenue skeletal figures of all nationalities kept trying to reach out and touch us. At its end we discovered a pit measuring fifty yards by ten yards full of dead bodies.

‘All over the camp there were great piles of naked corpses of both sexes. Kramer told us there was three days’ supply of food for the inmates, but we found none, and to add to our difficulties the camp had been without water and light for three days as a result of the fighting around Belsen.’

Kramer was placed under close arrest without clothes in what had been the cold store of the German Army barracks. His staff they locked up for the night in one prison cell, where they had neither room to sit or lie own, and the following morning set them to work removing the piles of bodies and burying them.

‘The situation we were having to sort out was so horrific, I don’t think we took it in. We were too busy. Added to which it was the first concentration camp the British Army came across. Consequently, the place was absolutely swarming with reporters and photographers.

‘Our cook was a chap called Jarman, who was head chef at one of the Oxford colleges. How he managed to feed all the VIPS who descended on us I’ll never know.’ But when at last Major Barnett was able to hand over to a specialist Field Hospital Unit and take some well-earned leave, the full enormity of what he had been dealing with sank in with a vengeance.

His wife Delia remembered: ‘I was a Wren at the Admiralty in London at the time. The second night we went to the cinema. The first thing he saw on the newsreel was Belsen. It broke him up.’ ‘For ten years after the war,’ said Major Barnett, ‘I wouldn’t happily go near a German. I’m still not happy talking about it. It makes me sweat a bit.

‘To tell you the truth, when the British Embassy in Paris wrote to me about the memorial, my initial reaction was I didn’t want to have any more to do with Belsen. Then I thought perhaps the French and other people who survived the camp would rather like to see me to say thank you. I felt I owed it to them to say: Yes, I’d go.’

*Oxford Mail* 19 January 1994

**Japanese PoW to Tokyo palace guard**

The Japanese guard did his best to convey the news: ‘Boom, boom, no come,’ he shouted, pointing to the sky to signify there would be no more Allied bombing raids. The men in Kanchanaburi prisoner-of-war camp in Thailand didn’t yet know about what had happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, let alone about nuclear bombs. Perhaps, they thought, their brutal guard had dreamed up some new way to torment and torture them.

So, they abused him in typical military fashion, then got back to their task of digging out a moat around the camp — designed by their captors to discourage any escape attempt — working with ‘chenkals’, a coolie instrument, a sort of cross between a spade and a hoe. Four days later on 15 August 1945 it was a different matter when Captain Naguchi, the Japanese camp commandant, announced to the senior British officer that a Japanese surrender had been ordered by Emperor Hirohito.

‘A tremendous roar went up throughout the camp,’ Lieutenant Colonel John Mortimer recalled at his home in Harwell. ‘*God Save the King* and *Rule Britannia* were loudly sung in a spontaneous expression of relief at release from the miseries of the last three-and-a-half years. Flags of all the Allied nations suddenly appeared, were hoisted, and flew proudly from the top of our huts. Our Japanese jailers were astonished. They couldn’t believe we’d hidden them all these years.’

For Captain Mortimer, as he then was, it was a wonderful moment after all the wretchedness and humiliation of captivity in Japanese hands, an experience he said he would never forget as long as he lived.

He had been captured at the fall of Singapore in February 1942, spent ten months in a Chinese shop in Changi on Singapore Island, then been herded into an overcrowded cattle truck on a five day journey up the Malayan peninsula to Banpong in Thailand to start work on the construction of the Burma-Siam Railway, the notorious Railway of Death.

Along with many others he had survived beatings, disease and privation, the misery of the jungle and monsoon rain, continuous bouts of malaria and dysentery, and all the other things that made prison life so precarious. Now he was a free man, or was he? Throughout the years of captivity, the thought had been ever present in his mind that prisoners might well be massacred when things were going badly for the Japanese or when they had no further use for their labour, and in the conditions after a surrender the enemy might well be trigger-happy.

Nonetheless, when he and a subaltern from his regiment and two other Royal Artillery officers learned that there was a collection of Indians of all sorts at a camp under Japanese control at Banpong they decided something should be done about it.

So, clad in the new green uniforms which had been air-dropped by the RAF, they set out for Banpong, found the camp and demanded the surrender of the Japanese officer, relieving him of his sword and revolver. Much to their surprise, he bowed and hissed and handed over the camp and what food and equipment he had.

Alongside was an Anti-Aircraft Battery run by the Indian National Army, who been forced into manning Bofors guns by the Japanese and there they repeated the exercise, though the Indian officer in charge was rather more reluctant to disarm his men. Then at the head of a motley collection of Indians numbering about a hundred they set off for Bangkok.

‘Looking back on it all,’ said Lieutenant Colonel Mortimer, ‘we must have been crazy. We could have been wiped out so easily, especially as there were quite a lot of Japanese units nearby.’ But travelling mainly by night in due course they reached the Thai capital, now occupied by the Indian Division.A week later they flew out to Rangoon.

Over the Gulf of Martaban one engine of the Dakota gave trouble and suddenly Lieutenant Colonel Mortimer was very afraid. ‘Having survived the Japanese, I didn’t want to end my days by dropping into the sea.’ Thankfully, the plane reached Rangoon without further mishap. A spell in hospital followed then, after a month of convalescence in India, he came home to England for some long-overdue leave before returning to India in 1946 to resume his career as an officer in the First Punjab Regiment of the Indian Army.

A few months later his commanding officer sent for him. ‘Your own battalion is now part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan,’ he said. ‘How would you like to join them and have the boot on the other foot?’ Mortimer replied: ‘Send me, I should like to go.’ ‘So, I spent the last nine months of my Indian Army career on the north-west coast of Japan and in Tokyo, where my battalion guarded the Imperial Palace. Inside, the Emperor was under orders to stay. Perhaps fate does deliver!’

Anthony Wood Column *Oxford Mail* 15 August 1975