



ERIC TOYNTON
6th Air Landing Brigade

Eric Toynton, No 14655364, 6th Air Landing Brigade, 6th Airborne Division, 'C' Company 1st Bn Royal Ulster Rifles:



I was born in Butterwick, Lincolnshire, 3rd May 1925, and left school at 14 in May 1939 to be a grocer's errand boy at 50p per week. There were a few bombs near Boston, not too many. I wanted a better job so I took over from the boss's son at a higher-class shop when he left to be a Spitfire pilot. Then in 1943 when I was 18 I enlisted. I went to Grantham for the



medical – and I was A1. There was a choice: either the mines or the army. I chose the army. Mid-May I had to go to Carlyle for a night, then report to Omagh, Co Tyrone, Northern Ireland, for six weeks junior and six weeks advanced training. Then, after a spot of leave, I was posted to the Royal Irish Fusiliers holding battalion. Their job was erecting tents on Southampton common for the Americans for D-Day.

For the 6th Airborne Division we had two training trips in Hotspur gliders. I'd never been away from home, or in a train or a bus before, let alone aircraft! Before I joined up they were volunteers but for D-Day it was: You, you and you! Very, very scary but I passed alright and then received the Pegasus chevrons for my blazer. Then we were at Woodhall Spa and could go to Boston at night on the bus after road work, route marches, keep fit classes, all for the "Big Scheme", practice for D-Day. One route march was 70 miles from Friday to Sunday. Next stop was Bulford, Salisbury Plain, Kiwi Barracks.



May 1944 we were taken to an aerodrome in Dorset, don't know where, for four weeks under canvas in a wire compound. They told us when and where we would be landing on D-Day, and the names of local people near the beachhead. Mornings we did Keep Fit, afternoons Briefings, studying RAF reconnaissance photographs. We saw film of holes being dug for poles to obstruct landings. The Germans paid the French to do it. After we landed, the French wanted *us* to pay for it!

D-DAY minus 1 June 5th we were keyed up, ready to go, but it was cancelled because of the rough weather. Next day we took off. It was late afternoon. Our Horsa gliders were all wood except for the wheels and controls; they were mostly three-ply, compressed pine wood glued together, unlike the Americans' tubular steel. As we went to take off, our wing was trailing along the ground.....

320 gliders left for Normandy that day, that's two and a half battalions, the Oxford and Bucks and us. Only two gliders didn't arrive. One failed to leave because a rope broke and another had to return. Apart from those two, all arrived safely. It was a

miracle really. They were built so that they would come apart in the centre. We sat along the sides, 29 of us. Some gliders carried a jeep and a small gun with crew; Hamelcars carried a small tank. After that scary beginning – we were all petrified after that wing tip trailing – we thought: This is it. We were all tense, quiet. I was thinking: When I'm there I've got to kill, I've got to kill to survive. If I kill a German, his parents will get a notification saying he's been killed. But if he kills me, my mum will get the same. I was feeling sorry for them really. But then, I thought, it's their fault I'm here, so why worry about them? I've got to kill him first. That's the attitude I took.



There was some shrapnel came through our glider on the way over but we made it OK. The trip took about two hours and we landed between eight and nine in the evening, about dusk. It was bumpy in the air and even more bumpy landing at nearly a hundred miles an hour, but no-one was hurt. It was a perfect landing.

Early in the day, the paratroopers had landed to cut down the poles and level the ground. We had to move quickly, out of the way of the others landing all round us. We dashed for the rendezvous near Ranville. We carried small trenching tools and 24-hour rations. I didn't see any Germans that night, except a dead one. I got hit in the knee by something, don't know what, so I just put a field dressing on, wrapped it up as well as I could, and carried on. I've still got the scar.

By D-Day evening we were dug in on the edge of Ranville. It turned out Ranville was actually our headquarters. We were supposed to get to Caen but there was a heavy machine-gun nest on the crossroads between Ranville and Colombelles. That's a night I'll never forget. Everything was happening. They were bombing Caen. Dakotas were coming back dropping supplies, and the Germans thought they were more paratroops, so they opened up. It was like a big firework display got out of hand, nerve-wracking, bangs and explosions everywhere. Carnage. It was terrible.

Next day we moved to the village of Longueville to liberate it. That's when we met the Germans proper. Then St Honarine, and their tanks came up so we had to withdraw to Ranville. That's when the RAF came over with Typhoons and rockets. Then we dug in to defend Breville for several days. Didn't sleep for three nights, no washing or shaving. It was all action. You couldn't afford to sleep. We had two ration packs but no time to eat. All the supplies were coming in so you had to make do for the first week. After that there might have been a small mobile kitchen with the unit but nothing else. Just round a right hand bend at Breville that second day, D-Day plus 2, we came across a German knelt in the middle of the road. He was dead. He was just knelt there. He'd been shot in the back of the head. I still see him, and the road and everything, just as clear as it was then. I was so tired I was just about off my head! I was flaked out. We were up against it. It was sheer carnage. Cattle in the fields were lying, feet in the air, dead and swollen up three times their normal size.

At Breville four of us dug a hole in the ground, stole some wood to line it, got some heavy planks to cover over, stole the hood off an old sports car we found in a barn, and slept on parachutes. Of course they didn't keep the damp out. Daytime we were in a split trench. That was a defensive position. The Germans were trying to break through the bridgehead while the Americans were making their way round Cherbourg and St Lo. We had to hold it for about a fortnight and stop the Germans coming through. Then I was sent back to England with abscesses on my eardrums.

My unit came back and regrouped while a fresh lot went out. While we trained for the Rhine Crossing, the Germans broke through the Ardennes, so Christmas Eve 1944 the whole Division crossed from Folkestone to Ostend, spending Christmas Day in lorries on the way to Dinant, completely demoralised. We went to help the Americans at the Battle of the Bulge. For three weeks we were dug in the woods, didn't see a German, live or dead. We only got out to relieve ourselves. We had groundsheets to stop the snow blowing in the trenches and stood on sticks because there was that much water and frost in the ground. Everything was at a standstill. We couldn't move because of the weather; it snowed, it froze, it snowed - for three weeks. Everything was slippery, covered in ice.

Then we went back to our barracks at Bulford for more training and did some more flying training. Then we went to Holland and got dug in on the River Maas. During lulls in the fighting we had to go round collecting the bodies for burial, lots of bits. We held out there some time and then came back to England for regrouping. I was on compassionate leave just when they were leaving for the Rhine Crossing so I missed that trip.

The war in Europe finished on VE Day so we were kitted out ready to go to the Far East, did jungle warfare training etc; the senior NCOs were out there training ready, but the war finished and we were never needed. No sooner were the celebrations over than we had to go off to Palestine to get that sorted out. I was there about a year. It was hot and dusty, flies by the millions, ants by the millions.



There were orange groves and banana groves. The best part was Tel Aviv; it was a lovely place. The better part of Haifa was nice but the Gaza side was a shanty town. We did night patrols in Jerusalem mostly, watching out for terrorists, making sure who everybody was and what they

were doing. We did a stint guarding the High Commissioner's house for conferences and that sort of thing. There's a picture of me holding a five foot rock snake killed in the garden.



When things quietened down at the end of 1947 we moved to Austria, did some guard duties on the Austrian-Yugoslav border. We had snow and sunburn there, it was really nice. We went up into the international zone, all spit and polish there, to the Schonbrunn Palace; it was massive. We took over from the Russians, a ceremonial take-over in front of the Palace. It had a big drive in the front and massive gardens at the back with huge fountains; they weren't working, of course, because of the war. Nobody lived there, only caretakers. There were two patrols on three shifts, 24 men.

There were seventeen flags to put up and take down, four for each country and one Union Jack.

We went into Vienna, to the Hofburg Palace where they have big conferences, a lovely palace, then to the Palace of Justice where the courts were. Then we did a special guard for the four powers, a guard of honour for a big conference when the four generals met. They inspected us in turn. Had to spit and polish my rifle, the first time I'd ever done that.



1947 I was demobbed in Vienna. All these years afterwards, I still see that dead German and have nightmares with them all coming at me with fixed bayonets.