

## THE FORGOTTEN BATTLES OF NORMANDY AUGUST 1944

When we went to France on holiday last August we had little inclination that our holiday was going to include a trip to Bayeux and start researching my Father's war time experiences in Normandy. We had left a day earlier from Montpellier due to the forecast of bad storms - we did not want to pack up wet camping equipment, so we headed home, albeit very sad after a really good holiday. For many years I had wanted to see Bayeux and the tapestry. Dad had always told me about the circular Cathedral and how beautiful the tapestry was. Little did I know that this 'slight diversion' via Bayeux on our route home was going to put a mere 400 miles on our journey home!



Bayeux is simply beautiful - peaceful, picturesque, tranquil and simply stunning. We went into the Cathedral on a sunlit early Sunday morning - at 8.am. It was a unique feeling when we entered this magnificent building . We went through the door on the side, the door which Dad would have gone through according to my research. It was difficult to envisage what it would have been like in war time, but I understand that it would have been with a basic stone altar and a few candles. Our next visit was to the famous Bayeux tapestry - wonderful with so much intricate detail. We were virtually the only visitors in it at 9.am. We had seen this and it was better than we had expected - I had never expected to see Halles it or for that matter for it to be so large and preserved.

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As we had a small amount of time to spare before we headed back to Calais, Alex our youngest Son asked if we could visit the D Day Museum - I must admit that I was not over keen on the idea at looking around memorabilia and uniforms, but reluctantly agreed. How wrong I was in my initial judgment - for whilst our Sons were looking at uniforms I spotted the wartime maps - Knowing that Dad was injured on 6 August 1944 at a place near Bayeux beginning , he claimed with V - it could only have been Vire. Mustering my best French I asked the Curator how long it would take to drive to Vire - I was told about 40 minutes and that it was on minor roads - knowing the way the French drive I decided that doubling it would be a more realistic time - a trip of 3 hours was out of the question with a ferry to catch, but on our way home we decided that we would research Dad's wartime experiences and return.

Without the internet and many wonderful people along the way we would have never achieved this. My knowledge was sketchy to say the least based on childhood memories of Dad's accounts. I knew that he had served with the Devonshire Regiment, was a signaller, had done training in Ireland, on the South Coast of England, and Burnham on Crouch. He had been drafted to France through fate as he had been on an intensive signallers course at Catterick - The War Office had over estimated a draft of men - all those who could return to their Units and courses did, those who could not were drafted accordingly. In Dad's case this meant France.

A wonderful Lt. Col from The Gordon's replied to my email for help, and sent me copies of the Regimental histories. Dad had always said that he had fought alongside the Gordon Highlanders. He gave me some helpful advice on how to pursue my research further. At this time I was still under the misapprehension that Dad was injured whilst serving with the Devonshire Regiment - I was wrong again! It was going to be difficult, although not impossible to get his records from Glasgow without a service number.

Knowing that Dad had been a member of BLESMA,[British Limbless Ex-Servicemen's Association], I contacted them, who gave me the vitally important service number, date of enlistment and discharge together with details of how Dad came to have his leg amputated. I was surprised to find out that Dad had been a rifleman in the Cameronians - although on reflection, one of his favourite sayings was 'Go and tell that to the Cameronians'.

For many years I had suspected that Dad had decided to have his leg amputated above the knee due to chronic osteomyelitis - a chronic infection of the bone. He had said that he had had to have 33 operations, with 2 major operations during the first week and was not expected to live. He decided that it was best to have his leg amputated, as he would have had a permanently stiff leg, which he felt would be more disabling than an artificial leg, - a decision which he never regretted. This was done on 10 March 1947, 2 days prior to his thirtieth birthday.

Streptomycin, a very powerful antibiotic which could have caused deafness and renal failure had been offered, as this might have helped with the osteomyelitis, but Dad declined this. Dad underwent bone grafting and had been in plaster from his waist down for 6 months, having both legs grown together for skin grafting at East Grinstead Hospital under Professor Beard, whom he later saw again and kept in regular contact.

During this time he learnt embroidery and became very accomplished at this, as well as making stuffed toys during this period. In fact Dad taught me how to do embroidery. Guinness was put on Dad's prescription, but as he strictly abstained from drinking alcohol, he declined this. This made him somewhat popular with the other patients as they gladly drank his prescription!

Today we treat osteomyelitis with antibiotics, bone grafting and Ilizarov frames, and unfortunately, we still have to amputate limbs due to this condition. Dad was always willing to allay peoples fears of having amputations, and yes, we could have done with his expertise and counselling today.

Now that we had this additional information we requested his papers from Glasgow which confirmed the information, most of which we knew. Our next step was the Public Records Office at Kew - where their knowledgeable and helpful staff pointed us in the right directions. We looked at the Regimental Diaries - and maps but were slightly unsure where the battle took place - further investigation was needed. To my surprise I saw Dad's name in one of the training exercises in May 1944 as Lance Corporal Archer signaller. Dad was very proud that he could send Morse at the maximum words per minute required and of the fact that he was an assistant radio operator.

In the meantime a lady had seen my plea for help for information on the Devon Regiment and gave me some useful background information about the Devon Regiment and kindly offered to take a photo of Dad to the Regimental Reunion.

A gentleman from Edinburgh had seen a request for help via the web on the BBC People's War page and offered to do some research for me in the libraries in Edinburgh - up until now I thought the area Dad had been injured near Estry, but I was slightly in the wrong place. Copies of the Cameronian Regimental histories and other supporting information were sent to me, which gave the exact location.

We were having difficulty in correlating the army battle maps with present day maps. However, through a French internet site, a French historian sent us maps of the local area produced in 1944, which enabled us to define the area on present day maps.

A telephone call from a Major in the Cameronians one afternoon confirmed that Bois des Monts [literally translated meaning High Woods], at Point Saffery as shown on the Regimental Diary maps was indeed the battle site.

Dad landed somewhere in Normandy on 29 July 1944 after a very rough crossing in a flat bottomed boat. On board the troops were gambling the little French currency they had been given. Dad went through Bayeux and Caen, but exact information is somewhat non-existent, except that is for an entry in Dad's paybook showing a posting to the 9<sup>th</sup> Cameronians on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1944. From the Cameronians history I know that on the 5<sup>th</sup> August the regiment moved to Au Cornu in preparation for a battle the following day. I am going to try and research this further, although I have my doubts that there is much more information. Dad told me that the troops were so hungry that they raided the farms for cheese which stank and apples. Dad never did like French cheese after the War. Tea was an important commodity and was dried and re-used on several occasions. - Something which I tend to do, in so much as I will use my herbal tea bags twice!

On 5<sup>th</sup> August 1944 at Au Cornu the Cameronians were joined by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gordon Highlanders and 2<sup>nd</sup> Glasgow Highlanders, the night being spent at Au Cornu, which is opposite to Chapple Le Cornu. Today, Chapple Le Cornu is farmland, with Au Cornu being partially wooded with the odd farm.

On 6 August a pre-Battle service was conducted I understand by either Padre Sam Cook [Cameronians] or Padre Alexander Dunlop [Gordon's]. One of the things that I always remember Dad saying was that the Padre spoke of forgiveness and 'love thy neighbour', but had a shovel and gun slung over his shoulder. According to my research Padre Cook had previously been a Curate at Porlingland and Surlington, was subsequently wounded, received the Military Cross, and became Rector of Pleasley, Derby. He died in the late 1950's. Rev Dunlop received an Emergency

Commission as a Padre, and after the war served with the Territorial Army, where he was awarded the Territorial Decoration. He had previously been mentioned in despatches.

At about 9.30a.m., the men ran over the hill of Bois des Monts, a distance of some one and a half miles from Au Cornu. The Waffen SS were laying wait for them on high ground opposite. Bois des Monts; there is a meadow which is surrounded by trees and high

woodland above. This runs to a valley at Pont Saffrey, opposite is a steep wooded hill described as the Grouney feature. At the crest of this feature the Germans waited. Around Pont Saffrey many men were killed and injured in a short time around midday on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August. They stood no chance of getting out unscathed as Mortars would have rained down on them striking and exploding in the trees above, and heavy machine gun fire from the sides. Dad said there was only one shovel between 3 men, and he very quickly dug a fox hole.

When Dad was injured he had a tobacco tin in his breast pocket covering his heart containing a pair of scissors, which in the force of the explosion bent in half. A Mortar bomb, referred to by Dad as a Moaning Minnie had landed in his fox hole and severely injured Dad's left lower leg. Dad also had shrapnel embedded all over his face, A comrade either side of him and within touching distance had both disappeared having been blown up, another comrade survived but later died of his injuries. At 3.p.m. on what was a blazing hot day either Padre Cook or Dunlop offered Dad a cup of sweet tea, which he promptly refused and asked for one without sugar! By then Dad had been stacked on an ambulance for just on 2 hours.



Today there are cows in the meadow across from Pont Saffrey, a small bridge over a stream which is little more than a ditch. The objective had been to capture the Gournay feature, which is a high hill on which the Germans were waiting and then proceed to Estry. On one side of Bois des Monts there is farmland and the only way to access it is via a small track. . There is no memorial despite

this Battle being one of the bloodiest in Normandy. The Regiments retreated and re-grouped at Au Cornu late in the afternoon on 6 August, where they remained for 5 days; and then went on to fight for the Falaise Road, [literally translated Cliff Road], which was one of the many Battle Honours shown on the Cameronians Colours. The Germans left Gournay of their own accord some days later.

We laid a British Legion poppy posy at the war of St. John le Blanc, which is a small village of a church, Marie, general store and a few stone houses. Dad would have been able to have seen the distinctive spire of the church of St Jean le Blanc des Monts and surrounding area.



memorial consisting of houses.

from Bois

A short distance away is the small village of Estry, which consists of a church, Marie, boulangerie, garage, one general store and a few stone houses. Also on 6 August 1944 between 9a.m.-11 a.m. many men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gordon Highlanders along with the supporting tanks of the Guards and other units lost 11 tanks within site of the Estry church, with many men killed or injured by Mortars, machine guns and a German tank which was dug in by the church. The tank by the church, being eventually blown up by our shell-fire. Today, within

the churchyard, there is a  
this could well have been  
Even today, this track  
and has blue bells,  
There is a new farmhouse  
childrens play equipment in  
side of the village which  
guns has now gone being  
It hardly seems possible a battle happened here.



pit where dead flowers are put  
the site of the German tank.  
about 300 yards long still exists  
primroses and cowslips growing.  
opposite the church with  
the garden. The wood to the  
had Mortars and heavy machine  
replaced by several new houses.

Dad never spoke about what really happened at the Battlesite, telling us the briefest of details, nor of his journey to Bois des Monts. He was always proud of the fact that he served with the Scottish Regiments, and that the Germans were extremely frightened of the Scottish Regiments.

Despite the fact that a close friend had offered to accompany him to return to the Battlesite and the places he had been in France, he never wanted to return. Dad suffered severely from what we would call today post-traumatic shock, which was unheard of during the immediate post war years. Dad was a deeply religious man and regular church goer, and was always in church for 6<sup>th</sup> August and on Remembrance Sunday.

I feel very privileged to have had the opportunity to visit the Battlesite and take the opportunity of thanking all those who have helped me with my research. I still have further research to do regarding where the Casualty Clearing Station and Field Hospital was and of Dad's pre-battle whereabouts. It is my intention to return to the Battlesite again and may be to walk up the hill at Bois des Monts, which at present I am unsure whether is private ground, and is guarded by extremely large dogs.

I shall never forget Bois des Monts, Estry, Montchamp, Monthchauvel and all the other little hamlets and villages that I have seen, nor of the utter sacrifice so many men made. I have never experienced the utter horrors of the last war, of how many men died in such a short time and space. If anyone does have any further information, however, small I should be grateful if you would be kind enough to contact me please. It hardly seemed possible to have happened in such a quite and tranquil place. In the meantime I thank you for reading this article, and the many people that assisted me and provided guidance and information along the way.

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