

80th Anniversary of the Rhine Crossing

The 80th anniversary of 'Operation VARSITY' was celebrated and commemorated this year by a group of 32 people, including 99 year Philip Aucott, veteran of Op VARSITY, who landed over the Rhine in a Horsa glider with 2nd Bn, Ox and Bucks Light Infantry in 1945.

After everyone had been collected by the coach, the journey began and we headed to the hotel in Wesel, Germany. This was a great time for everyone to get to know each other, especially as we had people joining us from the USA and Australia. Most of the group were relatives of 6th Airborne men who were there in 1945 and individual stories and photos were shared amongst the group.

The travel out day was Sunday 23rd March, which meant we were able to tour the Drop and Landing Zones on the actual anniversary, the 24th March.

First up was DZ A, drop zone for the 3rd Parachute Brigade (1st Canadian Bn, 8th Bn and 9th Bn) a general overview of the plan was given before we ventured on foot into the centre of the DZ, luckily a local asset was available in the form of a WW2 Willis Jeep, which drove our veteran, Philip, making things a little bit easier for him.

Here I was able to describe the drop and subsequent battle by the 8th Battalion, who's job was to secure the DZ area, enabling the other two Battalions to secure their objectives. The battle for 'Axe Handle Wood' cost many lives on that DZ, but the 8th Battalion succeeded. Other losses were felt by the other two Battalions, including the CO of the Canadian Battalion, Lt Col Jeff Nicklin who was found dead still in his harness, entangled in a tree.

On the edge of Axe Handle wood remains of a German defensive position can still be seen, I did inform the group that on previous visits I had seen the odd piece of ordnance here and there, to which a loud reply came, "what, like this?" One of our group, Richard, had suddenly become our resident EOD and was stood over an unexploded shell, courtesy of the Royal Artillery from 1945. Cue the exit music, and we all safely departed that area.



The group entering DZ A

The only VC awarded on VARSITY was awarded to a Canadian medic, Fred Topham, his heroic action of tending to a wounded man on the DZ, subsequently getting shot himself before evacuating the wounded man still under fire was no doubt worthy of the highest honour. We passed the spot of his action as we moved to the 9th Battalions objective, the high ground just South of the DZ, called The Schnepfenberg feature.

The account of A Company, 9th Battalion, was told here. The Schnepfenberg feature was a relative high spot on otherwise flat farmland and was a Divisional objective handed to the 9th Battalion. A Company attacked and seized the top of the feature, only to find the defenders had bugged out already.

We then moved on to DZ B, where the 5th Parachute Brigade (7th, 12th and 13th Battalion) dropped. At the south edge of the DZ the tragic story of Pte Porrill, 13th Battalion, was told. He was killed by machine gun fire as his platoon were moving back into cover after moving out to engage a heavily defended position. Letters from his Platoon Leader, Lt Peter Downward (later Major General) were available too add real context to the action.

Moving through the 12th Battalion area we discussed their actions of securing the road that lead into Hamminkeln village, as well as them clearing dozens of farm buildings, all containing German soldiers and anti aircraft crews. As we moved off the vast open space of DZ B came into view, and it was easy to understand then why many casualties were taken on the DZ, with many German guns in action as the Battalions organised themselves.

The 7th Battalion's area was next, just a short distance away and at the far North end of all the 6th Airborne's area of operations.

The 7th Battalion's objective was to hold and defend the area, enabling the 12th and 13th Battalions to secure their objectives. This they did after a mostly accurate drop, however A Company had come down slightly 'plus' of the DZ and were the last Company to arrive. This turned out to be unfortunate for them as a German 88mm gun position had readied themselves and were firing into the 7th Battalion area, causing many casualties. The gun position was only 700 metres away, Mortar crews were put to action but were taken out before any sustained fire could be organised. Thankfully a Platoon from the 12th Battalion put in a flanking attack and silenced the guns.

Most of the group were relatives of 7th Battalion men and were travelling over the Rhine for the first time. Describing the action to them, stood in the positions they fought and died was an honour to be a part of.

A couple of years after the war, the CO of the 7th Battalion, Lt Col RG Pine-Coffin took part in a Battlefield tour for the Staff College, his transcript was available from that day and his words, on the spot of the action being described, were read out by his Grandson, Michael Pine-Coffin.



Michael Pine-Coffin reads out his Grandfathers account of the battle, on the spot of the action from 1945.

We then moved into Hamminkeln Village to attend a memorial service, this had been originally organised by the US 17th Airborne association (the 17th Airborne also took part in VARSITY). We arrived and took our place amongst the crowd, many locals were in attendance, which I must point out is not surprising, the people living in this area are at ease with their place in history and encourage visits and dialogue about the war. We watched as wreaths were laid by the 17th Airborne people and local dignitaries and then realised we weren't on the schedule to be involved. This was quite surprising as Hamminkeln village was the objective of the 12th Battalion, Devonshire Regiment. So we let the events play out and had our own ceremony after, laying a wreath and making sure our men were honoured.



The 6th Airborne group at Hamminkeln Town Hall

Day two was the time to look at the glider element of the operation, we naturally concentrated on the 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and their objectives of securing a road and rail bridge over the River Issel. The Issel is a river of canal size, but big enough to be a Tank stopper. It was crucial that these crossings were secured to 1) deny German use and 2) to facilitate the breakout from the area once the land elements had arrived in strength.

Our travelling veteran, Philip Aucott, told us of his flight over in his Horsa glider as part of A Company, and remembered hitting the ground with quite a bang, the glider took small arms fire on the way down. As the glider came to an abrupt stop against a tree it split in half, causing casualties. Philip remembered his Officer shouting "get away from the glider, form up on that road". There was a road nearby with a ditch alongside it, this provided cover for Philip and the other nine of his Platoon that made it out of the glider alive. Philip and the others had landed close to the Company objective, a cross roads just North of Hamminkeln village where they set up, protecting the other Company's as they set about their objectives. The attrition rate amongst the glider element was horrendous. At the end of the first day in Germany, A Company, 2nd Bn Ox and Bucks strength was 4 Officers, 56 Other ranks.

Also arriving by glider that day was Sgt Jack Long, 22nd Independent Parachute Company. The 'Pathfinders' had a different role on VARSITY. They were split up into small groups and spread around the entire Division. They were to assess the battle and update Division HQ and recommend the best location for the upcoming supply drop. The glider carrying Sgt Long landed East of the River Issel, which was unfortunately outside of the intended area and Sgt Long was sadly killed. Sgt Long's Grandson and Great Grandson, Gareth and Oliver, told the group about Sgt Long's service, including his exploits in Normandy, as we listened we were only a few hundred yards from where Sgt Long was killed in action.

We then drove East, following the 6th Airborne's route as they started the advance into Germany. A quick stop to look at a well preserved series of trenches and Machine Gun positions just outside Brunen gave the group a good idea of what the Airborne men had to deal with as they advanced through the towns and villages.

A few miles further in we came to an area known as Dammerwald. This was the scene of a large attack against a series of gun emplacements, carried out by the 7th Battalion on the 27th March 1945. A report of this action is contained within the 7th's war diary and as the features on the ground haven't changed in 80 years it was possible to walk the battle, and for some of the group they were literally following in their fathers footsteps. This action cost the lives of five men from the 7th Battalion and was typical of the stiff resistance the advancing troops had to deal with.

After a local lunch we drove into Holland to visit the Reichswald Cemetery. This immaculate place is the final resting place for most of the VARSITY casualties. A small service was conducted, with readings expertly delivered by Howard Perry, son of Ron Perry (7th Battalion). Wreaths were laid for all casualties of the 6th Airborne Division by 16 year old Oliver Long, Great Grandson of Sgt Jack Long (22 Ind Coy) and a wreath for the 7th Battalion casualties was laid by Chris Cornell, who's Great Uncle, Sidney Cornell was Killed in Action on 7th April 1945.

For Gareth and Oliver it was the first time they'd been able to visit their relatives grave, which was the same for Martyn and Carol Pauling who were visiting Carol's uncle, Jimmy Law (7th Battalion) who was killed during the Operation. An emotional moment for all concerned, followed by a time for reflection for the group as we spent time walking around the cemetery, reading the names of the men who have been resting there since the end of the war.





Howard Perry reading the service, and Oliver Long laying a wreath



Since we had crossed over the border into The Netherlands had time to drive down to the town of Baarlo. This was one of the locations along the River Maas that the 6th Airborne secured at the end of the Ardennes Campaign in January and February 1945.

One of our group, Paul Rickett, son of Sgt Wilf Rickett (7th Battalion) had a photo of a local family, with the words 'We are your friends til eternity, because you have saved us from the Germans' This was given to Sgt Rickett whilst he was billeted with the Pennings family. Through some local enquires previously, Paul was able to locate the descendants of the Pennings family that had presented his father with the photo.

We had arranged to meet the Pennings family and the two families connected again, the friendship shown to us from the residents of Baarlo was incredible.



Paul Rickett with Peter and Marcel Pennings

After the famous Dutch hospitality had ended, we headed back into Germany for our last night before heading back home. An evening of food and drink followed with new and ongoing friendships, all connected by their relatives involvement in the successful Airborne operation to cross the River Rhine made the long journey a worthwhile event.

The following from the 6th Airborne Division were directly represented:

Lt Col RG Pine-Coffin (7th Battalion)
Captain Eric Woodman (7th Battalion)
Sgt Jack Long (22 Independent Coy)
Sgt Wilf Rickett (7th Battalion)
Sgt Joe Thompson (12th Battalion)
Sgt Sid Cornell (7th Battalion)
Cpl William Smith (2nd Ox and Bucks)
Cpl James Mangan (225 PFA)
L/Cpl John Halstead (7th Battalion)
L/Cpl Ron Perry (7th Battalion)
L/Cpl Bill Law (7th Battalion)
Pte George Jackson (8th Battalion)
Pte Albert Breen (7th Battalion)
Pte Eric Truman (7th Battalion)
Pte Jimmy Law (7th Battalion)
Pte George Clough (7th Battalion)

Special mention to The Parachute Regiment Association for their assistance, making it possible for Philip Aucott, Ox and Bucks, Op VARSITY veteran, to travel with us for this tour.

Phil Aucott at the OX and Bucks memorial stone in Hamminkeln



The 6th Airborne group on DZ B on the 80th Anniversary of Op VARSITY



If you would like to discuss VARSITY, or share your relatives story that was there or want to know about visiting the area, please get in touch.

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