



43rd Infantry Recce - Wessex

Formed October 1941 from the 5th Battalion of the Gloucesters.

Formed as the Reconnaissance Regiment for the 48th Infantry Division and then transferred to the 43rd (Wessex) Infantry Division in November 1941, with which the regiment served until disbandment in 1946.

Landed in Normandy on 24th June 1944 (after the sinking of the liberty ship carrying HQ, A and C Squadrons with the loss of 180 men), the regiment fought throughout the campaign in North-West Europe



A Yorkshire Recce Driver's D-Day and Beyond Memories

Contributed by Harry Free

Location of story: France, Belgium, Holland and Germany

Background to story:

Contributed on: 01 June 2004 courtesy of BBC Peoples war.

We couldn't sail directly to Arromanches - we had to zig-zag across the Channel to avoid German submarines. The journey therefore took many hours and I remember playing bingo to pass the time.

When we arrived at Arromanches, we disembarked and went to a field a short way from the beach. It was a hot sunny day — some soldiers even went back to the beach for a swim in the sea. Everything seemed OK, very normal — then suddenly there were explosions around us and I remember asking 'what's that?' It was the Germans shelling us but we were so innocent that at first we had no idea of the dangers surrounding us. My response to my first experience of shelling was naive. I heard them flying over and exploding nearby — I didn't even know what they were. But I soon learned to duck when I'd seen the results — dead bodies, dead, bloated cows in fields. You couldn't see how you were going to survive with such destruction going on around you.

Sadly, one member of our troop was killed in this incident. Audrey, who was by now my fiancée, had given me a writing pad — I remember thinking that I wouldn't live to use it. I didn't panic about that; I just thought I'd end up getting killed.

We were sent to join up with the rest of the 43rd Recce who were based further inland to pick up our equipment. Each squadron was then given different areas to reconnoiter — I found myself as lead recce driver to 'A' squadron responsible for recce-ing for the infantrymen of the Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset regiments.

It was the summer of 1944, and we were pushing on through the Villers Bocage — Calvados country. French civilians in the Villers Bocage were very friendly and provided us with Calvados — a favourite tippie. It was a difficult area for fighting in because of the wooded terrain where the enemy could easily hide. The plan was to push the Germans back all the time, starting in France, then into Belgium, Holland and eventually into Germany by crossing the Rhine. And that's what we did, but there were many hold ups along the way. One particular stumbling block was Hill 112. The high vantage point allowed the Germans to view the allies' moves and use their defences to pin them down. This delayed the push for some considerable period, and cost many infantry lives.

Being a leading recce driver meant that you were under constant strain from the moment you set off to the moment you returned. There was nothing in front of you but the enemy - somewhere — so you had to have your eyes all over the place. The strain really was horrendous — you didn't know when the enemy would appear — round the next bend, over the next hill, hidden in the hedgerows lining the roads. Roads were mined; German bazookas were hidden in hedges. Sometimes there was a German gun at the very end of a straight road just waiting for you. You were looking for tell-tale signs constantly so couldn't afford to be distracted by flippant conversations, jokiness or anything. I remember once a mate called Charlie — he was a sergeant with brilliant eye-sight — put his head out of the turret of the car and a bazooka blew his head off. He hadn't spotted it.



We often drove into enemy fire unexpectedly, and as the gunner engaged fire with them, we had to reverse back rapidly — and I mean rapidly! I remember also another sergeant bending down inside the vehicle and at the same time the gunner firing in response to enemy fire: the recoil of the gun hit him in the forehead and killed him outright.

Once Hill 112 was taken, we were able to carry on doing our reconnaissance work, heading for Belgium. Our friends, the Americans under General Patten (2-gun Patten!), were heading for Paris.



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>

Photographers: Unknown

Description:

1 Troop Cars in Germany 1 Humber MkIV AC 3 Daimler MkII ACs & 1 Humber MkIII LRC.
Circa 1945

I remember one time finding an abandoned truck which we exchanged with a local farmer for eggs a plenty — for the next few days we lived on eggs, a welcome addition to our usual rations. The farmer was extremely happy with his truck — we got heartily sick of eggs!

The British allies had a wonderful reception when they arrived at Brussels. As we drove through the centre of Brussels in our tanks and armoured cars, people lined the street, cheering, waving flags and giving gifts of fruit and chocolates.

We were heading for Holland on Operation Market Garden, and although there were no major battles then, our job was the same as always — reconnaissance to seek out any German units along the way. We eventually found ourselves on the solitary road to Arnhem. There should have been no resistance along this road — except the SS Panza Division were 'resting' along its route! This meant that the army coming up from behind us were effectively delayed on their way to join up with the Parachute Regiment at Arnhem.

Our next destination after the failure of Arnhem, was Brunssum in Holland. I was billeted here for about three weeks during the winter of 1945 — this was a base from which we could relieve the infantry at Gellenkirchen. In Brunssum I remember going ice skating. There was also a village baker who baked big fruit tarts for the village and they shared them with us. There was a lovely cinema at Heerlen which I visited — it had double seats for couples.



Shelling made you wary, apprehensive, wondering where they would land — though at least we had the protection from armoured cars, except when we were used to relieve the infantry who had no protection at all. I don't remember feeling fear in a physical way — sickness, palpitations, nervous laughter and so on. In the job I was doing there wasn't time for fear, you were concentrating so hard all the time. I'm not a particularly religious person and didn't become religious even when facing a lot of danger. I really did believe that I would be killed — but I don't remember praying when on active service. I remember feeling admiration for the courage of the padre who showed no fear of live ammunition falling around him. I'm still not religious, but believe in God and an afterlife — there's no point to life otherwise.

I know that some of my troop experienced physical responses. I remember one member of the troop 'froze' in a trench and was ordered to move at gunpoint by the sergeant. My mate Nobby had a nervous breakdown during shelling at Gellenkirchen which was excessive — the shells were hitting trees and the shrapnel was horrendous, raining down. Nobby cracked. I found it difficult to understand at the time — almost like losing face. It surprised me that he was affected so badly because he always seemed more of a 'jack-the-lad' than me. It must have been a front. He was sent back to the hospital. I did feel at the time that he'd failed in some way but I can understand and accept it more now.

I think the greatest apprehension to all of us was caused by the 88 mm gun of the Tiger tank and the Moaning Minnie — it made a sound like a cow being sick, then you heard it whining as it fell, then the explosions as it landed. If you heard it explode you knew you were safe. It was essential to work as a team; you were all interdependent on each other. We had to work closely together. You got to know who you could rely on — there were some who you knew might let you down in a real emergency and you couldn't afford that.



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>
Photographers: Unknown
Description: 2 Troop cars and carriers stop for tea
Circa 1945



I was told after the war that I had a very blasé attitude, appearing not to have a care in the world. It wasn't a front — it was just my nature. Some years after the war I suffered severe bouts of depression and I often wonder if that was a belated response to the tensions of my experiences during the war. I was kept on recce duties for longer than was normal and at the end of the war the captain of my squadron apologised for keeping me on such a stressful job for so long.

There wasn't much time for discussions when we were on a recce, but when we returned to base we would mainly discuss what had gone on during the day — finding out how other troops in the squadron had got on, casualties etc. The main concern was to have a brew-up, something to eat and a smoke. There were plenty of cigarettes available but I only smoked when back at base, not when out on recce. Other conversations consisted of spinning yarns about conquests — typical 'bar room' talk — what the Yanks were doing with your girls (they had all the money!) We often complained about our stupid CO who used to say things like "hunting Germans today, chappies". We had no respect at all for him, or any other senior officers who were seen as inept.

There was a lot of camaraderie between us swaddies during the war and in my particular job we really did have to work as part of a team, so we got to know each other pretty well.

There have been many criticisms of British weapons, vehicles and equipment over the years and I think they are fair. Vehicles supplied did stand up to the job — Humber, Daimler and Scout armoured cars were adequate. But the weapons were lacking. Some of the assault troop weapons were a dead loss. The Bren gun was a joke — forever jamming. Rifles came out of the Ark compared to the Americans. The Lee Enfield rifle was used in the 1st World War and Canadian P14 rifles were not automatic. The German MP38/MP40 'Schmeisser' was far superior to anything we had.



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>
Photographers: Unknown
Description: Daimler armoured car of the 43rd.
Circa 1945



Churchill tanks had 'pea shooter' guns — two pounders whose shells would bounce off a Tiger tank. Tiger tanks had 88 mm guns — and I've seen ONE German 88 mm gun hold up a whole division! On this occasion, we were leading. We stopped and suddenly heard the crack of the 88 gun which was straddling the road in the far distance, but out of our sight. Then the shells came whizzing over, past my car, past Jackson in the second car.

We sat waiting and eventually Eddie Phillips, my car commander, said: "we're not hearing anything". We looked all round, to find all the other cars had retreated and we were on our own! They hadn't told us! We made a hasty retreat — about fifty miles an hour in reverse!

There weren't many recreational facilities on offer to servicemen that I remember. There were occasional mobile baths when we pulled out for a break — which wasn't very often as I rarely pulled out for a rest! The only way we could wash when on a recce was by igniting sand soaked in petrol and then heating water in a tin over it. That's how we boiled water for drinking too. Before going out on a recce we would eat a cooked breakfast — tinned sausages, fat bacon (I didn't eat that!) and perhaps beans; we wouldn't eat again until we returned to base at dusk. I never saw a library or a mobile cinema. There were occasional live concerts — I saw one with Gracie Fields. There were no other recreational facilities on offer.

The Salvation Army was brilliant, the best soldier's friend. They came right up to the front (WI and WVS never did) — very courageous in providing refreshments to soldiers on the front line. I had, and still have great respect for the Salvation Army.

I found no difficulty and felt no sense of guilt about the destruction of property in Germany — they'd done the same in Britain. I didn't agree with the intensive bombing campaigns (Bomber Harris) as they created huge obstacles/craters which made the practicalities of our job more difficult as we had to negotiate them with our vehicles. It seemed like sheer destruction for destruction's sake.

I never destroyed, or remember any members of my troop, destroying anything for the sake of it. The troop was always well disciplined. However, I remember that we did appropriate items of furniture from bombed out buildings in Germany and take them to Dutch families who'd been occupied by the Germans. I remember seeing wardrobes and other furniture strapped to tanks to be taken to Holland! It wasn't really seen as wrong, more a perk of the job. Some soldiers did sell these things and made quite a lot of money — some even bought bars out there.



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>
Photographers: Unknown
Description: 10 Troop stop for a tea break.
Circa 1945



In England the dress code for swaddies was very strictly enforced. On active service I was something of a rebel — whilst on recce duties I never wore a hard hat; I wore a black leather bomber jacket, air gauntlets, gumboots, a yellow neckerchief and a beret. I was never challenged by senior offices, they seemed to be very lax. There was only one other trooper that I remember who was much like me — Shagger — but the other soldiers seemed to stick to the uniform.

There was an incident on one rare occasion when I was wearing a hard hat. A British plane came down — as it descended my mate Wally told me the plane tip touched my helmet. Probably exaggerated, as I don't remember it, but another close shave. The pilot and crew survived — it's where I got my gauntlets from.

Belgians provided support to the Allies but were frightened of the Germans: during the Ardennes offensive, villages which had been flying Union Jacks and Belgian flags seemed overnight to be flying German flags. Self-preservation I suppose.

The Dutch were excellent people. When we were on the push to Arnhem they couldn't believe the number of troops passing through. They lined the streets cheering as we passed through. I was billeted with the Von Kemp family in Brunssem — they were very friendly and welcoming and I got to know all the families in the area.

Somebody must have known the war was coming to an end but the rank and file didn't, until the cease fire was announced to us the night before. On the day it was due to finish we were ordered to do a patrol but our officer, Jackson wasn't taking any chances. He put us all in a lay by and we sat and waited. Once the war was officially ended, it was 'on parade', all brasses polished, marching here, there and everywhere — a very strict dress code enforced!!



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>
Photographers: Unknown
Description: 10 Troop - Lieutenant Cannon (standing centre).
Circa 1945



A Yorkshire Recce Driver's End of War Memories

As an occupational force, we were not allowed to fraternise with the Germans after the war.

Civilians were very wary of us because of our appearance — we wore black tank suits and berets — very much like the SS who were feared. Hitler Youth caused us a lot of problems — creating craters in the roads. We made them fill them in.

After the war we used coffee, cocoa and cigarettes to barter with the Germans for cameras, watches etc. I bought a Great Dane puppy for 2,500 cigarettes whilst on peace-keeping duties.

About this time I was also put in charge of the petrol station in Wuppertal (a very powerful position!!), doling out petrol to army personnel. I had a Porsche car which had silver vases fixed on the sides for flowers. A good time was had by all. Then I went on leave, and when I returned the petrol job had been given to someone else. I was very sorry to lose that job and the car!

I was told after the war that I had a very blasé attitude, appearing not to have a care in the world. It wasn't a front — it was just my nature. Some years after the war I suffered severe bouts of depression and I often wonder if that was a belated response to the tensions of my experiences during the war. I was kept on recce duties for longer than was normal and at the end of the war the captain of my squadron apologised for keeping me on such a stressful job for so long.

I visited Brussels twice, once during combat, once after. The first time I spent drinking and going to night clubs where you picked up girls — the girls, they were prostitutes really, actually flaunted themselves in clubs and brothels. Brothels were legal and prostitutes weren't cheap. Soldiers visited brothels as a matter of course - we were only young and for some the anticipation was more than they could manage! Some used protection, others didn't. I did as I had seen films of what it was like if you caught VD. It was also a serious crime to catch VD in the army — you got your pay deducted. I would say I was a jack-the-lad — always first in the queue.

When we were in France, during combat, we pulled back one night and heard about two girls who were 'on the game'. I went with a mate to this house where they were - and joined a queue!. Our troop captain, Jackson, found out and had us up before the troop as an example of how not to behave! I marvelled at the Bon Marche, a large store in Brussels — it seemed to sell everything and was flourishing. The second time I visited Brussels was after the war finished. I was with my wife Audrey and we spent the time sightseeing — a much more sober affair!

I visited Antwerp and saw 'Apache dancing' — a very athletic form of dancing where the girls were thrown all over the place. I also visited Hamburg which was absolutely flattened.

I don't remember coming into contact with any non-combat units at any time — we were too near the front and they kept well back. The only rivalry (probably envy really) was with the Yanks because they had everything — silk stockings, chocolate, more money.... I thought the Yanks were mad — they'd swagger down the road calling out: 'Come out you Krauts'. You could sell them a Luger — they'd give anything for a Luger. They had very smart uniforms but they weren't very practical — not very warm in winter. They liked our battle dress.

There was some rivalry between us and the RAF. They were known as the 'Brylcream Boys'. We felt they had the life of Riley compared to the Infantry. They did a bombing mission and then went back to base to a life of comfort compared to the infantry who went back to a trench.

I don't remember changing the way we operated at any stage, apart from that. We just carried on as usual.

Nobody liked the SS, Hitler's elite troops because of the atrocities they were supposed to have committed. The SS were part of Hitler's strategy to have a superior race. We were always wary of them because the SS divisions were responsible for the persecution of the Jews in Poland. The SS were fanatical and we were really fearful of the Panzer division.

The Wehrmacht were like the ordinary British 'Tommy' so you didn't feel any particular hatred for them. In fact, whilst I was based at Wuppertal after the war, I was on guard duty at the prison where Von Rundstedt, the German Army Commander was being held. He was a terrific soldier — looked the part, a real soldier's bearing. I thought he was a brilliant general, the way he conducted the war. I had a lot of respect for him. We in Britain had a lot of old fashioned ideas especially at the beginning of the war. We didn't know anything about Blitzkrieg and had to modernise our ideas as the war progressed.



In France the resistance movement was mainly communist controlled. Once we captured a town occupied by Germans these resistance workers came out of hiding. They shaved the heads of French girls who had gone out with Germans as they were seen as collaborators.

I personally never had any dealings with the Resistance, but those higher up obviously did and used them to gain information.

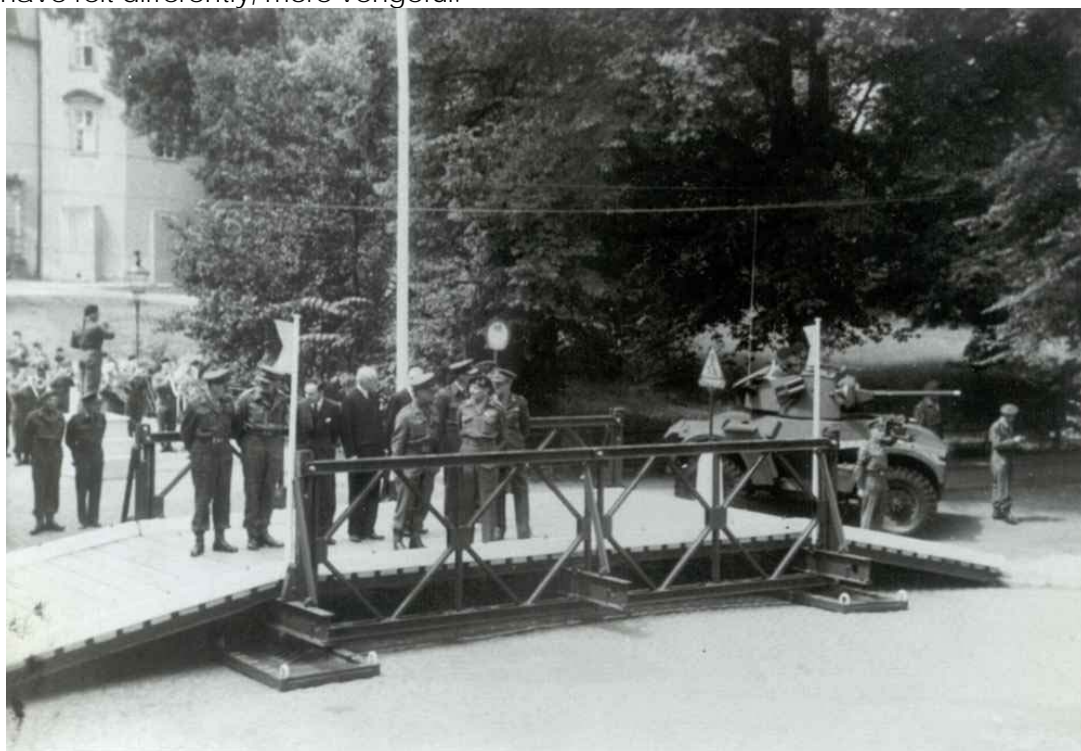
I remember one time when we on a recce, we asked a group of French nuns if they'd seen any Germans on the road they were walking along. They said no, but when we got there, the Germans were waiting for us. So I'd never trust a nun!

In our troop, our officer strictly enforced the 'non-fraternisation' rule. But we found ways round it — what the eye doesn't see....! So the experiences I've mentioned earlier were not endorsed, or even known (mostly!) about by the officers. You'd have been for the high-jump if they'd found out.

Recce had a reputation for being disciplined, one of the few units not to indulge in widespread looting. I'd have to agree with this: there was no looting because there was no time for looting. The job of a recce unit was to 'seek, find, observe and report back' so the practicalities of the job didn't allow time for looting. If there had been time, we would have seen it as a 'perk of the job'. The infantry obviously did have more time than us.

It has also been said that 43rd Recce was not involved with any mistreatment of German prisoners. To my knowledge, this again is true: as already stated, our job was to seek, find, observe and report back - not to take prisoners. Occasionally we picked up prisoners but I never recall any prisoners being treated badly. Shouted at, but not physically hurt. We didn't have any particularly vengeful feelings towards the Wehrmacht as we saw them as like us.

Seeing the concentration camps for the first time was a terrible shock. I couldn't believe that people could treat human beings like that. The guards at these camps were the dregs of Germans. I felt sorry for the state of the inmates — I couldn't really take it in, seeing all the bodies and the people like skeletons. As a recce unit, again all we could do was continue to advance leaving the infantry to deal with the situation. My attitude to the German people didn't change — I just carried on doing my job. Perhaps it's more difficult to associate yourself with foreign people — if the concentration camp inmates had been English prisoners of war being treated like that, or if I'd actually had to go in there and deal with the situation, maybe I'd have felt differently, more vengeful.



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>

Photographers: Unknown

Description: The 43rd Division March past at Celle. Monty takes the salute.

24th May 1945



There was no drinking of alcohol when you were on a recce apart from the usual rum ration — which was in fact only available when the weather was cold. I was detailed to collect the rum rations from HQ so I developed quite a liking for it! During action, we rarely drank apart from that — again there was no time — except when we were in France and we had all that Calvados.

When the war ended, there was much more drinking. Some soldiers got hold of illegally distilled Schnapps from the Germans. It was lethal - rumoured to make you go blind. We were warned against drinking it and we didn't in our troop, though I know some infantrymen did.

My memories of VE Day were that it was just like any other day for us. It was 'spit and polish'! On VE day we were in civvy billets patrolling near Celle, maintaining a curfew. If we saw anyone out after curfew we took them back to base. VE day was a routine day for us. It was different for others as they were waiting to be told they could go home, but as a regular I had to complete my 7 years which would be in 1947. We heard the celebrations in London on the radio — I remember feeling envious because all we were doing was patrolling.

I felt glad it was over, but there were rumours of a 'werewolf movement', an underground German movement which we were apprehensive about, and we were still resented by some people. The ordinary Germans weren't cowed by defeat and I remember seeing a torch-lit parade in Wuppertal with Germans singing and marching. It was an impressive sight.

After Germany surrendered I don't remember any problems maintaining discipline among the men, despite the number of swaddies waiting to be de-mobbed. The 43rd was disbanded and we were transferred to the 14/20 Kings Hussars which had returned from India. This was a tank regiment attached to the Ghurka division. We were stationed at Wuppertal and I think I used my position as a tank driver effectively — everything got out of the way. I enjoyed that. I took some delight in knocking German trams off their lines — a touch of the tiller bar did the trick.

Soldiers did get drunk — they'd order a bucket of beer at the bars in Wuppertal, but they never got out of hand.

You could stay on the fairground all night for a cigarette. Germans would follow you for a cigarette end. I used to drop mine down the drain — my small way of taking revenge. I also had a suit made for 10 cigarettes — it took about a week to make.

I had a fatalistic attitude — I suppose we felt that we had a right to have some fun whenever there was a chance to because you didn't know if you'd be alive the next day. My fiance had packed me a writing pad and when I found it after I'd arrived in France I remember thinking that I didn't think I'd be alive for long enough to fill it up.

The only time my attitude changed and I really believed I was destined to survive was after an incident that happened about a month before the end of the war. We were on a recce and pulled up in a lane. A group of us disembarked and did a foot patrol to see if the Germans were in a nearby farmhouse. Half way across the field, the Germans opened fire on us. We fell to the ground as bullets whizzed over head. I tried to return fire with my Bren but it jammed! Typical.

We retreated crawling backwards to the lane where the rest of the patrol was waiting. Walking back up the lane, I reached my car and the gunner informed me that he'd tried to open fire on me as I approached thinking I was a German - and the gun had jammed. A close shave and one that made me re-think my ideas about my destiny.

I feel quite cynical about what's happened to our ex-servicemen since the war. I believe that it is totally wrong that they should be dependent on charities like the Poppy Day appeal. Leaving wreaths in memory of those who have died is sentimental and does nothing for the men who survived. They're not valued as they should be. The countries that lost the war provide more for their ex-servicemen than our government has done.

I believe soldiers gave their lives so that people could have their freedom today. I think that parades — at the cenotaph etc. - are hypocritical. I've never had any time for them. People who fought in the war can sit at home and remember their fallen mates etc. quietly and in private without the hullabaloo and all the superficiality organised by 'nobs' who've never fired a gun in their lives.

I think that soldiers are used as tools — bureaucrats who have no experience of war make decisions and gamble with other people's lives. After they've gambled, those remaining are forgotten and some have to depend on charity to survive. I think that young people today looking back at what's happened to ex-servicemen wouldn't come out and fight for their country.



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>

Photographers: Unknown

Description: The Regiment's Daimler Armoured Cars bulled for the parade at Celle.
24th May 1945



Picture courtesy of the <http://www.recce.adsl24.co.uk>

Photographers: Unknown

Description: C Squadron's last parade. Hermannsburg
29th Jan 1946