

REMINISCENCE

(for which apology must be made for any omission or historical inaccuracy)

Today, Sunday, 3rd May, 1953, we witness the dedication of a Memorial to those who lost their lives whilst serving with 716 Company, Royal Army Service Corps (Airborne Light). This may only have been a very small cog in a very large machine, but during its brief lifetime—a mere 5 years—it created a wonderful spirit which remains as virile today as when it was born.

However, let us begin at the beginning, and hearken back to a spring day in May, 1943, when at Weybridge, Surrey, Major E. Clive Jones, R.A.S.C., was handed a massive pile of literature and apprised of his appointment as O.C. of this new unit. Gradually officers and men made their appearance to join him in this new venture, many of them from 716's sister unit 250 Coy. of the 1st Airborne Division which had not long sailed for North Africa. We were a mixed bag; many experienced soldiers but many more raw recruits straight from Training Battalion or O.C.T.U., but almost immediately we seemed to capture that vital enthusiasm of our new O.C., a born leader who became almost a father to us.

Soon we found ourselves whisked down to Figsbury Camp, near Salisbury, where we joined the main body of our parent formation, the now famous 6th Airborne Division. We had scarcely settled in when more men arrived, literally in their hundreds, and soon we found ourselves up to a full strength of 421 all ranks. What an enormous amount of sorting out was required to mould these diverse elements into an effective force, but by June, 1944, the job had been effectively completed to enable 716 to carry out its first operational task.

Let us pause for a moment and consider the extent of this task. A Division normally has four R.A.S.C. Companies to keep it supplied with ammunition, petrol and rations. The 6th Airborne Division had two such Companies, 63 and 398, who functioned when the formation performed a static or ground job. It was during an airborne operation that 716 came into its own. With its Jeeps, trailers and motor-cycles, it went into action by air, landing by glider and parachute in the midst of the enemy. Thereafter it collected the various supplies parachuted from bomber and transport aircraft and distributed them to the fighting troops. With such a task it is clear that the Company's personnel had to be young, fit and able to look after themselves whatever the emergency. There is no use relying upon a front line when the enemy are all around you. In the course of time 716 acquired numerous other duties—but more of these later.

A matter of supreme urgency was to train parachutists, all of whom must be volunteers, but such was our spirit and keenness that we were quick to follow Clive Jones' example and make the trip to Hardwick and Ringway, returning, eight jumps completed and right shoulder self-consciously raised to emphasise the blue wings newly acquired. Glider training was proceeding apace and we were initiated into the arts of squeezing our Jeeps and trailers into the long cigar-shaped Horsas.

The pace of training steadily mounted until in the spring of 1944 it became obvious that something more definite was afoot and those in the know were given the code word OVERLORD—the Normandy landings. This was it, our first operation. If Clive Jones ever envisaged his Company going into action as a single entity he was to have this illusion well and truly shattered when his orders came from C. R.A.S.C. Aircraft and gliders were severely limited and only a few could be allotted to the R.A.S.C. Nos 1 and 2 Parachute Platoons were to jump with the 5th Parachute Brigade and half of No. 3 Parachute Platoon with the 3rd Parachute Brigade. Part of "C" Transport Platoon was to travel by glider as were numerous odd Jeeps and their drivers loaned to various Battalions. The remainder would have to come by sea, but even then would be split into a host of small groups. Rarely can a unit have entered its first operation in such a state of disintegration, and yet such was the standard of training and ability that every task allotted was faithfully carried out.

The airborne drop near Ranville on D-Day (6th June, 1944) was very widespread and in some cases it was several days before individuals were able to fight their way through the enemy to the main 716 group. But working like Trojans, Freddy Bland and the few available men were able to set up their dumps in the Divisional Maintenance Area, and despite constant shelling and mortaring none went short. On D-Day plus 1 the various seaborne elements began to make their appearance and by D plus 6 716 was once again a single entity. The initial phase past, 398 Company took over the supply task and 716 commenced what was to be an all too frequent role as maid-of-all-work. Divisional Jeep pool and salvage of airborne equipment being but two of the many tasks allotted. Jerry did not allow us to become bored. Our daily ration of shelling and strafing—for we were within i-mile of Pegasus Bridge over the River Orne—kept us out of mischief. Sadly it took its toll, especially one night when the ammunition dump was set on fire and burned for the best part of 24 hours, during which four of our lads were killed and several more wounded. So the existence continued for two months under the alternate heat and torrential rain of the Normandy summer, whilst the rest of Montgomery's 21st Army Group swept round in an arc pivoting on the Division's position. Long will we remember the interminable barrage of the Divisional Artillery, 400 yards behind us, the spiteful mosquitos which fed upon us, and the monotonous "compo" and biscuits which were our daily ration, the ingenuity and imagination shown in the construction of our fox-holes, some of which exist to this day, and the fine example set by our worthy O.G. who kept us cheerful. It was indeed a relief to move forward as the 6th Airborne left its static role and, with the 2nd Army, swept the Germans back across the Seine.

Then in September came the long-awaited news—that the ship whose oft-met "skipper" had set in motion rumour upon rumour was indeed going to take us back to Blighty. As we left the Normandy shores from the famous Mulberry Harbour we were glad to be going but sad to be leaving behind in the beautiful Churchyard of Ranville no less than 18 crosses bearing the names of our lads who would never again see their native soil.

Back in the U.K. we found that we had a new home. During our absence the Home Details had moved from Figsbury to the delightful little village of Minstead in the heart of the New Forest. Here we said farewell to Clive Jones, who was destined for Burma and who was succeeded by Major C. P. R. Crane (Storky to us all), who had at one time been our Second-in-Command. Once again came the task of settling in, repairing the gaps in the unit's equipment, making friends and ingratiating ourselves with the hospitable villagers. By Christmas we were well established, truly forest-bound and all set for grand festivities— Church Service, Christmas Dance, Kiddies' Party, and the rest. General von Rundstedt had other ideas, however, and on the 23rd December we were given 48 hours' notice to become mobile. Christmas Day saw us embarking in the cold damp mists of Tilbury and two days later we were with the Division in the snow-bound Ardennes stemming the break-through the U.S. lines in the "Battle of the Bulge." We had been cold in the past but never had we experienced the bitter conditions of the Belgian winter, where several of our men suffered from frost bite. The "White Hell," as it was known, brings back many memories—Antoigne, our first billet, Biesmes, Custinnes—'here our Christmas dinner (tinned) caught up with us, and Hulsonniaux, where "C" Platoon's cook left the Salle de Fete a blackened and smouldering ruin.

From there we moved north to Holland, where H.Q. took over the small hutted camp at De Heibloem and the three Transport Platoons were each attached to a Brigade. The Parachute Platoons took their place in the line on the River Maas with the 3rd Parachute Brigade to capture the first two prisoners in the sector—only to incur the wrath of the Battalion Commander by handing them over to the Canadian Parachute Battalion.

Life had become fairly placid when at the end of February, 1945, Storky Crane assembled his officers and gave them top-secret

news of another operation which would probably complete the collapse of Hitler's Reich—the Rhine crossing, which was given the code name VARSITY-PLUNDER. Then followed a speedy return home via Ghent and Ostend, and once again the hectic preparations. On this occasion 716 was to adopt a new medium of supply collection. The airborne party was to be flown in massive Hamilcar gliders, each capable of carrying eight tons and was to be equipped with Bren carriers and trailers, as these were considered more suitable in the flat muddy countryside of the proposed landing zone than Jeeps. In addition we had now been trained to act as pathfinders whose Eureka radar equipment could guide in the re-supply aircraft. The numerical strength of the airborne party was once again reduced on account of aircraft shortage, approximately 80 all ranks drawn from all Platoons with 12 carriers being transported in 12 Hamilcars. There was to be no parachuted element and the rest of the Company was to cross the Rhine with the 15th (Scottish) Division to make contact with the airborne group as soon as possible.

So much for the plans. The airborne landing commenced at 10.00 hours on 24th March, 1945, four hours after the ground troops had made the initial assault crossing of the Rhine. Consequently Jerry was ready for us and had a warm barrage awaiting. In addition the British artillery barrage which preceded the attack, together with the rocket strafing by Typhoons, had created such a dust that the ground was invisible above 200 feet. The landing was therefore extremely widespread and hazardous, to which the shattered Hamilcars gave ample evidence. For many days barely 50 per cent of the air-transported party could be mustered. Those who were able to reach the rendezvous, however, were equal to the task and a dump was formed from the scattered supply drop which was able to meet all the Division's needs. 716's position turned out to be in the middle of a heavily mined German defence group and a most uncomfortable night ensued, involving several skirmishes with our foe. However, he had not much heart to fight and when the rest of the Company turned up the following afternoon the position was more stable and the P.O.W. cages full.

An Airborne Division is not unnaturally very lightly equipped and apart from Jeeps possesses very little transport. Imagine our surprise, therefore, when we were given the order to advance with all speed. The Division's lack of transport was scarcely an obstacle to the ingenuity of its members and before long we had annexed every type of vehicle from bus to perambulator. So equipped it sped through Germany at such a pace along the "Pegasus Axis" that the 7th and 11th Armoured Divisions on its flanks could scarcely keep pace. 716 acquired a motley collection of W.D. and German transport and every man who could hold a steering-wheel was pressed into service. What a hectic and exhilarating six weeks ensued—from Diersfordt, where we landed, our journey gave us brief halts at Coesfeld, Altenberg, Ladbergen, Holzhausen near Lubecke, Dudinghausen, Hamburen just outside Celle, Nettelkamp on the outskirts of Uelzon, Barum, Forst Medlingen, over the River Elbe to Lauenburg, and the final 80-mile dash to the Baltic Coast at Wismar, where we met the Russians. Jerry was "kaput" and the armistice was signed a few days later.

We were constantly being called on to show our adaptability. Just before the Elbe we were called upon to supply the 5th Parachute Brigade and join them in an airborne crossing of the river. The operation was cancelled, but we still had to maintain the Brigade. Without trained supply personnel we undertook the difficulties of "bulk-breaking" without the slightest qualm. During the advance some 30 members of the Parachute Platoons were responsible for guarding some 10,000 prisoners of war and at our Wismar quarters in the Artillerie Kaserne we found ourselves caring for many thousands of "Eastland" displaced persons from the Slav countries. They were in a pitiful plight but we did our best for them. There also came to Wismar a trickle welling to a stream of escaped prisoners of war, both British and American, who had made their way through the Russian lines from a camp some 70 miles to the north-east. To these we gave a tremendous welcome and provided first-class hotel accommodation with service by their former German "masters." As soon as possible we assembled a motley fleet of German buses which ran a daily service to Luneburg, from where these lads were flown home.

At this juncture came a pleasant diversion. One evening about 8 p.m., 716 was asked to supply six Jeeps, trailers and crews for a "very special mission." Needless to say, after the work it had undertaken our transport could scarcely be called immaculate, but by the grace of Workshops the six were ready at 4 a.m. the following day completely repainted to the last detail. They and their crews might have stepped out of a band box. Their mission turned out to be the liberation of Denmark, where they were flown with the 13th Parachute Battalion. Words cannot describe the warmth of their welcome and it was a sad day for them when they were relieved by the 1st Airborne Division and returned to 716.

At Wismar, too, we helped entertain the Division, when in conjunction with several other members of the Divisional R.A.S.G. the "RASC BERETS" Concert Party was formed.

V.E. Day, 9th May, 1945, was a complete day of rest—and how welcome it was after so many weeks of unremitting toil. It was followed on the next Sunday by a Thanksgiving Church Parade in the Nikolaikirche and a few days later by a Victory Parade through the streets of the town.

Ten days after the armistice we were once again on the move, this time—with no regrets—back home. We returned to Minstead and immediately went on 28 days' leave—embarkation leave. There was still a war on out in the Far East and the 6th Airborne Division was required to help bring it to a speedy conclusion. We had re-equipped before, but this time the whole of the unit's "G.1098" had changed and we were introduced to the new Jungle Equipment, probably the finest personal issue in the history of the British Army despite its hideous colour. Every article down to the last stitch of underwear was "jungle green."

At this time, too, hopes of demobilisation amongst the older soldiers were raised by that magic phrase "Group 27." Most of those under this Demobilisation Age and Service Group were posted to the 1st Airborne Division to be replaced by those of that Division above it. Thus we said farewell to Storky Crane and bade welcome to our new O.C., Major Douglas Norman, who came to us as Second-in-Command in Germany.

The Divisional advance party to the Far East was to consist of the 5th Parachute Brigade together with detachments of Divisional Troops. Under the latter heading came our Nos. 1 and 2 Parachute Platoons, to whom we said "au revoir" in June, 1945. The departure of the rest of the Company was to take place several weeks later, but any hopes we may have had of visiting the Far East were soon squashed by the Atom Bomb. Japan capitulated shortly after the 5th Parachute Brigade Group arrived in India.

However, the advance party who made the journey by air had become installed at Kalyan Camp, in Bombay, so that as soon as the main party turned up preparations began for the invasion of Malaya and in particular a parachute drop on Singapore. The Japanese capitulation on 15th August, 1945, caused the cancellation of these plans, but, as the Commander in Malaya refused to surrender, a seaborne operation was substituted. Part of the 716 detachment took part in the landings and spent an unpleasant night in the monsoon rains only to find the following morning that the Japanese had finally given in. On arrival at Singapore the Parachute Platoons, completely untrained in such work, took over the supply of rations to the Brigade with - Complete success.

Soon afterwards the Brigade Group went by sea to Batavia with the task of restoring law and order in the areas troubled by the Indonesian revolt. The Parachute Platoons continued with increasing experience the running of the Supply Point and provided first-class Christmas fare for their formation.

In January, 1946, the task completed, the Brigade moved on to Semarang, a port on the coast of North Java, to safeguard the town from the Indonesians in the surrounding countryside. Conditions were chaotic when they arrived complete with additional tank and artillery units of the Indian Army, and they immediately set to work to restore law and order. The Parachute Platoons' supply organisation was now stretched to the utmost. In addition to having to cater for the various religious sects of the Indian troops, the unit had to maintain its own dockside godowns (warehouses) and, with the assistance of naval and R.A.S.C. craft, had to collect replenishments from ships out at sea. To cope with all the man-handling of supplies and ammunition local labour was recruited and the bulk-breaking point became at 7.30 a.m. daily at the local employment exchange. Payment was made in Japanese military currency or in currency even more desired by the locals—tinned herrings, of which we had the customary surplus.

By May, 1946, Semarang had, by the Brigade's good offices, become peaceful and law-abiding again and control was handed over to a Dutch Brigade, for whose supplies, incidentally, 716 became temporarily responsible. Shortly afterwards the few remaining members of the detachment were re-united with their parent Company.

So much for our distant detachment. What was to happen to the rest of the Division? For six weeks we were left in doubt and numerous rumours circulated, but towards the end of October news came to Stratton St. Margaret, just outside Swindon, which had become our home some two months earlier, that we were not to be denied the experience of warmer climes. The new destination was

that potential trouble spot, Palestine. Our farewells said, a special train took us to Glasgow, where we embarked with the 2nd Parachute Brigade (which had now replaced the 5th Parachute Brigade) on the S.S. *Cameronia*. The voyage was uneventful apart from its boredom and in under a fortnight we were presented with the apparently tiered city of Haifa surmounted by the monastery crowned Mount Carmel. As they shimmered in the brilliant sunshine the buildings of the city seemed almost dazzling in their spotless whiteness, an optical illusion to be destroyed on later acquaintance. Two nights in a transit camp and we were off again to Southern Palestine, where in Gaza Ridge Camp, near Gaza, we were to occupy with the rest of the Divisional R.A.S.C. the home set up by the advance party. This was a change to what we had been accustomed but the large tents were vastly superior to what we had known in action.

Now began the general process of acclimatisation—khaki drill, sunburn, the armoury, contractors, dhoby, fruitseller, barber and ice-cream man, the 40-man Company guards which, until we became acquainted with the wily Arab, seemed so unnecessary, the camp cinema, bathing at the Gaza lido, unaccustomed working hours with afternoon siesta when the sun was at its hottest, tiffin—in fact everything which goes to make up the Middle East camp life. It did not take us long to "get our knees brown." There followed a somewhat humdrum existence, for we were in an area largely populated by Arabs who, apart from petty pilfering, were not troublesome. It was pleasantly punctuated by the occasional visit to Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, and occasionally Tiberias or Jericho. Our knowledge of the Middle East was improved when leave commenced in Egypt, Cyprus and Lebanon.

At Christmas time we were determined that absence from home would not spoil the festivities and the cooks and entertainments committee gave us the finest Christmas that most of us had known in the Army. In addition many of us had the wonderful experience of spending Christmas Eve with midnight service at Bethlehem.

As the New Year came in we had a taste of the incessant torrential rains which form part of the winter weather, followed within a month or two by the khamseen, the hot, dry, stifling wind which blows from the deserts of Arabia.

There was a continual change of faces as demobilisation took its toll and reinforcements joined us. All the time the tension in Palestine was mounting. We had the occasional alert in the South but nothing to worry about, though we took part in several of the security operations farther North with the rest of the Divisions—house searches for terrorists and their arms caches. In July, Major J. C. Wetherall took over from Major Norman, to be succeeded by Major W. Grierson, and later Major T. A. K. Savage, who, in January, led the Company to Madeira, in the North, when the 6th Airborne and 1st Infantry Divisions exchanged positions. By now the Jewish opposition was reaching a crescendo and mortaring combined with raids on the camp were almost a nightly occurrence, though fortunately we suffered no casualties. The Company took over the Hadeira bulk-breaking point and we were now responsible for feeding the entire North Palestine area.

All these duty calls did not prevent a certain amount of recreation and our football team, which had been prominent in the Divisional competitions, carried out the noteworthy feat of beating the well-known Islamic Soccer Club 3—1.

By November, 1947, 716 had moved to G.T.A. Camp, in Haifa, and was commanded by Major D. Mortlock, later succeeded by Capt. M. Briody and Major H. Henderson. Two months later a further move to Jalama, just outside Haifa, saw 716 amalgamated with 398 Company, though the title 716 still remained.

By now the writing was on the wall and shortly the British Government announced its intention to give up the mandate and evacuate Palestine. 716 embarked at Haifa in April, 1948, and sailed for the U.K.

In June, 1948, the Company's brief career of just five years' duration came to a close when it was disbanded at Cheltenham, some of its members being posted to 63 Company, now in B.A.O.R., and the rest to the 16th Airborne Division (T.A.) in London. It had been a comparatively brief lifetime but into those five years had been crammed a wealth of activity and no little gallantry, evidenced by the M.B.E., two M.C.s, two M.M.s, one B.E.M., and several Mentions in Despatches awarded its members.

Today's ceremony will ensure that the name of 716 lives on.

We must now pass over a period of two and a half years until Roy Day, formerly C.S.M.'s Corporal in 716, asked *Pegasus*, the Airborne Forces Journal, to publish a request for anyone interested in holding a re-union to contact him. There were only a few initial enquiries but by use of the "snowball" principle and announcements in the national and local Press the nominal roll grew until in May, 1950, some 36 old comrades foregathered in the Holyrood Restaurant, near Regent Street. An excellent but all too brief evening produced the firm resolve to repeat the success and a committee of Londoners was formed to assist Roy Day in organisation.

This committee set to work forthwith. The job of making contacts was of prime importance but difficult as we had no records. With the assistance of Airborne Forces Security Fund and those with whom we had already been in touch the circle was gradually widened until we had heard from no fewer than 200 of our old comrades.

The Second Annual Re-union was obviously going to be a much larger affair than its predecessor and the Victory Ex-Services Club, near Marble Arch, was selected as the venue. On the 5th May, 1951, we were gratified to find that no fewer than 80 of our friends had arrived from all over the country. We had wondered whether we might be at fault in failing to organise some form of entertainment for the evening, but our doubts were groundless. The evening organised itself and reminiscence held sway. It was an even greater success than the previous re-union and we went home well satisfied. The Third Re-union took place on the 3rd May, 1952, once again at the Victory Club, and though the cost of living had perforce cut down the number of those who could come from far afield, 56 ardent "clansmen" repeated the pleasure of previous years.

By now the committee were coming to the opinion that though these re-unions were a very fine thing, something more enduring was required to perpetuate the memory of those who gave their lives whilst serving with the Company than the annual toast to Absent Friends. Quite spontaneously came the desire to raise a Memorial—if possible, in the tiny twelfth century Church of All Saints, Minstead, where we had worshipped and been made so welcome.

Firstly the preparation of a Roll of Honour was required, and with the kind assistance of memory and once again Airborne Forces Security Fund and the War Office, combined with much hard work, this became a reality; though we still cannot be absolutely certain that it is exhaustive. Next, permission to raise a Memorial was sought of the Vicar of Minstead. He readily gave his consent, and it was agreed that a solid silver Alms Dish engraved with the names of the fallen would be a most acceptable form of Memorial, a useful and permanent remembrance of those who (made the supreme sacrifice).

The third yet none-the-less important task was to finance the project. We were not a Company of wealthy men and donations must of necessity be small. However, by organising charitable functions in which all members of the unit could assist the requisite funds have been realised, not only to provide the Memorial but to bring to its Dedication all those of the next-of-kin with whom we are in touch.

The final task was the organisation of everything, so easily dismissed and yet resulting in hours of daily labour for those involved.

The result is seen here today, when the congregation of this fine old Church witnesses a ceremony which will remain firmly engraved in its memory. In years to come time will take its toll, as did the cruelty of war cut short those young lives. Yet to a posterity who did not know them their memory will be kept alive by this visible token of the esteem in which their comrades held them.

D.S.B.

