

## FIGHTING THROUGH NORMANDY

**BILL FELLER**

**Born: 1925**

**Army**

### RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

#### Under-age in active service

At the age of 15, I joined the North Chingford Home Guard. Well that stood me in good stead when I went into the army. I knew what I was doing, so when I went in the army I could handle a rifle, Bren gun, machine gun, anything like that. After a year in the Home Guard I thought I'd go into the army.

It was 1942 when I volunteered for the army. I was 16. I was called up in May 1943. I went into the "Buffs" Regiment. When I went to the recruiting office the sergeant said to me "Where would you like to go?" and I said "I'm not bothered."

So he gave me a pin, and I just put my pin into a sheet, and it came up with the Royal East Kents, which is "The Buffs", because the uniform was buff.

After our initial training, for six weeks, we were sent up to Yorkshire, to Hull. We were camped at Burstwick. After training there for a few weeks we were going home on leave, but as we were getting on the lorry to go to the station, a dispatch rider came up and said we were off to Scotland instead of going home. So we got sent to Scotland. Then I was transferred to the fourth...1st 4th Surreys.

We were sent to North Africa. 1943. We fought our way across from Algiers, across Tunisia, until we got to a place called Bone, and then the campaign in Africa finished.

After a while, they decided to split my Regiment up and I was transferred to The North Staffordshire Regiment. And then from there we were asked to volunteer for The Parachute Regiment, which quite a few of us volunteered. Maybe fortunately, I don't know whether it's true or not, but I got a message to say that I was on my way back to England. My mother had reported me for being under-age, for being in active service. I was only seventeen you see. Well, I shouldn't have been in Africa. Anyway, I come back. I came back in '43, and I joined the North Staffs, the 6th North Staffs in Kent. We were stationed at Herne Bay, in Kent

We were training there for weeks, you know, for D-Day, for The Second Front. I'd guessed that we weren't going to the D-Day because we did no assault training. We did no boat training. I guessed we wasn't going to be in the first day because we'd not even been on a boat. A training craft.

What we did then was, we used Folkestone as 'house to house' combat. There was a lot of bombed property out there.

Being on the coast facing France it was shelled quite a bit, and we did 'house to house' fighting training there. As I say, we were there quite a while, then suddenly it was D-Day.

## EQUIPMENT AND WEAPONS

### It's a monster!

When you've seen Tiger tanks, you look at our tanks, and Tiger tanks and you think "God! What's going to happen with this lot?" Because they had the 88mm gun, they could outgun our tanks, and the reason we won was because we had more. We had thousands, and the 88mm anti-tank gun, that could shoot a long, long way, and our tanks were useless against it.

We had Churchills, Matildas, Cromwells, Shermans, that was the Americans', Shermans, but we had more, you see. And then we had the flail tanks and things like that, and they used to go along setting off mines, and then we had the bridge tanks, so they could put stuff over the bridges. The only ones who I thought had a tank to match them was the Russians - the T34s, yes and the one after that, was it a T54? They were terrific things. They were, what, seventy tons weren't they? That's incredible - it's a monster!

The only time we came up against tanks was in the... at the first campaign, near Bayeux, when we got driven back. That's the first time I got up against tanks, but apart from that I don't remember... you can hear them, can hear them firing, and see them in the distance but I don't remember them pushing us back any more, because they were fighting tank by tank. You see I was lucky I didn't do any 'house to house' fighting in the villages. We were just in the open all the time.

## DAY TO DAY LIVING AND ROUTINES.

### 'Freezing muddy water'

*Bill spoke about digging in, where you dug a hole and laid in it, sometimes for many hours, out of the firing line of the enemy guns, and sniper fire, and away from the horizontal trajectories of shrapnel from exploding shells. Soldiers sometimes had to sleep in these holes, with little or no cover from the elements, and wearing basic military clothing, that could well be wet, as they would have had little or no opportunity to dry out, and absolutely none to change. If it was raining whilst you were dug-in, pretty soon you could be laid, or even sleeping, in an inch of freezing muddy, water.*

*Bill had once been 'billeted' in a farm out-building, but he actually slept in a hole he'd dug in the garden next to a house!*

*Bill recalled, whilst serving in the deserts of North Africa, the soldiers' technique for building a cooking fire in an environment completely devoid of wood and trees. The men would use their spades or hands to scrape a mound of sand a couple of feet in diameter, and then douse this in petrol from their vehicles' storage cans. This would soak into the sand and then the mound could be lit, acting like a big wick and used for warmth or to cook on, by placing their mess tins on top and cooking food such as soup, 'bully' beef and marmalade pudding!*

## EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO BATTLE.

### King and Country

It doesn't matter what you write, or what you speak about war, it's not the same as being there.

The smell of death. The smell of burning flesh, the noise, people dropping around you, is not the same as talking about it. I mean you can think about it, sometimes you think, "Good God! Did I come through all that?" And that's what I mean. People think, 'war',

you just talk about it. It's the same as people in the Blitz. A lot of them...what they went through. But war is war and as I say before, its noise, the smell gurgling, and especially when a tank gets brewed up, and it is, there, and as I say, I wouldn't like to go through that again. I hope nobody has to go through that again, anyway. I don't think they will because I don't think there'll be an infantry war next time.

In them days it was 'King and Country', and I wanted to do my bit, if you know what I mean. You used to feel real proud in uniform.

You see, I've been through the war, and I always thought when I came out of it, how life, fate was mapped out for you.

## **EXPERIENCES BEFORE AND AFTER D-DAY.**

### **The London Blitz**

Before I went in the army I was in the Blitz just for a bit, which was a bit hairy, the London Blitz.

The memories of the Blitz I have is going to work in the day. In the beginning it was a bit quiet, but at night-time it got a bit hairy.

I used to work in a factory. I was an apprentice machinist, when I first left school, and I remember going home, collecting my three sisters and my mother, going down to the air raid shelter, which was at the bottom of a hill, and then to stand outside and just watch, watch in the distance all the fires. Watching the landmines come down. They used to come down on parachutes. They used to just float about, it'd go anywhere. Huge things, like big oil drums, and one went off near our shelter, and although they were deep underground it really shook the place. You used to have to dodge in doorways because the shrapnel used to come down, and that could 'shoot' people,

But all I remember is the burning, and when I came up here I was very surprised because we'd never heard anything about Hull. I didn't know about Hull, but to me Hull got hit just as bad as London, comparing the two cities. They really got it bad.

The rest of it was watching the dog-fights during the day time. Watching the aeroplanes all over the place. There was quite a few of them, always see them coming down, being shot down and things like that. To a youngster it was exciting. When I went into the army, it wasn't fear or fright. I wasn't frightened, I was apprehensive, you know, going into action and all that. I was apprehensive all the time.

## Into Normandy - You don't argue with Tiger tanks

About a week after D-Day we were transferred to a place called Newhaven, expecting to go straight across after a week, but the weather deteriorated, so it put us back a week. We sailed fourteen days after (D-Day, which was June 6th), and we landed in the Mulberry harbour, which was very lucky as we didn't get wet.

We knew the floating harbour, the Mulberry, was going but we didn't know it had been built. With the weather as well it was a miracle it was put together.

There again, see, there was two Mulberry harbours. One was the Americans', one was ours, but the Americans' wasn't put together very well, and with the storms it just all broke up. We were very fortunate in all that. When we got to France we were sent to an area between Bayeux and Creully, where we dug in, waiting for the assault on Caen.

When the assault on Caen started, the 3rd Canadian Division were on our left, we were the 59th Division, 176 Brigade, We were in the middle, and the 3rd English Infantry Division was on our right. Ten days after landing in France my battalion went into action in the final drive for Caen. We took our objective but by night time we were driven back by the 12th SS Panzer Division. We came up against the tanks, you see. So we had to withdraw, because I don't think we had any tanks with us that time, but as I say, when you come up against Tiger tanks you don't argue. They were coming straight towards us. We were driven back, but next day that objective was taken by another battalion, and we went on, we took another objective which was fortified trenches. And we had to fight our way through the trenches, on the way to Caen. It was the hamlet of Malon. Our first battle there, on the day cost us 190 casualties - that was killed and wounded, out of the battalion, which was a pretty heavy loss.

We went on to take the village of Haut des Forges

We reached the Orne on the 6th August 1944. That's the River Orne, just off Caen. The North Staffs were given the job of fording the river and going to the other side to make a bridgehead, while the sappers built a bridge across because there was no bridge for the troops and mechanicals, vehicles to get across. We forded to hold a bridgehead while the Sappers built a bridge as the one at Le Bas had been blown.

We were given the job of holding the direct approach road from a place called Brieux. Two heavy attacks were beaten off and all day we held onto our exposed position. Wounded could not be evacuated as the road down to the river was under constant fire, shell-fire, you just moved and you brought shell-fire down onto you.

Next morning we repulsed another heavy attack, we couldn't do anything then until night-time. We got our wounded out at night, got fed at night, and then, by that time the bridge had been built and the tanks were coming through.

We held that road for twenty-four hours against heavy attacks, and quite a few losses of life there as well, and then after that we continued on our advance to Falaise, that's the Falaise Gap...

We were advancing through a gully and as we were passing a large rock, there was this big rocky place my Bren gunner in front just dropped. He'd been shot through the head with a sniper. So we consider ourselves lucky that we got through, at that.

On the edge of the forest we dug in. That night we were sent out on patrol to find out where the enemy positions were. I was a Bren gunner.

When we reached the enemy, we found they were there, but we didn't know how many. My officer got shot, but he wasn't killed. The sergeant was carrying him back on his back, and I was a rear man, protecting the rear with the Bren gun.

We got to the edge of the forest and as I turned round to face to come back into our positions, the sergeant trod on a land mine. It killed the officer outright, because he was already wounded, the sergeant lost his legs and he died next day. I got a little bit nicked out of my nose and next minute I found out I was in field hospital having a week's rest from shell shock. I consider myself lucky there again, to come through all that.

Then after that it was the Falaise Gap, which finished the Normandy campaign.

### Into Belgium

Our Division was split up, owing to the shortage of manpower, and I, along with my Company, was transferred to the 2nd Battalion of the Lincolnshire Regiment.

Then on through Belgium to catch up with the front line. Our next objective was the Escaut Canal. My company and another were given the job of crossing first. The boats were dropped into the water by the Border Regiment. Then we had a long rest and went on from there through Belgium, which we did in a canal crossing in boats, and the only thing I was frightened of there was because I couldn't swim! We got to the other side, after this canal crossing and found the walls very high and I thought, "How are we going to get up there?" But we soon did, for they started dropping shells in the water behind us and we soon found a way up!

From there on we went through to Overloon and Venray, round that area, taking them places, and I finished up on the River Marris and it was mid-winter and it was cold.

Absolutely freezing! We were there quite a while, and while I was there I got sent home on compassionate leave because my mother was dying with cancer.

### After the war - The Stern gang

After the war finished we were sent to Toulon, the 2nd Battalion, ready to go to Japan, but the Japan war finished so they sent us to Palestine instead, and we were up against the Stern gang. Jews. Israelis. That was the terrorists in Palestine in '45-'46. They wanted their own homeland. We were trying to keep them out. Eventually they got it [the homeland] as you can see. But they were killing British troops, and we were killing them.

When I came back from there, we were put into these Prisoner of War camps to look after them. And then that was finished. When they closed I was sent back to Beverley barracks, and from there I went on to the Lincoln barracks and I was demobbed in 1947. I did about ten or twelve years in the reserves after that; I could have been called up any time.

### ATTITUDES TO THE ENEMY

They were just men. I didn't have a lot to do with them, but a lot of people were taking things off them, but I never did because I thought I wouldn't like anything taken off me. I mean, I picked up one or two things like a Luger and that, but I lost them in transit. I dunno where they got to, but I lost them in transit, which is a good job I didn't bring them home. I would've been picked up by the police then you see.

No, I think as you look at it, a German soldier was a German soldier - they're a bit different to the S.S. and so they were more like us, if you know what I mean, and I suppose they were like us, glad when the war was over. I mean they were just fighting the same as we were. To me they were just ordinary people.

But I wouldn't have liked really and truly to come across the S.S. I know we got beat back at the beginning of the campaign at Caen by the 12th S.S. Panzer Division, but I think they were just called Panzer divisions because they were tanks and things like that. Whether they were S.S. soldiers I don't know. But there were a lot of atrocities caused through them you know, some of them.

