



*This excerpt from the memoirs of Ronald Knight is shared with kind permission from his son Ron Knight and daughter Christine Murphy.*

### **DAD'S TIME IN THE ARMY**

Just a little about my army background.

R. E. Training B.T.N. Brompton B.K.'s Chatham. I joined the Royal Engineers on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1935. It was a very hard life for the first nine months. Discipline was rigid with no excuse for error, and one paid for every mistake with heavy punishment. For all that I enjoyed it and because I took part in most sports (I represented the company at Chatham, Kent), I was able to avoid a great many problems. I got through my initial training quite easily and I really enjoyed it.

After my training, I was transferred to Aldershot 23<sup>rd</sup> Field Co. At that time, horses were used as a means of transport. We had only just got a couple of lorries and motor cycles. Again, things went my way, because I was one of three who held a licence to drive so I got the job of training others. I stayed until March 1937, apart from going on courses to Gosport and (Pangbourne???)

I went from there to Gibraltar, 32<sup>nd</sup> Fortress Co., where I stayed until June 1941. Whilst there I played football for the garrison and did a tour of the Med. I became driver to the Chief Engineer, Colonel Fordham, and then to three governors; Lord Gort, Field Marshall Ironsides and General Liddle. Through them I was kept on the Gibraltar for a longer turn of duty. Once I had to drive a lorry up the most hazardous part of the rock to bring an old gun down and take a new one up. It meant reversing up a narrow strip of rough road, 900ft up, with only just enough width to fit the lorry.

In 1941, I drove Sir Anthony Eden during his visit, and it was through him that I got my release from Gib. in May. On the way home, I served on H.M.S. London, and was involved in the sinking of the German battleship, Bismark. I finished up on the west coast of Africa. From there, back to England on 12 July 1941.

I was then sent to 275 Highland Field Com. 51<sup>st</sup> Division, where I took over as despatch rider for the company and then in October I went to 263 Com. in Maidstone, Kent, where I trained recruits until I fell out with the C in C. I was then given two choices: bomb disposal or assault

engineer. I chose bomb disposal, 23<sup>rd</sup> B.D.S. 96 Section, and apart from six weeks training for D-Day in Westward Ho! in Devon, I spent my time at Ashford clearing U.X.B. from airfields in Kent, London and the South Coast. Without going into too many details, I loved the work which was very rewarding especially when returning to base with the same number of men I went out with. We were a very close-linked unit and cut down our chances of error to a minimum. I was lucky in that I got on very well with everyone of all ranks. In my own Sub-Division, I would particularly mention Evans the driver, Delohunty, Ward, Smith, Hargraves, Gunner and Fitzgerald. I have told you many stories about Ward who couldn't read or write. Ted Delohunty was a great friend. He came from a large family of boys in Liverpool. More about that later.

During the threat of a German invasion in 1941, I took over the job of planning the demolition of two airfields in Kent. This involved demolishing the airfield and living quarters. It was a heavy undertaking and I felt honoured to have been given the job in preference to more senior N.C.Os. Within two weeks we were able to report that both airfields could be demolished completely, either electrically or by hand-lit ignition. This I might add was mainly due to the graft the Sappers put into it.

It was whilst doing this job I had news of the birth of Sheila. I shall never forget that day.

We next went to mine clearing along the Kent coast, which was more nerve racking than bomb disposal, as the mines were put down by the Canadians who were very lax with mapping out their minefields. We suffered quite a few casualties due mainly to this. On one job, we went down 56ft, the deepest on record, for a 500lb bomb.

From Ashford, we were sent down to Winchester to help with the B.D.S. who were having a bad time in Southampton and Portsmouth and it was here I encountered my first anti "Butterfly" an anti-personnel bomb. These were dropped in clusters of 50, each about 11lb of TNT and about the size of a cocoa tin. When released from the container, they opened out and floated down in all directions. Anyone touching them would cause them to explode. I went with my Officer and Sect. to a place near Barton Stracey where several local people had been killed or injured from unknown objects. We found a cluster of 24 and after considering several options of disposal, decided to lasso them with a long rope and blow them up in situ. Several went up in sympathy with the ones intended, but in the end, all but one remained, which we wanted to keep whole to investigate later. After pulling it about from a safe distance, for a while, I went and kicked it, then picked it up and found the detonator had not been put in. We were therefore able to experiment with it, eventually deciding that these bombs could never safely be dismantled. That incident cost one of my nine lives I can tell you.

We carried on with the work until October 1943, when we were sent down to Westward Ho! to join the Combined Operations Group in preparation for D-Day. About 100,000 troops from all allied countries were then in intensive training for the big day. 96 Section consisted of 1 officer (Lt. Decon Deacon???), 1 sergeant, 2 corporals, 1 driver cum cook and 24 sappers. We were the only B.D. Sect. needed for the initial part of the invasion. Our job was to get up the

beach and find a way up the embankment, clearing mines and booby traps on the way to enable the Signals to bring ashore the cross channel cable to set up direct communications.

We were working and training in the worst conditions imaginable. It rained almost continuously and we were out in it for over 24 hours at a time. I must admit we had the best food and shelter – a Butlins holiday camp! It was hard, rigid work, going over and over the job we had to do again and again, and in the end it was decided that my Sub-Sect., with an additional Cpl., were going to be the first to attempt the job with three other Sub-Sections in reserve in case.

We all felt very proud to take the job and did nothing but prepare for the big day. We had no idea where or when it was going to take place and I knew when I went home in April that it was going to be my last leave home for a long time. I didn't want to let Sheila and Nellie out of my sight for those last ten days.

We went to a village near Brentwood in Essex, and it was from there I was asked if I would take a course in deep sea diving. I accepted and went to Chatham Naval Docks and did a crash course which lasted three weeks. I was then regarded as qualified but of course this was just the tip of the iceberg and I took every opportunity to be competent in the work. This paid off when I got over the other side. We were told to rest as much as possible in this last camp, but we did as much exercise as we could; 5 mile runs one morning, and then ten mile route marches with full battle order the next. We were determined to be as fit as the Commandos.

On 1<sup>st</sup> May, we were marched into a great park which we thought to be six miles away, but was in reality only two miles away, just outside Brentwood. We had been misled for security reasons. The camp was under canvas and housed over 100,000 troops (British). We were locked in with a heavy guard at all entrances. We made our own amusements with sing-songs and sports of all kinds, and on 3<sup>rd</sup> June it came over the tannoy that 96 B.D.S. was to report in full kit to the command post right away. From then on, units were called every few minutes. We were loaded into buses and taken to Tilbury, and put on a Dutch merchant ship. One could hardly turn round. I know I really felt fear and a mixture of relief that night.

It was 5 p.m. when we boarded and 8 p.m. when we took to the sea with about 8 large Transports??, and 6 destroyers as escort. I can remember we were shelled from France whilst going through the Straits of Dover. We eventually arrived at the Needles after dark.

In the morning, I couldn't believe my eyes. There were hundreds of boats of all sizes and all nationalities formed up and being loaded with landing craft. We were called to attention and were given 50 French Francs in liberation money but still didn't know where we were going. After all, the money could be a hoax to put off spies etc. We hadn't been able to write or receive letters for over three weeks.

The 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> June were spent at the Needles and then in the early hours of 6<sup>th</sup> June, we quietly left port. We had prayers and were very quiet, not wanting to say anything that might be interpreted as fear. Box, Delohunty, Gunner and I kept close together. We had made up our

minds to keep an eye on Box who was aged only 19. I was given a leaflet by Monty wishing us God Speed and happy hunting on the battlefields of Europe. (This is now in Ron's care.) The journey over was very strange. We were all resigned and apprehensive but had a feeling of safety when wave after wave of bombers and fighters flew over. Time just stood still. I didn't know what day it was or what time it was. At just before daylight, we got into landing craft. There were about 140 of us; my section, and the remainder were Naval Commandos who were to cover us while we carried out our job. I shall never forget listening to these fellows having a heated argument as to who was the best singer, Frank Sinatra or Bing Crosby. I felt secure with men such as these to help us do our job. We approached the beach and the obstacles in the water, and saw the dead bodies of comrades floating in the water. We suddenly hit a submerged tank, which split our landing craft almost in half, and shot the lot of us in the water. We were nearly chin deep. Someone got hold of Box to keep him up. Every few paces Box was lifted out of the water and told to take deep breaths until he got beached.

During this time the noise was terrific; planes bombing and strafing, the Germans' heavy naval guns were booming and of course, the German weaponry in action. There were bodies everywhere. Some were crying for help and the medics were going at full speed to attend to them. We eventually reached the bottom of the 100ft rise we had to climb. The Mine-Sapper and Gunner took the detector. I followed to defuse the bombs and mines, and another brought up the safety tape to ensure we had a wide path. Three quarters of the way up, Gunner must have touched an S mine, and realising this, threw himself onto it, and was blown to bits, some of him landed on me. The shrapnel blew the badges off my sleeve but somehow missed me, whilst hitting the two men behind me. The C.O. was hit in the face and chest and so was a sapper. We got help for the wounded, completed our job, buried Bonny Gunner in a temporary grave and reported back to base. It was hard to shake off losing a great comrade who we always used to call "Bonny the smiling boy", because he was always so serious and took his job so seriously. His death certainly saved me from death or serious wounds.

Our first night was spent in Tracy-St. Mier??? and for the next few days it was a case of a couple of miles forward and one back. We entered Caen twice and were thrown out twice.

The British Armies were asked to take on the brunt of the German forces to allow the Yanks to get a foothold in their sector. The weather deteriorated and our supplies of petrol and rations were running out. Things looked glum until the Mulberry Harbours were installed and suddenly things started to work for us. The Germans were fighting every inch of the way so no prisoners could be taken until Caen was captured. The other sub-sections were not having a very good time, and each time our D.R. came up he reported casualties. On July 9<sup>th</sup> Caen fell after a heavy bombardment and a full assault.

We stayed in the area for a few weeks, during which time I went with the Sect. Officer to de-booby trap a large house just vacated by the German Artillery H.Q. I had quite a shock when I found a map of Cuckfield which was to be used when they invaded England. I also found a seven day time-bomb set for the full seven days which would have blown the house and

everyone in it to bits. Danny has one of the clockwork timing devices which I took out of them. We also spent a short time in Tilly which was flattened by the U.S. Air Force by mistake.

On 20<sup>th</sup> August, the attack of the Falaise Gap took place. This was to be the beginning of the end of the best of the German Army and S.S. as they were trapped in the gap and were hit from three sides and from the air. In four days they lost over 15,000 men killed and captured. Our job was to clear the road of mines. We crossed the Seine on the 25<sup>th</sup>. On 2<sup>nd</sup> September, I was on loan to the Guards Armoured Division and was at the liberation of Brussels on 3<sup>rd</sup> September. I stayed in Audingham??? for four days until my section caught up with me. It was wonderful. It was the first time since D-Day that we felt wanted by people and the Belgian people were great. I was invited to two big Civic Receptions, where local members of the Resistance were honoured, including a girl of seventeen who helped dozens of our prisoners to escape back to our lines.

Whilst I was there, I was told to clear the Queen's Palace of bombs. We completed this in 4 days. There were 12 in all. One of them was 20-odd feet down and the excavation caved in on me. I was completely buried until they dragged me out. The only thing I suffered from was a broken nose and I was back at work next day.

We left Brussels and went back to France to help liberate Lille, a town the Germans held to the last. Whilst there, we cleared booby traps from ammunition dumps. The airborne invasion of Arnhem had just taken place and we were sent up to Nijmegen?? to clear the bridge of explosives to keep it open. Our airborne troops had been taken by surprise and were being massacred. They were indeed a bridge too far and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army could not reach them to help. We were in the middle, with Germans ahead and Germans to the rear. We had no food and the civilian population had none to give us so we went out at night hunting for stray Decci??? trucks and taking food from them to survive. We were eventually re-formed by the American Airborne and 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division and were sent back to Ghent??? where we rested in a lovely abbey.

During our time in Nijmegen the Germans shelled us with Moaning Minnies. These were shells fitted with cardboard flutes. They screamed as they went through the air, and to make it worse, they were timed to come at exact intervals so we knew just when to expect them and the suspense was terrific. This was done to break our morale.

From Ghent??, we joined the Assault group to take the Albert and Escaut??? Canals where I did quite a bit of diving work. From there, the rivers Maas and Mabel and then to Inschedg??? and S. Hentogenbosch where twelve of my mates were blown to pieces trying to de-booby trap an ammunition dump which blew up while they were working. We then went to Helmond, a lovely Dutch town, where we stayed until the Battle of the Bulge, in the Ardennes. This was to be the deciding battle of the war. The Germans threw everything they had into trying to split the two British and American armies, making a cut right into Brussels. The Americans were rapidly going backwards to within miles of the German plan and were only stopped, then pushed right back, by the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland, 15<sup>th</sup> Scottish, and the power of the British Army.

Having rested during the hard winter, the next push was on 21<sup>st</sup> March, when we went over the Rhine. All the bridges were down and the Royal Engineer Field Company took heavy casualties building Bailey Bridges under heavy German fire. We kept going forward, and the seaport called Cuxhaven where I was helping to clear the port of underwater explosives.

At Bremen?? in one of the heaviest artillery bombardments of the war, our heavy, light and anti-aircraft guns were arranged in a semi-circle around the town, wheel to wheel. They literally blew the resistance out of the town.

As I say, the war ended on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1945, after we had been front line troops for the whole eleven months since the D-Day landings. As a reward we were given the privilege to be the first allied troops in Berlin. Believe me, London and Coventry were badly bombed, but Berlin had hardly a house or building left standing.

Today, I look back on those years and I think of all my comrades both living and dead, and ask myself, (and I ask you and your age group), surely there must be another way to settle arguments without bloodshed and misery.

Thank you Christine for asking for this, otherwise it would never have been finished.

02/02/00