

PTE.14375398 Ronald Hickman.



3 Platoon B Company.
Batt. Sherwood Foresters

5th Dec 1943

Dear Mum, Dad

You must by now be concerned, not having had a letter from me for such a long time. Well the news of the landings in Italy must by now be well known all over England, so I am able to tell you that about seventy lads including myself were drafted into the Foresters to make them up to strength for the assault at Salerno. We only knew that it was for real when a dive bomber shot at us in the landing craft. We landed on the beaches in the early morning of the 9th Sept.

Heavy shelling was going over from both sides, ours was coming from battleships standing out to sea. We soon moved off the beaches and dug in, just inland. From then on we seemed to be continuously on the move, digging in, often two or three times a day. Finally we got into Salerno Town, and were held up for a couple of days, then out again up more mountains. One morning we found ourselves at the top of a mountain looking out over towards Naples. Our platoon commander came around the positions and told us that we were going into Naples, but as we

were in the American 5th Army we would be letting them go in first with us following. So I was one of the first British troops into Naples!. We moved through the city and dug in on the outskirts. We were then pulled out for a 24hr rest, moving into a small field, and after a kit check thought we may get some sleep. We soon found out that we were in front of a battery of twenty five pounders, who promptly opened up firing over our heads. Some rest?

Early the next morning we moved forward and dug into positions overlooking the Volturno river. Patrols went out at night looking for crossing areas, and new lads came up to replace the losses. The following evening we moved out to our start line for the assault over the river. On our way we passed through a wooded area where we picked up collapsible boats, brought up by the RE's. Artillery fire now going on constantly from our guns, and return fire also coming back to us. Getting into boats, dark at night, and going over the river was a tedious job, no one having much idea of handling small boats with seven or eight men in them, but we mostly all got to the other side. A. company were to move forward onto our left. C and D companies to go forward onto our right, B company were to advance forward some 7 or 8 hundred yards and take the German positions along a fairly steep embankment. This we achieved, getting into ready made dug outs. We heard voices on the other side of the embankment coming towards us. Grenades were lobbed over, a patrol then went out and brought in four, two wounded and two alright. They had moved out to get away from our shelling, which had now stopped. Over on our left we could hear that a hell of a fight was going on. A. company were to take a small village just forward of our position, but had walked into an ambush and were nearly all lost, killed or prisoners.

Except for the shelling, which by now was very heavy, we in B. company were well dug in and not fairing too badly. Myself and my mate with me spent some time calling out to our friends in the next trench a few yards away, when we heard a shell coming that we knew by the noise it makes was going to land close. Diving to the bottom of our hole, it landed, and after all the bits of muck had stopped falling on us we called out to our friends but got no reply. At first light I peered over the edge and could only see a red hole in the ground. The shell had landed right in their trench. We were now aware of a lot of noise over to our right, heavy shelling and small arms fire. The shelling was also different, just a loud explosion as it landed no loud whistle as it came over. At first we could not understand why our artillery was not replying to back us up, then word came along our positions that our artillery officer, who radios back to the artillery, had been killed within the first hour of getting over the river, along with a war correspondent. So we then thought our own Battalion radio operator would get a message back. This did not happen. The shelling now getting worse and machine gun fire heavy. Now we could hear the rattling noise made by tanks, and soon we saw the Tiger tanks moving along our front from the direction of C and D companies. Our Peart anti tank crews opened fire but were both blown up and killed. We now had nothing that we had any chance of stopping tanks with. By now it was full day light, and a runner came along to tell us that C and D companies had mostly been lost, chopped up and cut off by the tanks. All command and communications had broken down and it was every man for himself.

The tanks were now coming down behind us, as well as to our front, as I did not intend walking out in front of tanks with my hands up I decided along with the rest of our platoon to go for the river. Doing short monkey runs I made for a shallow ditch which we had passed along when advancing from the river, machine guns were now firing into our positions from the Tigers. As I dived into the ditch bits of the hedge above me were being cut off by the gun fire. Four lads ran past me shouting out "come on Hickman, follow us". I shouted back "no thanks, I will take my time". A hundred yards or so further on I had to crawl past and over them, a burst of machine gun fire or a shell had killed all four. By belly crawling and short monkey runs I got near to the river bank. I now knew why we could get no support, our radio operator was lying on the bank part of him bobbing up and down in the river, the rest of him lying on the bank with his smashed radio. Now out of the ditch and in the open I could see two Tigers up river stationary and able to fire along the river. To my right about a hundred yards away was a small clump of trees and bushes. My only chance of cover, so again belly crawling and short monkey runs, I made for the trees, a lad in front of me doing the same. Then I heard the familiar noise of a shell coming up behind me, and from the noise it was making I knew very close. I felt the heat from it as it went over my head.

Then I went up in the air from the blast and came down with incredible force. The earth coming up to meet me. As all the mess stopped falling on and around me I looked up. The lad in front of me had disappeared, just bits of webbing and a tin hat swinging in the trees. A lad out in the trees had gone over the edge. He was screaming out, "fix bayonets, fix bayonets, may as well have a hat pin against tanks, especially the Tiger". I now crawled to left and to the river bank where three other chaps were lying in the grass. They said "what now? we can't swim!". I said "neither can I. Not that it would have made any difference, lads trying to swim were going under, either getting hit or could not manage, or did not have the strength left to fight against the flooded river. We now decided that our only chance was to slip into the river, holding on to the grass and reeds, and keeping close into the bank. Knowing that we would not become prisoners still holding our rifles we let them go down to the bottom of the river, as we had always been instructed to do if in danger of being captured.

After a short while we noticed coming around a bend up river of us, the large branch of a tree that had been cut off by shell fire, so I suggested that we try and hold onto it as it came past. The current helped by pushing it near to our bank. This we managed to do. The river was being constantly hit by shelling and hit by the machine gun fire from the tanks. We decided to try for it and by kicking out with our feet and paddling with our free hand, holding onto the branch, which kept us afloat, we got across reaching the bank. We then still had to climb a high and steep bank rising up from the river. This was also under shell and machine gun fire. When I reached the top I was on my own, so I don't know if the other lads made it or not. I remember walking along a mud path. The next thing that I was aware of was sitting propped up against the wheel of a truck and someone talking to me. What they were saying I have no recollection of at all.

The next thing I became aware of is coming round laying on a stretcher in an American casualty clearing station, somewhere in a large white villa. Now I am in the British army hospital in Naples, and I do not remember how I arrived here. However do not worry now you know where I am and that I am alright. Seems that I am suffering from exposure and complete exhaustion. The rumour going round here is that about 25 or 26 of B, company Sherwood Foresters got away.

Much love to you all
Ron.

An extract from the war diary of 187 Coy Pioneer Corps Commanded by Major G R Vivian.

D. DAY

We left Tripoli at 0430 hrs, on September 6th, 1943 on LST 365. No incident occurred during the 6th, 7th & 8th except on the evening of the 8th when a slight air raid was made at about 1900 hrs.

On the morning of the 9th, D Day; H hour being 0400 hrs, the first party of my Company landed on Green Beach at H Plus 30 mins, under the command of Lieut A P Grundy. They were opposed by the enemy on landing and a pillbox was captured to the right of Green Beach. No further incident occurred until daylight.

The second party of my Company landed on Amber Beach at H plus 30 mins under the command of Lieut R R Selwyn. The beach was being heavily shelled by 88 mm and mortar guns.

The third party of my Company landed with H.Q. By this time the enemy had found a perfect range and was shelling us with both 88 mm and trench mortars. The whole of the Company immediately got down to their work of unloading and laying tracks, and this was carried on although we were being very heavily shelled from time to time. The work on Green and Amber beaches was carried out by the men of my Company, and the discharging of the LSTs was done as though we were on an ordinary exercise. There was no panic, no one realised the danger during this heavy work.

After all LSTs of the Beach Group had been discharged I directed my position from the key plan which had been given to me several days prior to the operation. Having located my position I found the enemy in occupation, so with difficulty I retired to a more suitable and defensible situation. There we settled and dug in for the night, only to be sniped from all directions by the enemy who was constantly harassing and doing his utmost to make us panicky and cause confusion. But all personnel were cool and very collected. I must add that the day was a very hard one for my Company, having stood the strain of hard and heavy work, harassed by shellfire and air raids.

I had reason to be very proud of the men of my Company. The Officers and NCOs played their part in as much as they gave every confidence to the men. Little did they or I realise that the landing could be carried out in so orderly and successful a manner. Success was due to everyone playing the part of real Pioneer, and I say quite definitely that without our orderly and well disciplined men the landing would not have been so successful. During the course of this very arduous day we lost 3 killed and 11 injured.

British forces under overall American command were X Corps under Lieutenant General Richard McCreery, BA comprising

46th Infantry Division (Maj.-Gen. John Hawkesworth) which included the Sherwood Foresters

56th (London) Infantry Division (Maj.-Gen. Douglas Graham)

7th Armoured Division (Maj.-Gen. George Erskine)

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