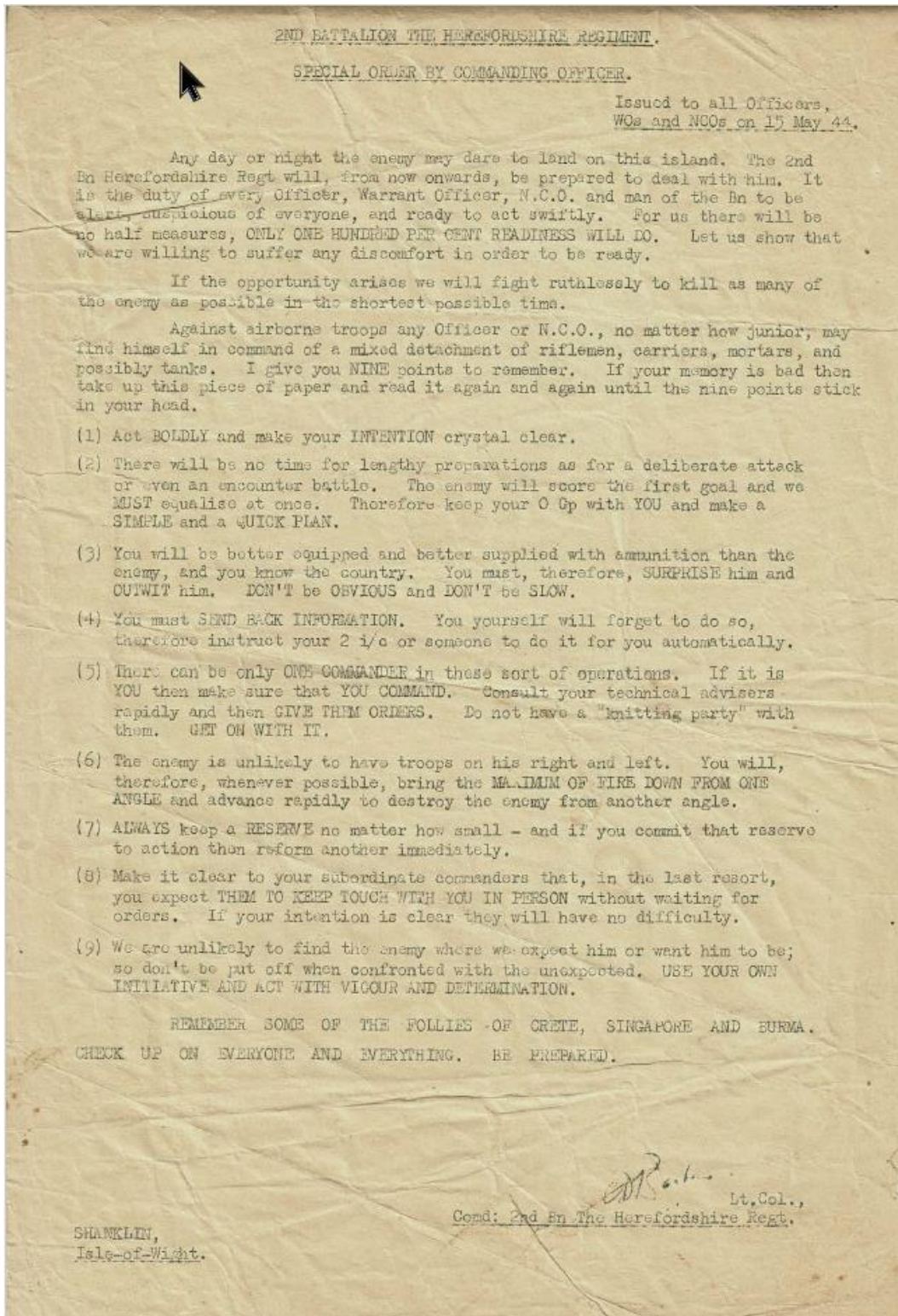


2nd BATTALION – THE HEREFORDSHIRE REGIMENT – JUNE 1944

No War Diary for the 2nd Bn for June 1944 has been located. However the Battalion remained in the Isle of Wight guarding vulnerable points – including: Radar installations and PLUTO (pipeline under the ocean) which would be so critical in supporting troops on the European mainland after the invasion.

On 15 May the 2nd Bn issued a special order of the day:



Ken Crockford a brand new second lieutenant from the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry was attached to the Herefords and recorded the following which gives a good flavour of the atmosphere and duties at the time and the journey of reinforcements to Normandy:

I was commissioned on 31st December 1943 into the KINGS SHROPSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY (KSLI) and posted to the 2nd BATTALION THE HEREFORDSHIRE REGIMENT (HEREFORDS). A week later I reported to 'X' Company at that time billeted in private houses in ALMOUTH, NORTHUMBERLAND. About two weeks later we moved by train and ferry to the ISLE OF WIGHT. 'X' Company was billeted in the unfinished, unfurnished GRAND HOTEL to the north of SANDOWN. Between the hotel and the sea was a PLUTO (pipeline under the sea) terminal and alongside it was the concrete base for a spigot mortar. I never knew who was supposed to man this in a suicidal role in the event of an invasion. A few weeks later we moved again this time to BONCHURCH to the South of the Island. My Platoon was detached from the rest of the company to a rather pleasant unfurnished house in its own grounds.

Training on the Island consisted mainly of route marches, physical training, weapon training with an emphasis on the location and clearance of land mines, section and platoon attacks and on a few occasions a company attack with the use of live ammunition over the only area on which the use of live ammunition was permitted. This restricted such exercises to a company frontal attack which in addition to rifles and bren guns (light machine guns) permitted the use of two and three inch mortars. On one occasion a visiting section of medium machine guns (MMGs) enlivened the exercise. The only weapons other than those held in the rifle company ever seen were the battalions three inch mortars and the visiting MMGs.

Towards the end of May the battalion moved out of its billets and "dug in" in a defensive position some five hundred yards to the North of a number of radar installations established on BONIFACE DOWN. Here we carried out mock counter attacks on imagined GERMAN paratroopers who had dropped with the intention of destroying the installations before escaping by means of rubber inflatable dinghies to submarines awaiting off VENTNOR. Each soldier was issued with ten rounds of .303 rifle ammunition, and officers with ten rounds of .38 revolver ammunition with which to defeat the heavily armed paratroopers! The excuse for the issue of such meagre amounts being that priority had to be given to the units of the 21st ARMY GROUP.

During the first few days of June we had a grandstand view of part of the invasion fleet anchored off the Island, but no hint as to whether it was to be the "real thing" or just another exercise.

When we "stood to" at dawn on the 6th June the sea was empty. We had heard no sounds from ships engines or sirens. Later in the morning we heard that landings in FRANCE had taken place. Some five or six days later we were ordered back to our billets where we were later to learn that the battalion was to be disbanded. Those of low medical category and the more elderly would be posted to 5 KSLI which was to reform as a training battalion on moving to SHROPSHIRE. The remainder of us would be sent as reinforcements to NORMANDY.

This news came as a great disappointment to me. I had a platoon which I would confidently have taken into action. Admittedly some were in their mid to late thirties having been members of the pre-war Territorial Army (TA), my platoon coming mainly from ROSS-ON-WYE and surrounding area.

During all my training as a private soldier in the QUEENS ROYAL REGIMENT and THE BUFFS, and my five months with the HEREFORDS I had never seen a tank, an armoured car, or a gun larger than the six pounder anti-tank gun with which the battalion was equipped.

Rumours leaked through to us on the Island that the 1st HEREFORDS were in the 11th ARMOURED DIVISION which was carrying out intensive training with tanks in the NORFOLK area. We heard that they were commanded by a very forceful commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel JACK CHURCHER. The rumours continued that there had been a number of casualties during exercises, none we understood in the HEREFORDS.

In late June it became my turn with a number of other ranks to move to the RHU (reinforcement holding unit) located in a wooded area near MICHELDEVER, HAMPSHIRE. It seemed to be raining nearly all the time, and when it was not, water continued to drip from the trees onto the NISSEN huts below. We were relieved when it became our turn to leave for NORMANDY.

From MICHELDEVER we moved by train to NEWHAVEN, SUSSEX. I was somewhat dismayed to be made OC (officer commanding) train on which would be placed eighty "deserters" for whom I was charged with their safe arrival at NEWHAVEN. My morale rose considerably when a very smart, efficient looking GUARDS company sergeant major (CSM) presented himself as Train Warrant Officer (TWO). He assured me that once I had signed for the prisoners there would be no escapes pointing out that the prisoners' escorts were armed with fully loaded rifles which they would not hesitate to use if necessary. He advised me that there would be many unscheduled halts, but that each time the train stopped his soldiers would detrain, rifles pointing in, safety catches released. He also told me that I should have a first class compartment to myself and that he would be in the adjoining compartment should I require anything.

All arrived safely in NEWHAVEN where I received the Port Commandant's signature for the prisoners and gave the CSM my heartfelt thanks.

At the quayside were five landing ships infantry (LCIs) and columns of troops embarking on them. I was instructed to join a group of officers who were embarking on LCI 13 which appeared to be crewed by AMERICANS.

As we prepared to move forward I heard an unfamiliar sound above and on looking up saw my first VI flying bomb coming towards us about five hundred feet above the sea. The orange-red flame trailing behind looked evil against the low black clouds. We waited for the engine to cut and to bomb to nosedive but it did not, it continued its journey to some unfortunates inland.

On board we descended by ladder into the holds equipped with two-tier bunk beds, and after disposing of our kit we were permitted to return on deck to witness our departure. About a mile out to sea we were joined by a destroyer which we were told over the tannoy system was to be our escort.

We soon entered heavy seas and were ordered below and the hatches above us secured. A voice over the tannoy informed us that we should anticipate a voyage of some eighteen to twenty or more hours as it was necessary to sail well to the WEST before turning to the beaches in order to avoid minefields.

Throughout the remainder of the day and into the night (of which we were unaware there being no portholes) the weather deteriorated. The small craft pitched, tossed and rolled. Worse still the propeller kept coming out of the water and shaking the craft as a dog shakes a rat. One of the more knowledgeable amongst us did not raise our morale by pointing out that

our craft was welded together not riveted. Whilst a riveted craft allowed the outer plates some movement permitting the ingress of some water and remain afloat, a welded craft under strain (as ours certainly was) could merely gape open and we would plunge to the bottom. By this time I had used my "three bags vomit" issued in NEWHAVEN and would almost have welcomed a quick end. We remained afloat and a kind officer of the NORTHAMPTONSHIRE REGIMENT who appeared completely unaffected passed me his "three bags vomit" which I gratefully accepted – and used.

After what seemed an eternity all became calm and still. The engines stopped and I thought, "Thank God we've arrived". The overhead hatch was raised and we were ordered out but to leave our kit behind. On climbing the ladder and sniffing the sweet air we discovered we were back in NEWHAVEN the LCIs having found it impossible to beach in NORMANDY.

We formed up on the quayside and set off on a two mile march inland to a camp where a "transit breakfast" of fried egg, bacon, sausage and fried bread awaited us. After the march even I devoured all that was put in front of me.

After the meal we marched back to the quayside, embarked, and set off once again. The sea had calmed considerably and I was able to sleep for much of the journey.

As we "beached" the following afternoon, a voice over the tannoy informed us that as the craft could not refloat until the next high tide we could remain on board until low tide when we could walk ashore "dry". The crew rustled up some food which was much appreciated.

Early in the evening we disembarked and were told to wait on the beach for further orders. We were surprised and delighted to find soya stoves set up and hot tea available – very different from 'D' Day! We were somewhat disconcerted to see a column of about fifty men headed by a solitary officer walking down the beach towards the LCIs. These we were told were all that were left of an infantry battalion of 43 WESSEX DIVISION.

As the tide turned the LCIs refloat and departed. We found ourselves being compressed between the sea and a high sandbank which we were forbidden to climb as it had not yet been declared free of mines.

As dusk approached two low flying aircraft appeared from the East. They sprayed us with machine gun fire before climbing, turning and spraying us with bullets yet again before disappearing to the East, not to be seen again that night. We were unarmed and there was no return fire from our area. The whole incident had taken only two to three minutes. No-one in my immediate area was hit although a cry for stretcher bearers (a cry with which we were all later to become familiar) came from some distance away.

We passed the night lying on the beach, but sleep did not come easily in the strange uncomfortable conditions. Shortly after dawn we were ordered to collect our kit and were led inland through a gap in the sandbank to an RHU established in tents some distance inland. On arrival the officers were separated and grouped in a field to be addressed by the officer commanding (OC). The gist of his talk being, "Good morning gentlemen, welcome to NORMANDY, you are to partly replace heavy casualties sustained by the infantry battalions of the 43rd Division in the fighting around CAEN. Your life expectancy is two weeks unless you are fortunate enough to be first evacuated wounded. If you have not already prepared your wills I strongly advise you to do so now in the space provided in your AB439s (which we all carried in our breast pockets). Goodbye gentlemen and good luck". He departed presumably for his breakfast.

It was open knowledge that the invasion would take place soon, but unknown (to most) was the location and the date. Plans were in place to inform troops when the invasion took place – sealed secret orders/notification were passed to units, this envelope is held in the museum – unfortunately the detail of its contents are not known:

