

1ST HEREFORDS - DECEMBER 1944

The following account has been produced at the request of Mr HUGO LEVELS of NEER in HOLLAND who has undertaken to research the activities of the British Armed Forces in the areas of HORN, BAEXHAM, HEEL and BEEDEN during the period 17th December 1944 to 2nd February 1945. He was particularly interested in the activities of a British patrol located on the Western side of the destroyed bridge over the River MAAS opposite ROERMOND on the night 26th/27th December. I was in command of that patrol! Mr LEVELS has received an official copy of the report made by the officer commanding the German patrol which attacked this position, Lieutenant HEINE of the 2nd Parachute Regiment HUEBNER. A copy of the original report in German is attached, also a translation into English.

The account opens with an introduction to indicate where the 1st BATTALION THE HEREFORDSHIRE REGIMENT fitted in to the order of battle within 21 Army Group (commanded by Field Marshall MONTGOMERY).

The second part briefly covers the activities of The HEREFORDS from the 13th to the 27th December 1944. It is largely taken from the official War Diary to which recollections of those present have been added.

The third part is my personal recollection of the activities of 14 Platoon 1st HEREFORDS during 26th and 27th December 1944, with the assistance of Sergeant JACKSON of that platoon.

I have also added brief notes about a number of personalities mentioned in the account.

Photocopies of the three maps used by me at that time are also attached. The first is a copy of one of many German maps acquired by the Allies and subsequently issued to appropriate units. The scale is 1:50,000 and gives a good idea of the complete area of operations.

The second and third maps are on a scale of 1:25,000, and, as was so often the case, the activities described are partly covered by each. The first shows the area of the standing patrol opposite ROERMOND (bottom right hand corner) and the second the complex known as HATENBOER which was the objective during the early part of the night 26th/27th December.

All map references quoted refer to the two British maps scale 1:25,000.

Since preparing the original version of this account I have decided to include an account of my meetings with General HUAT STUENT in 1946 as an Epilogue. This account will explain how the patrol came to be attacked by German paratroopers.

September 1993. K.H. Lovellford +

THE FIRST BATTALION THE HEREFORDSHIRE REGIMENT
HOLLAND 14TH-27TH DECEMBER, 1944

Account by Major (then Lieutenant) Kenneth H Crockford MC

INTRODUCTION

During the campaign in North West Europe 1944/5 the 1st Battalion THE HEREFORDSHIRE REGIMENT was one of three infantry battalions forming 159 Infantry Brigade, the infantry brigade of the 11th Armoured Division. The other two battalions being the 4th Battalion THE KINGS SHROPSHIRE LIGHT INFANTRY and the 3rd Battalion THE MONMOUTHSHIRE REGIMENT. Although the brigade had trained with armour since the formation of 11th Armoured Division in 1942 it found itself divorced from its armoured regiments during its first battles on the ODON Bridgehead from the 27th June until the 6th July (Operation EPSOM), and having no close contact with them during the operations to the EAST OF CAEN from 18th to 22nd July 1944 (Operation GOODWOOD). However, this changed from 30th July 1944 when close co-operation between armour (tanks) and infantry became a reality during the battles to break out of the NORMANDY Bridgehead WEST OF CAUMONT (Operation BLUECOAT). On that day (known to the HEREFORDS as BLACK SUNDAY) the HEREFORDS suffered one hundred and twenty nine casualties, twenty five being killed on the day or dying later from wounds. This from a total of about six hundred and eighty who set out that morning. On the credit side, those who survived had learned a great deal about close co-operation between infantry and tanks, but wished with all their hearts that the SHERMAN tanks had an external telephone with which they could communicate with the tank crews. If the infantry soldiers could not attract the attention of the crews, it meant clambering on to the tanks and banging on the turrets. This could be a most dangerous manoeuvre in itself and not recommended whilst the tank was being fired on! Tank losses on 30th July were small, they had more than their share of losses on the opening day of Operation GOODWOOD on the 18th July.

By December 1944, the HEREFORDS had suffered the loss of one hundred and fifty five killed and approximately six hundred and thirty five wounded, a total eight hundred and thirty five - far more than the battalion had landed with in NORMANDY in June that year. The difference is explained by reinforcements being posted in from the United Kingdom and units which had been disbanded within BLA (BRITISH LIBERATION ARMY). As even these proved insufficient to meet the demand created by losses, it was necessary to rebadge reinforcements from THE ROYAL ARMY SERVICE CORPS, THE ROYAL MILITARY POLICE and even at a later date others from THE ROYAL AIR FORCE. These reinforcements obviously suffered low morale at leaving their parent Corps or Arm of the Service and did not have the opportunity to prepare themselves for close combat fighting before being pitched into battle. That so many acquitted themselves as well as they did speaks highly of them, and the ability of the HEREFORDS to absorb so many into the "family of the regiment".

By VE Day, 8th May 1945, the HEREFORD casualties totalled two hundred and thirty four killed and approximately one thousand and thirty wounded. Forty seven are buried in seven war cemeteries in HOLLAND.

As will be appreciated from the foregoing, the battalion opposite ROEMOND in late December 1944 was very different from the one which had landed in NORMANDY in June that year. A number of individuals had survived, and fewer still survived until the end of hostilities in Europe.

13 - 27TH DECEMBER, 1944

On the 13th December, the HEREFORDS handed over their defensive positions at GRUBBENVORST and HOUTHUIZEN to the 8th Battalion THE RIFLE BRIGADE and moved to a rest area at MELDERSLO (map ref 8518). On the 14th and 15th they provided working parties to improve the road running between MELDERSLO and HORST. During this brief period they also took the opportunity to bathe, check and service their weapons and equipment and get what rest they could. They had little idea of what might lie ahead. The three armoured (tank) regiments had gone back to Belgium to exchange their SHERMAN tanks for the new COMETS. It was anticipated that the regiments would require two weeks to exchange and become familiar with their COMETS, after which 159 Infantry Brigade would withdraw from the front, move to Belgium and enjoy a four week period of rest and training with the newly equipped armoured regiments. The RUNSTEDT offensive in the ARDENNES quickly changed this plan. The tank regiments collected their old SHERMANS and set off for the ARDENNES, whilst the infantry brigade (including the HEREFORDS) remained in HOLLAND.

BACK IN "THE LINE"

The HEREFORDS did not have long to wait. After only two days at MELDERSLO the battalion reconnaissance party departed for an area WEST of HORN in preparation for the battalion to take over the following day from the 6th Battalion THE ROYAL WELCH FUSILIERS (RWF) (part of 158 Infantry Brigade, 53rd WELCH INFANTRY DIVISION).

At 0900 hours on the 17th December, the main body of the HEREFORDS left MELDERSLO and by 1530 hours had completed the take over with the exception of the forward standing patrols which could not be relieved until after dark.

During the changeover, 'B' Company had been shelled and Second Lieutenant BACHE a platoon commander wounded.

The HEREFORDS defensive positions were located at:

BATTALION HQ	-	Area road junction (map ref 733921)
'A' Company	-	HEUGDE (map ref 751923)
'B' Company	-	Area WEST of BRICKWORKS (map ref 737905)
'C' Company	-	HORN (map ref 751915)
'D' Company	-	Area SOUTHERN Edge of HAELENSCH BROEK (map ref 760928)

After dark, a patrol of one platoon moved down the road from HORN and relieved the platoon from 6 RWF located in a ruined house to the left of the road (map ref 769905) and brickworks (map ref 767903) about three hundred metres short of the blown bridge over the River MAAS.

The Regimental Aid Post (RAP) was situated near the civilian hospital (map ref 732927). Each company has its own regimental stretcher bearers (NOT Royal Army Medical Corps). As movement between the main positions and forward patrol areas was under constant German observation, no movement between them was permitted during the hours of daylight. A stretcher bearer accompanied each patrol. In addition to their normal first aid kit they were provided with a supply of hypodermic syringes charged with morphine with which to alleviate the suffering of any wounded until they could be carried back the following evening.



The means of communication were: 38 wireless set and field telephone between the rear and forward patrol opposite the bridge, and field telephone between the ruined house and brickworks on the other side of the road. These had not proved reliable for the RWF, nor did they prove so for most of the time for the HEREFORDS. For many hours each night "mush" prevented the use of wireless, and the telephone cables were frequently cut by shrapnel or German patrols.

The HEREFORDS had in support a battery of 25 pounder guns (8) of the 151st Field Regiment (The AYRSHIRE YEOMANRY, EARL OF CARRICKS OWN) ROYAL ARTILLERY. This battery registered DF (Defensive Fire) and DFSOS (Defensive Fire SOS) tasks around the HEREFORDS positions, the DFSOS being immediately in front. The HEREFORDS own 3" Mortar Platoon of six mortars also registered targets, their range being very much shorter than the guns. A company of medium machine guns provided by The ROYAL NORTHUMBERLAND FUSILIERS was deployed to our flanks.

The situation was somewhat complicated by the unannounced movement of Dutch civilians. Some would take chances and visit their houses and farms between us and the river. Some crossed the river as and when they could evade the German sentries. We were warned to be wary of all civilians in the area, some of whom might well have been German soldiers in civilian clothing. Great care had therefore to be exercised before opening fire on any detected movement, particularly during the hours of darkness or heavy fog.

Just before our move to HORN I had handed over command of 14 Platoon, 'C' Company and taken over the appointment of second in command to that company with the acting rank of Captain. The Company Commander, Major LESLIE NORTHEY advised me that in the event of 14 Platoon being required to act in an independent role before a replacement platoon commander arrived I should be required to re-assume command of the platoon for the duration of the operation.

'C' Company was very happy with its new position. When not actually on sentry duty we had houses in which to keep warm and dry and regular meals became normal! The outside temperature was well below zero. The water on flooded fields was frozen and the countryside covered in snow.

I was not so happy about the patrol opposite the bridge, the location of which appeared to me to be a direct contradiction of all we had been taught in training and proved by experience. To maintain the patrol in the same location day after day, week after week appeared sheer madness. The enemy must have known the strength, times of change-over and just about all there was to know about it. We were informed that the decision had been taken "well behind the line" - at HQ 8 Corps in fact.

Just after 0230 hours on the morning of the 18th we received our first warm welcome from the enemy, over one hundred and fifty shells fell on the village on HORN. We left the warmth of the houses and manned our defensive positions in anticipation of an attack following the barrage, but none came. After an hour we "stood down" leaving our usual sentries on duty. For the rest of the night we saw flares being fired all around us and heard spasmodic burst of Spandau (German light machine gun) and our own Bren guns, but none in our immediate area.

Later in the day 'D' Company HQ moved to map ref 762931 and altered its platoon positions slightly. The HEREFORDS then remained in these positions until Christmas Day 25th December.

The following day (the 19th) the ROYAL ENGINEERS came forward and cleared an enemy minefield in the vicinity of Battalion HQ. There was some enemy shelling and mortaring but probably restricted due to lack of vision as the result of a heavy mist which persisted throughout the day, although there was little doubt that they had "observers" on our side of the river. Peering through the mist hour after hour imposed tremendous strain on the sentries. It also muffled sound calling for even greater alertness.

During the day we heard a noise the like of which we had never heard before. We thought the Germans had produced a new weapon to sound even more terrifying than their moaning minnies. We ducked but there was no immediate danger the noise came from German jet aircraft, the first we had ever seen - or heard. Fortunately, they were more interested with what was going on behind us.

The mist persisted through the night and all day the 20th. The enemy was active along the whole front firing small arms, Nebelwefer (six barrel mortars known to the British as Moaning Minnies because of the noise the bombs made), 81 millimetre mortars (similar to the British 3" mortars), and occasional shells. No enemy patrols were encountered and no casualties were sustained.

The Carrier Platoon of the HEREFORDS set up "standing" patrols in addition to carrying out "mobile" patrols, and on the 20th they shot up the area East of 'D' Company with their medium machine guns (Vickers).

Enemy patrols were reported to be operating on our side of the river, possibly acting as spotters for their artillery or just seeking to create havoc.

On the 22nd an enemy patrol was reported to be in the area of WEERD (map ref 7691) but disappeared in the fog before it could be intercepted. After dark the ROYAL ENGINEERS again came forward and, protected by a platoon from 'A' Company, laid anti-personnel and Schu mines along our side of the river (map refs 785916, 774921, 774913). The ROYAL ENGINEERS suffered two casualties during the operation, both wounded by shrapnel. An enemy patrol of six was seen at map ref 752920 and another at map ref 746915. One of them was wounded by our rifle fire.

The 23rd passed quietly and it was thought the Germans were celebrating Christmas due to sounds of revelry heard from across the river. During the day a Troop from 474 INDEPENDENT SEARCHLIGHT BATTERY came under command in order to provide artificial moonlight as and when required. We all had previous experience of the use of this (reflecting searchlight beams from clouds) and whilst appreciating its tremendous value at nighttime we were also aware that care was required by us to avoid presenting silhouetted targets to the enemy.

The 24th was also fairly quiet with but little enemy shelling. During the day the Reconnaissance Troop of the 15/19th HUSSARS came forward in an infantry role and was placed under the command of 'A' Company to thicken their defensive position.

On the 25th Christmas Day, two Dutch civilians accompanied by two Canadians crossed the river under the very noses of the German sentries. The Canadians were part of the crew of a Halifax bomber which had been shot down in May 1942. They had been sheltered at great risk by the Dutch people since then, nearly three years. They and the civilians were able to provide much useful information regarding the German defences, also pin-pointing the enemy's crossing points over the river, and routes taken by them on our side of the river.

Christmas Day was a day of activity for the HEREFORDS. The personnel of 338 BATTERY, 75 ANTI-TANK Regiment ROYAL ARTILLERY came forward in an infantry role to take over 'D' Company's position. 'D' Company moved to the WEST of HORN (map ref 7490) an area known to have been used by German patrols. 'B' and 'D' Companies thus spent much of Christmas Day moving to and "digging in" to their new locations.

For the period 1800 hours 25th to the evening of the 26th December, the patrol opposite the bridge was provided by 13 Platoon of 'C' Company. The Platoon Commander had been instructed that in addition to manning the ruined house and brickworks he was to place a standing patrol near HATENBOER (map ref 762897) and withdraw it to the brickworks before first light. This he did. The patrol ambushed a German patrol estimated at 25 to 30 strong and believed it had killed seven and injured others. The Germans took great pains to recover all their wounded and dead, presumably to prevent identification.

HATENBOER 26th - 27th December, 1944

On the 26th December, the Commanding Officer (CO) of the HEREFORDS received intelligence reports to the effect that the group of buildings known as HATENBOER had been occupied by Germans for at least three days, and that it was believed they were using it as a base from which to operate on our side of the river. He therefore decided that decisive action should be taken to eliminate any enemy in the buildings and surrounding orchards. He further decided that the proposed action should be undertaken by the platoon due to take over the forward position that evening, 14 Platoon.

During the afternoon of the 26th I was instructed to report to the CO at Battalion HQ for briefing. On arrival I was directed to a room in which I found the CO (Lieutenant Col BOB TURNER CAIN), his Intelligence Officer (known to all as BIFKINS), his Signals Officer (Lieutenant N A POWLEY - known as NAP), and an officer from 151 FIELD REGIMENT RA who I believe was the CO (Lieutenant Colonel AP TREVOR). During the 'O' (Order) Group the Brigade Commander (Brigadier JB Churcher) arrived but did not take part in the proceedings.

The CO introduced me to the CO of the "Gunnery" and told him that I would be commanding the patrol that night. Then, turning his attention to a large diagram produced by the Intelligence Section, he outlined his plan for the operation.

The plan was masterly in its simplicity (this was not unusual) and breathtaking in the amount of artillery allocated to support 14 Platoon. It was usual for a battalion to be supported by a battery of eight guns, but the Colonel's plan envisaged my platoon being supported by a whole regiment of twenty four. This was proof, if indeed any was needed, of higher commands' determination to keep casualties to a minimum at that time.

The plan was for 14 Platoon, accompanied by an officer from the gunner regiment in the role of FOO (Forward Observation Officer) to set off at 1730 hours from HORN to the forward positions. On arrival 14 Platoon to form up just beyond the SOUTH WEST corner of the brickworks and to advance and clear the orchard to the EAST of HATENBOER. The advance from the FUP (Forming Up Position) to be covered by the regiment of guns firing on to the orchard until 14 Platoon arrived within one hundred metres of it, when the regiment would lift to the buildings beyond. When the orchard was cleared the guns to lift to the orchard SOUTH EAST of HATENBOER whilst 14 Platoon cleared the buildings. When this was completed the guns to lift to known targets on the far bank of the river whilst 14 Platoon cleared the final orchard. On completion the guns would cease firing but remain "on call". The platoon was to adopt an "all round defensive position" to ambush any enemy reinforcements which might arrive on the scene. If all remained quiet for two hours the platoon to return and relieve the patrol at the bridge and remain there until relieved by a patrol from 4 KSLI at approximately 1800 hours on the 27th December. In the meantime the HEREFORDS would have handed over their defensive positions at HORN etc and moved back to BAEXHAM. Transport would be left just outside HORN to enable 14 Platoon to rejoin the battalion on completion of its handover to 4 KSLI. It was hoped the HEREFORDS would celebrate Christmas on the 28th.

Communications for the operation would be by field telephone already established between the main position and patrol HQ, plus 38 wireless sets for as long as they were usable. The gunner FOO would be accompanied by a wireless operator equipped with a 'back-packed' 18 set (very much more efficient than our 38 sets).



I listened as the plan unfolded with tremendous gratitude that such care has been taken in the planning, and such overwhelming support arranged. Yet, I was uneasy. As previously mentioned I was concerned to be taking over a position obviously well known to the Germans, although I had to admit to myself, to date it had not been attacked. My more immediate concern was what would happen as the guns lifted from one target to the next. Our experience had been that as our creeping barrages moved forward the Germans anticipating that infantry would move in, would bring their fire down onto the same area. Even a few shells or mortar bombs would give the attackers the impression one or more of their own guns was firing short, with resultant drop in morale. I pondered the problem.

Colonel Bob then asked if we had any questions, starting with the Gunner Officer. He had none, in fact everyone appeared to be completely happy except me. When it became my turn to speak, and being the most junior person in the room, I asked, rather timorously, "Please Sir, may I do it without the guns?" The shocked silence which greeted my request must have been equalled only by Oliver Twist when he asked for more. The difference being I was asking for less. Then everyone appeared to speak at once but the Colonel called for silence and, giving me an encouraging smile, said "Ken is not inexperienced, let us hear his reasons".

I gave my reasons as explained above adding that I would prefer to go in silently relying on our own platoon weapons if necessary, ensuring surprise, and hopefully creating havoc and retaining the initiative. The CO held a short consultation with the "Gunner" and came up with a compromise. The FOO would accompany me to the forward position and set up his OP (Observation Post). I would then attempt the operation without the 25 pounder guns support, but if I got into difficulties they would be immediately "on call". This arrangement suited me admirably. We had tremendous confidence in 151 Field Regiment for their swift response to our requests and the accuracy of their fire. I also had the morale boosting factor of being able to tell 14 Platoon that if we got into difficulties we had a complete regiment of 25 pounders "on call".

At about 1700 hours our FOO arrived and my morale soared even higher. It was Captain KEITH SPENCE who had frequently accompanied 'C' Company on previous occasions (although it must be said he usually had a 19 wireless set in a tank rather than an 18 set strapped to the back of a signaller). We had all grown to admire Keith both for his skill and undoubted bravery. With our favourite artillery regiment and FOO to support us we were ready to take on the German Army - we only hoped Keith's 18 set would work as well as his 19!

As darkness fell, accompanied by our most welcome friends we set off down the road keeping to the edges to minimise the noise of our boots on the cobbled road. Of necessity we were in single file on each side of the road with one hundred metres between sections and platoon HQ. We fully appreciated that such a formation presented magnificent enfilade targets to a possible enemy ambush, but we had no choice - the fields on each side of the road being covered by snow concealing frozen flood water and possibly more horrifying, German mines. We made all speed towards the bridge.

On approaching the ruined house we were challenged and on identifying ourselves the platoon Commander came to meet us. He told us that he had sent a small patrol towards HATENBOER as dusk fell. The patrol had reported that the area appeared to have been evacuated by the Germans, there being no obvious signs of habitation. Grateful as I was for this information I was too experienced to take chances. Leaving KEITH SPENCE and his signaller we moved to our Forming Up Position (FUP) WEST of the brickworks. We then commenced our move forward. There was plenty of light either from the moon or the artificial moonlight. Shadows appeared to move, and creaking ice all around us gave us the impression that we were being shadowed by an enemy patrol, a bit unnerving.

We arrived at the first orchard, entered and passed through it unhindered. Halting within sight of the buildings we kept them under observation for a few minutes. We saw no lights and heard no sound so we approached and entered them. Empty! We turned to the second orchard, no sign of life, so we took up an "all round" defensive position covering the track junction to the WEST of HATENBOER (map ref 758898) being the most likely way Germans would return. (It had previously been reported that patrols crossed near the ferry points in the area of PONTVEER (map ref 753896). I reported the area clear and that we were in position, and proposed to wait the planned two hours.

After about ten minutes we heard shouting and the noise of hammering coming from the opposite bank to the South. On investigation we found it to be caused by a German working party which appeared to be erecting or strengthening their defences. We did not open fire on them as that would have been counter-productive to our main aim of ambushing a possible patrol and hopefully taking prisoners for identification purposes.

After what seemed an eternity, it was time to leave. No patrols had ventured near us. Appreciating that on our return to the brickworks we, the ambushers, could become the "ambushed", we moved tactically to the brickworks where I left Sergeant JACKSON in command of two sections. The two sections from 13 Platoon joined us and we returned to the ruined house.

The house presented a very sorry state. The ground floor being roughly level with the raised road, and the cellar below road level. To the EAST we could see a black mass which appeared to be another house and what appeared to be a raised bank on which the track running to the NORTH had been constructed. Also to the left front were other dark "blobs" which we assumed were houses or farm buildings. The "fields of fire" appeared deplorable and confirmed my apprehension of occupying such a position. The other disturbing factor was confirmation that the two positions were in no way mutually supporting. If one was attacked there was no possibility of the other position providing covering fire unless they left the protection of their own positions. The two positions could only act independently in attempting to deny the use of the road to patrols leading towards HORN.

My sentries replaced those of 13 Platoon and we said farewell to them and our Gunner friends wishing them a safe return to HORN.

The basement presented a dismal picture of where those not on sentry duty were to rest. It was flooded and, in an effort to keep dry, previous patrols had constructed platforms from any material available. The air was damp and smelly, the scene illuminated by two candles. Being so cold, we were surprised that the water had not frozen. (We were later told that the outside temperature was 21°F below zero!)

Sergeant FITZSIMMONS divided those not on sentry duty into relief sentries ensuring that we could change sentries every hour. (We only had one section plus Platoon HQ). It was the custom in infantry platoons for the Platoon Commander and Sergeant to remain awake for half the night each. I took the first "watch" sitting at the top of the stairs where I had immediate access to the wireless and telephones. The night was quiet, making any use of the telephone inadvisable. The noise would have been deafening in the now still night.

The night wore on, the cold seemed to penetrate to our very skeletons, and we all had wet feet. All remained quiet except for occasional flares being put up from across the river, and spasmodic bursts of machine guns well away from our position.

At the appointed time I roused Sergeant FITZSIMMONS who had managed only a few snatches of fitful sleep. He took my place at the top of the stairs and I sat further down where I could remain on immediate "call". I then fell into a fitful sleep usually of only a few minutes at a time.

I was fully roused by being shaken by Sergeant FITZSIMMONS who whispered that he thought we were surrounded by the enemy. He went on to rouse the remainder of the patrol, whilst I climbed the stairs and joined the sentries. I was told that they believed there were about ten to fifteen, mostly to the front of us (between us and the river), but there was movement on either side (mainly to our left) and it appeared that a patrol was working its way to our rear. All these conversations were carried out in whispers so as not to alert the attackers that we had seen them.

The rest of my patrol silently joined us (with the exception of the stretcher bearer Private HINDMARSH. He was calmly preparing his first aid equipment for immediate use). The HEREFORDS were too well disciplined to open fire immediately, the more experienced knowing the futility of doing so. Had we done so there was the danger that the enemy could call for artillery and/or mortar support whilst they were out of the danger zone. We had to wait until they were fifteen to twenty yards away to avoid this. The only disadvantage of this philosophy being that at such close range the Germans could easily lob their stick grenades through the gaps which had once housed windows. However, we did have the advantage of our brick walls and could throw our 36 hand grenades (mills bombs) without endangering ourselves which was always a problem with this grenade when used in the open.

We awaited the next move with bated breath but not for long. The Germans in front of us advanced and I believe we opened fire on each other simultaneously. This halted the advance but not the gun battle. We were subjected to a hail of bullets and occasional "plops" against the walls which we assumed were stick grenades. Fortunately none came through the window openings.

After about fifteen minutes initial firing ceased as suddenly as it had begun, the silence being broken by groans from obviously wounded Germans, but at that time my main concern was from which direction the next attack would come. It was therefore necessary to keep watch in all directions.

The silence was soon broken by a flash and tremendous crash, followed by a second joined by a crescendo of bullets cracking around us. We were sufficiently experienced to realise that the enemy was firing panzerfaust rockets (German hand-held anti-tank weapon) at us. Three other loud bangs followed but the noise and effect of the blast on us made it difficult to determine whether the rockets had actually hit the walls. Fortunately, they did not come through the window gaps!

Somewhat to our amazement the renewed attack came again from the direction of the river but we remained wary in case this was covering fire whilst other Germans were creeping up behind us.


About that time the telephone rang and a voice enquired as to "What on earth was going on down there?" I just said "We are being attacked" and rang off. Our only Bren gunner, Private PARKER, suddenly let out a yell and I thought he had been wounded but it was a yell of frustration, his gun had overheated and jammed. (He later told me that his barrel was 'glowing'). This inconvenience was slightly academic as he had practically exhausted all of his ammunition. What little he did have he unloaded and passed to the riflemen whose weapons were also getting quite hot, as one by one they ran out of ammunition.

Very soon we all ran out of ammunition and hand grenades and could only sit and await for what we thought was inevitable, an assault on the house under cover of intensive supporting fire (to keep our heads down), grenades thrown into the house followed by the attackers charging in, guns blazing. This is what we would have done and we had no reason to believe that the Germans would have done it any differently. Should any of us survive we would certainly be taken prisoner although, under the circumstances the chances of survival appeared distinctly remote! The telephone from the rear rang. It was the CO who asked for a situation report which I gave him. The CO said "Well done. If you are taken prisoners I know you will all uphold the best traditions of the British Army. Please convey my thanks to your men, hopefully it will not be too long before we all meet again."

As I replaced the handset I heard a bang in the house followed by a louder bang outside. On poking my head above the stairs I saw Private PARKES (14 Platoon Runner) sitting on the floor with a PIAT (Projector Infantry Anti Tank) between his legs. He was calmly arming a PIAT rocket, which he then loaded, raised and aimed at a dark mass ahead and squeezed the trigger. To our amazement the rocket exploded (they were noted for not exploding on contact). There were some screams but all firing against us ceased.

As darkness began to give way to the first grey of dawn, we could distinguish figures which appeared to be tending and collecting their wounded and possibly, dead. The Germans were again obviously not going to leave any possible means by which we could identify their unit.

I turned my mind to the problem of replenishing our ammunition. The only possible feasible course open appeared to be to borrow from those in the brickworks. However, in the increasing light of dawn, and not knowing where the enemy were, this would have been foolhardy. Equally foolhardy would have been what might appear to have been a logical reaction. That was to order Sergeant JACKSON to leave the safety of the brickworks and sweep across my front. At best he could have won a quick battle, but then he would be left with the problem of what to do with the Germans until the following evening. He would most certainly have had to disarm and send a sufficient number of uninjured soldiers back across the river with their wounded colleagues. The chances of them being shelled by their own artillery would be great. At worst, he could bump into a fresh patrol and not have the security of his position in the brickworks. It was almost certain the Germans would have left a small party to guard their boats and who would be fresh for battle. I therefore decided not to pursue the retreating enemy. Although this takes some minutes to explain the appreciation and decision probably took only a few seconds, due entirely to training and previous experience. Sergeant JACKSON did tell me by telephone that, although they had heard the noise of the battle, they had seen nothing of it.

Taking all the factors into consideration I decided we had no choice but to sit  out. Hopefully until relieved by the KSLI after dark that evening.

As daylight grew stronger we appreciated the hopelessness of our situation. Even if we had ammunition our fields of fire were deplorable, and both the brickworks and ourselves could be completely overlooked from the high buildings in ROERMOND where the Germans would most certainly have established OPs (Observation Posts).

We did not have to wait long, a loud crump to the front of us was sufficient to tell us we were being registered by mortars. (We did wonder why mortars and not guns). A second crump behind us confirmed our fears. The third bomb landed on our roof, sending splinters down on the sentries. We awaited the inevitable barrage to follow - but no barrage came. Had we any ammunition I would have ordered a one hundred percent "stand-to" on the assumption that we were to be mortared prior to another attack. There was no point in this and fortunately no further attack came.

Shortly after this the CO telephoned to say that in view of my total lack of ammunition, the gunners had arranged for a twenty-five pounder gun to be "on call" until I was relieved. It seemed at the time rather meagre after the proposal to use a whole regiment the previous day, but it was a kindly thought and very welcome.

The rest of the day passed quietly, disturbed only by the crack of two bullets fired into the house from across the river. We all had massive headaches due to the lack of sleep and explosions around us.

We ate our haversack rations (slices of bread, margarine and corned beef) but what tea had been left in the insulated containers from the previous evening was cold. Oh how we ached for those self heating cans of cocoa and soup, and twenty four hour ration packs with which we had been issued as we left England, never to be seen again, at least up at the front! Even the rations contained in the "fourteen man" compo packs would have been received with open arms, but we were told the whole of BLA was on "fresh rations" and no exceptions could be made for front line troops. Many hundreds of patrols throughout the campaign must have regretted that decision taken in the interests of health and economy (ie our health and the country's economy!)

At about 1800 hours we heard footsteps approaching from the direction of HORN, it was our welcome relief platoon from the 4th KSLI. We carried out relief procedures and thankfully made our way (cautiously in case of ambush) back up the road to HORN. On the far side we found our TCV (Troop Carrying Vehicle) with our ever faithful Royal Army Service Corps driver, Driver SPOTSWOOD (affectionately known as SPOTTY). We clambered on board and set of to rejoin the HEREFORDS for a delayed Christmas celebration at BAEXHAM.

We had come through the last twenty-four hours without the loss of one man. We all had massive headaches and felt groggy, but we were all alive and uninjured. My platoon expressed no surprise, frequently telling me that if I fell out of an aeroplane I would surely land on something "warm and soft, stand up, and walk away smelling of roses". I never felt like proving them right or wrong!

On arrival at BAEXHAM we received the welcome news that we were excused all duties for the remainder of the night. We were given tea and a meal, and directed to a stable which was to be our home for the next few days. Here we fell on to the straw and I certainly slept the "sleep of the just". The irony of being in a stable at that time of the year completely escaped us.



I recommended Private PARKES for an award as we were all convinced that had it not been for his imaginative action, the HEREFORDS would have been reduced by some twenty plus in strength! This recommendation got no further than company headquarters. I was informed that awards were only made for "offensive" action, our incident had been "defensive".

Note:

The establishment of a platoon was 1 officer and 37 soldiers. Lack of reinforcements meant that a total strength of about 26 was more usual.