

NORMAN FARR

Norman Farr was born on the 5th June 1920 in Birmingham to Polly and Sam Farr. They lived in Birmingham in a 'back-to-back terrace' house, with no garden and no inside toilet or bathroom. Norman left school at 14 as he needed to earn money for the family. He worked in a guitar factory. In his spare time, he joined the Territorial Army as a Boy Soldier.

Norman would drill and train twice a week and at weekends. He was taught to use a compass, pitch tents, cook outdoors, send messages by flags and to shoot. He was a very accurate rifle shot and was soon taught to be a Marksman. At aged 16 he was old enough to join the army and he joined the Royal Warwickshire Regiment.

In 1939 war broke out in Europe and quickly spread. In 1940 the war was going badly and Britain came close to being invaded. After the Battle of Britain Special Units were formed of highly trained soldiers. These units needed marksmen and Norman was selected to be trained as part of a special forces Airborne Division in the Oxon & Bucks Light infantry.

In the 6th Airborne, Norman started parachute training and also how to fire lots of different weapons including machine guns and Rifles. He was sent on week long training with no food and had to live off the land and carry all his kit. The Regiment was split into Platoons of 30 men and each Platoon into 3 Sections of 10 soldiers. Each Platoon had a No. 1 gunner who carried the heavy Bren gun. His No. 2 mate carried the ammunition that was even heavier! Marksmen like Norman had a special badge they wore on their sleeve.

For two years Norman had very special elite training including parachute drops, glider flying, attack tactics and silent running. The 6th Airborne were being trained to do a very special job, to be the first British troops to land in Europe on D-Day. Their job was to capture and hold enemy bridges before the AXIS troops could stop them.

The plan was for 6 Horsa Gliders would each take a platoon of 30 men and land them as close as possible to 2 bridges at Caen in France over the River Orne and the nearby Canal. The bridges at Caen were very important as they controlled the roads from the Beaches in Normandy where the allied troops would land on D-DAY on 6th June [Operation Overlord] to invade axis held territory.

Code name 'Operation Deadstick' was to go to France on the night of the 4th June but high winds and rain meant they had to postpone the flight for a day. At 11pm on 5th June 1944 (Norman's Birthday) the 6 gliders left RAF Tarrant Rushton in Dorset England towed by Halifax Bombers and flew 141 miles at 100mph to Casen. About 11 Miles from Caen the Horsa gliders were released from the Halifax planes and silently glided into France.

The first glider landed at 6 minutes after midnight and the second (Norman's glider) one minute later. They landed just metres from the. The landings took the enemy completely by surprise and at 21 minutes past midnight they had captured the bridges. They set up a bridgehead and started firing down the bridges to stop the enemy trying to recapture the bridges or blow them up. Norman was one of the first men out of the gliders that broke up when they landed. In 15 minutes, they had done their job but one of their soldiers had been killed when the gliders crashed

The 6th Airborne troops held the bridges for three hours until being reinforced by the Parachute Battalion, dropped from Sterling Bombers. Later, they were relieved by Lord Lovatt's commandos. The road from the Normandy beaches was now open for the British and Allied troops to recapture Belgium, France and Holland.

The D Day landings, was the start of the end of the War in Europe but it took until the following year before the war ended. Operation Deadstick helped end the war and because of the bravery and skill of the 6th Airborne the Caen Bridge was renamed Pegasus Bridge after the shoulder emblem of the 6th Airborne troops the Flying Horse. The famous 1962 film 'The Longest Day' about the 6th June 1944 includes the Pegasus Bridge capture.

After the battle for Pegasus Bridge Norman was sent back England. On his way back he was injured in the knee and leg by shrapnel. After Norman had recovered he re-joined the 6th Airborne and was sent to Belgium to fight the enemy at Bastogne in The Battle of the Bulge.

Finally, in late 1946, Norman returned home. He was given a number of medals but never wore them. He didn't like to talk much about the war. He had seen too many of his friends killed and had too many bad memories of fighting people who were just like him, soldiers who had to do their duty. He never went on a plane again or went abroad.

[account as told to his nephew, Derek Farr, a Wheathampstead resident]