



MARKET GARDEN VETERANS ASSOCIATION



"SPEARHEAD.....A GRENADIER REMINISCES"

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It was September the 20th, 1994, exactly 50 years since we had launched the successful attack on the bridge at Nijmegen(..)
Relentlessly the years had passed by, the battle being but a page in the history books; though forever it would be emblazoned among the battle Honors proudly displayed by the First of Grenadier Regiment of Foot Guards. My thoughts wandered back as I approached the bridge after such a long passage of time
(..) The kaleidoscope of memories passed quickly through my mind as I stood there, in the cold and rain at a viaduct in Nijmegen, awaiting the moment when Lord Carrington would unveil the plaque which would commemorate one of the epic battles of the Second World War. What had happened to the six men of the section I had led into the attack on Hunner Park and the German gun positions guarding the approach to the Nijmegen Road Bridge ?I didn't know any of the men I led that day, for they were all replacements for men previously wounded or killed in action. There could not be so many of us left, for there were not so many of us to begin with. Infantry of the Kings Company and Number 4 Company of the First Battalion Grenadier Guards, supported by a troop of four tanks commanded by Sergeant Peter Robinson were given daunting task of capturing this bridge intact.

Fifty years had passed, yet I could still remember as a member of the number 4 Company of the First battalion Grenadier Guards, reaching Marienboom, on the outskirts of Nijmegen, about mid-day on the 19th September 1944, where the formation of our convoy was changed. (..) We moved off (..) and entered the suburbs of Nijmegen to find it almost deserted. The only Americans I saw that afternoon, were a group of five or six, who walked towards us, then as they turned, they fired small mortars which were attached to the heels of their boots in the direction they had just left.



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Cautiously we approached the center of the town, but had to abandon the protection of our half-track as we got nearer to the bridge. Taking cover (..) we rested for a time, while a plan was hurriedly devised for the capture of the bridge.

We had received some information from the Americans that the Germans had installed a mechanism for blowing the bridge, in the post Office on the south side of the river. It became obvious that the Americans had not penetrated so far into a town, when a patrol, sent out by the Grenadiers, found the post office undefended and consequently this was chosen as a suitable site for our Company Hqs. (..) No demolition equipment was found at the post office.

(..)The following morning, 20th September, we were told of the desperate situation the Airborne troops at Arnhem were in, and that it was essential for this attack to succeed. Further incentive was provided by the announcement that anyone wounded in the engagement would be immediately flown back to England. Number 4 Company would take the left hand side of the street approaching Hunner park and the Kings Company would take the right hand side. The information supplied said that three 88mm guns protected the approaches to the bridge, that they were well dug in, and had to be eliminated before the tanks of the Second Battalion moved into the attack. Moreover, German infantry were entrenched in Hunner park and had either to be captured or killed with bayonet charge if necessary. This daunting task was programmed to begin at 4 pm that afternoon.(...)

(..)Strong points had been established by the Germans along the streets leading to the bridge and the center of the town had been set on fire to prevent infiltration by the enemy. A unit of the 10th SS Panzer Division, under command of SS general Euling together with a company of Engineers, had been allowed to take up defensive positions on the southern end of the bridge, while hauptsturmfuhrers Reinhard's Battalion of SS troops were well dug in on the northern end.

The attack was spearheaded by Lieutenant Prescott's tank, which immediately drew heavy enemy fire, as it positioned itself in the center of the street. (..) I took the Section into the only cover that was available, which was behind the tank. All went well for about 30 yards, when the Sherman came to a halt, still firing all of its weapons. We dived for cover into the terraced houses on the left side of the street. (..)

Firing at anything that moved, we rapidly made our way from house to house along the street, but the nearer we got to our objective the more resolute became the opposition. After a particularly heavy burst of machine-gun fire and anticipating that there would be a brief lull, my section ran for the cover of the next house. It was there that my luck ran out. I was suddenly headlong through an open doorway and found myself lying on the floor, with my Tommy gun at the other side of the room. How long I laid there I don't know. No-one was near me, and the sound of gunfire had receded. I tried to stand, but my left foot gave way and my right arm hung limply at my side. Struggling to my right foot, I opened the door. The street was deserted, except for the tank which remained about



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twenty yards away, where I had last seen it. Not a thing moved, and I slowly made my way back to the shelter of the building we had stayed in overnight. Stretcher-bearers appeared and after being injected by morphine, I was stretched onto a 30 cwt covered truck and driven through a deeply wooded area to a First Aid post.

It wasn't until days later that I found out what had happened to the men I had left behind at Nijmegen. Both Number 4 Company and the Kings Company had gained their objectives on the approaches to the road bridge, clearing Hunner Park and the Valkhof of German troops and capturing their heavier weapons. The way was now clear for the tanks of the Second Battalion to storm the bridge. Major John Trotter, commanding number 1 Squadron of the 2nd Bn Grenadier Guards, ordered Sergeant Robinson to make the first attempt, but his Sherman was hit twice by anti-tank gun fire and he was forced to pull back for minor repairs. It wasn't until dusk was falling that a second attempt was made. This time sergeant Robinson's troop of four tanks were used. Sergeant Pacey led the attack, with Sergeant Robinson's tank following, and Sergeant Knight together with the 4th Sherman of the troop in the rear. The two rearmost tanks were hit and had to be abandoned, but realizing that his vehicle had not caught fire, Sergeant Knight ordered his crew to remount. They then followed the two leaders who were nearing the northern end of the bridge, which was guarded by an anti-tank gun.

Sergeant Robinson's gunner knocked out this formidable weapon with his second shot, and fearing that the bridge would be blown at any time, the tanks smashed through all other obstacles, until they halted a mile away. Their objective had been achieved and they established a bridgehead, and stayed isolated overnight. Here they were joined by a party of Americans, who had crossed the river some four hours earlier at a point near to the railway bridge, which was about three-quarters of a mile upstream. (..)

Jolted back from my thoughts I noticed that the rain had eased slightly and it was time for the unveiling of the plaque to commemorate the capture of the bridge(..) Lord Carrington proudly unveiled the plaque, but the wording was not as I thought it should be. This was a Grenadier Bridge, and always had been since the 20th September, but now a half hidden plaque read "Grenadier Viaduct". This was considered sufficient acknowledgement of the deeds of the brave handful of Grenadiers who had overcome such immense odds to capture the bridge(...).

Between 16-21 September 1944 the Guards Armored Division lost 130 men all ranks, with the battle for Nijmegen Bridge accounting for the majority of those killed. many of these men were my friends and colleagues and here I was on that same bridge some fifty years later, alone with my thoughts, in reminiscence .

Number 4 company, the First Battalion Grenadier Guards.....a smile came to my lips as I remembered the slogan for the Company; This came from the letters that were stenciled onto every one of our vehicles;" S.O.B"; The "Shit or Bust Company of the "Fighting First " !



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Photo: Rob Essers

*"This plaque was unveiled on 18th september 1994
to commemorate the 50th anniversary
of the battle of Nijmegen
and the capture of the Nijmegen road bridge
by 1st and 2nd battalions Grenadier Guards
in september 1944"*

*"Deze gedenkplaat werd onthuld op 18 september 1994
ter gelegenheid van de 50ste verjaardag van
de slag om nijmegen en
de verovering van de verkeersbrug door de
1st and 2nd battalions Grenadier Guards
in september 1944"*