

# OVERLOON —WAR— CHRONICLES

**Overloon War Chronicles Foundation  
Presents:**

## **FACES FROM THE PAST** (episode 4)

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The Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery in Overloon, popularly known as the English Cemetery, contains 281 graves. Each with its own story. In this reports series, the Overloon War Chronicles Foundation highlights one such story each time. This time grave number 11, section IV, row E.

**Andrew Swinley (1920 - 1944)**  
*Young father at the front*

*" He had always been the farthest forward, where the danger had been greatest."  
(Source: Letter from Captain John A. Ford to Widow Swinley)*

Tense faces everywhere, concentration. Andrew looks around the landing craft. They practiced on this landing in Scotland for months, but now it comes down to it. Because this is no longer training, this is real! He sees the French coast getting closer and closer. How fierce will be the opposition by those Jerries? The adrenaline rises.

Andrew Swinley is born on Saturday 31 January 1920 in Buckhaven, a small village in the county of Fifeshire in Scotland. He is the son of Andrew and Jean Swinley. Andrew is the third child to be born in this family in line. The first, a girl, dies soon after her birth in 1917. In 1918, sister Mary is born. Andrew (1920) is followed by Elizabeth (1922), Flora (1933), Thomas (1934) and Jean (1936).

Andrew grows up in this Scottish village and there he also meets fellow villager Mary Jane Hunter. They fall in love and get married on 29 November 1941. After the wedding they continue to live in Buckhaven.

Andrew joins the local coal mines at a young age and works deep underground. Dangerous work. Miners are officially exempt from military service, as it is stipulated that the coal fumes that the miners breathe have a negative effect on the conditional performance required in a war conflict. For some Scots the miner's job is indeed an escape from military service, but Andrew is not happy with this rule and succeeds in enlisting in the army on 29 April 1939.

Andrew eventually ends up in the 76th Highland Field Regiment of the Royal Artillery and becomes a signaller (responsible for radio communication or other signal methods), Carrier driver and gunner. The 76th Highland Field Regiment is a territorial unit originally composed of the 303rd (Dundee) and the 302nd (Fife) Batteries.

On Wednesday 5 January 1944 son Andrew is born, the 6th consecutive generation with the name Andrew.

In the course of 1944 it becomes clear that a major allied landing operation is imminent. Exactly when and where that operation takes place is still top secret. The Moray Firth in the north of Scotland, east of Inverness, is where Andrew and his regiment train on landing along with elements of the British Navy. Loading again and again at Rosemarkie, after which the training landings take place 40 kilometers away on the sandy beaches of Burghead Bay.

When Andrew has to leave for Portsmouth with his regiment and his departure from there to the front is imminent, his wife Mary decides to temporarily move in with her parents again with little Andrew.

For the first days of June, Andrew and his regiment are in Portsmouth on the English south coast and everything is prepared for the crossing to France. The vessels and crew are in the ports and waters of Portsmouth awaiting departure on Sunday 4 June when that is delayed for another 24 hours. On Monday 5 June the order to set sail that afternoon follows. At that moment everyone may open their sealed package containing the exact information about the destination and the arrival time.

After a night of superior navigation by the Royal Navy, the Normandy coast comes into view for Andrew in the early morning of Tuesday 6 June 1944 at around 5:30 am, after which the shelling towards the beach codenamed Sword Beach starts at 6:50 am. The heavy shelling stops after 35 minutes, after which the first wave of landing of the 8th Brigade can begin. Shortly thereafter, it is Andrew's regiment's turn to storm the beach from 18 LCT (Landing Craft Tanks, amphibious vehicles that can put tanks on the beach in addition to troops). Sword Beach and the landing is part of Operation Neptune (the naval part and the first attacks of the entire Operation Overload). The liberation of Western Europe has begun!

The situation on the beach is chaotic. After 5 hours of shelling from the beach, which is getting narrower due to the rising tide, enough safe paths are cleared to finally leave the beach.

Andrew is part of the OP, the Observation Post. These OPs are usually at the front of the lines to inform the artillery.

The first goal is to conquer the strategically important French city of Caen. But the German opposition is very fierce. In fact it will take more than a month to take the city, at the expense of thousands of victims.

After Caen, Andrew's regiment enters The Netherlands via battles in Northern France and Belgium.

On 23 September the 76th Field Regiment is ordered to guard the canal near Maastricht and to defend it against possible German attacks from the south.

On 25 September the regiment again supports the 8th British infantry regiment in Weert and a day later they are in the Heeze area, after which they arrive in Bakel on 27 September.

On 1 October the 76th comes into action north of the Maas and on 2 October Germany is fired upon by E troop, part of the 76th Field Regiment.

From 13 October the regiment takes action in Operation Aintree, the Battle of Overloon, and advances to Venray. On 19 October they relocate to the Kleindorp region, after which they support the 185th Brigade when they return to their own lines on 26 October.

The allies attack again on 14 November to roll up the Venlo bridgehead. The code name for this operation is Operation Nutcracker. On the German side General Von Obstfelder is still

the man responsible for the Venlo bridgehead and thinks that after a few days the tide has turned. On 20 November the 15th Scottish Division attacks, two days later followed by the 11th Panzer Division. Subsequently the 86th Corps holds the Venlo bridgehead until 3 December. Then all Germans are finally driven back across the Maas.

On Wednesday evening 22 November 1944 Andrew's regiment advances in support of the infantry. Andrew drives his Carrier. Suddenly an explosion! Andrew hit a German mine, placed under the surface of the road by retreating German troops. The Carrier is completely blown over. Andrew is killed instantly.

Andrew's comrades are shocked by his death and along with Andrew's Captain, John A. Ford of the 302 Field Battery (part of the 76th Highland Field Regiment), they bury Andrew's body in a field grave that same night. The next morning Andrew is buried next to the crucifix on the Gildestraat in Holthees where a short impressive ceremony takes place.

In his letter dated 27 November 1944 to widow Mary Swinley, Ford mentions Andrew's courage and sense of duty: *"Being in the OP party he had always been the farthest forward, where the danger had been greatest, yet he had never complained or asked to be given a safer or more comfortable job at the gun-end. His death is a great blow to us all."*

On 2 June 1947 Andrew's remains are transferred to the CWGC cemetery in Overloon.

Soon after the war, widow Mary meets John Denouette Patterson in Buckhaven. John, like Mary and Andrew, is also from Buckhaven. John was taken prisoner of war by the Japanese and forced by them to work on the infamous Burma Railway. John has also been a prisoner of war in the Changi prison in Singapore after the Japanese captured Singapore. Mary and John get married in August 1946 and have 3 children. Little Andrew is raised by John as his own son.

In 2020 the 8th consecutive generation of Andrew is born into the Swinley family, a family tradition that dates back to the first Andrew (born in 1824).

Andrew Swinley, the brave and proud young father at the front. The memory of him will forever be honored by his next generations.

## The deepening:

*In this section various facts and parts of the story are further explained and placed in context when necessary. These explanations are listed below in the order as presented in the above story.*

- The county of Fife was dissolved in 1975 like all Scottish counties. In its place came council areas, the county councils. As a result, the ending –shire disappeared from the name and from that time on the county is called Fife.
- Until 1860 Buckhaven was an important fishing village in Scotland. In 1831 the village even had the second largest fishing fleet in Scotland with 198 fishing boats.
- Mining in Fife goes back a long way. Coal was extracted in the area as far back as the 12th century. In the Victorian period everything moved fast. Initially run by individual land owners, in the 19th century Fife became a center of heavy industry and the mines came into the hands of private companies. Thousands of Scots moved to Fife in search of mining jobs. The work in the mine was dangerous work, over the years many hundreds of miners lost their lives in accidents, explosions and drownings. Because some mine tunnels ran under rivers and lakes, many times mine tunnels were flooded with many deaths as a result.

- D-Day (6 June 1944) was the day on which the allies initiated the final liberation of Western Europe. This happened under the total code name Operation Overlord, in which the allies crossed the Channel to the landing beaches in Normandy. The landing at Sword Beach, where Swinley landed, was part of Operation Neptune. The code names of the 5 landing beaches were from west to east:
  - Utah (landing of the Americans)
  - Omaha (Americans)
  - Gold (British + the Belgian brigade Prion)
  - Juno (Canadians)
  - Sword (British)

The British who landed on Sword Beach that day had 2 goals: to protect the left flank of the allied beachhead in Normandy, but also to capture the strategically important city of Caen on 6 June.

- The landing zone on Sword Beach was 8 kilometers long and was divided into 4 sectors, from west to east:
  - Oboe
  - Peter
  - Queen
  - Roger
- 28,845 British troops landed on Sword Beach during D-Day. 630 British soldiers were killed on Sword that day.
- Various monumental films have been made about D-Day and the landings on the beaches. Among others *The longest day* (1962) and *Saving private Ryan* (1998).

- The battle for the city of Caen lasted more than a month. Via the Operation Charnwood the allies managed to capture most of the city on 9 July. At 9:50 pm on 7 July 467 allied planes began bombing the city. The city was completely bombed within 40 minutes. 300 French civilians were killed and the Germans were alarmed. The next day at sunrise, the British, with the support of the Canadians, began their creeping barrage, or the firewall, in which the British and Canadian guns continuously fired their shells at the German positions north of the city and the bombing moved up 100 meters every 5 minutes. The subsequent allied attack was made by 115,000 men and 500 tanks.

After Operation Charnwood, Operation Jupiter, Operation Goodwood and finally Operation Atlantic followed in order to take the city and surrounding areas completely. It wasn't until 19 July that the time had come. But at the cost of 30,000 deaths on the British and Canadian sides and 3,000 civilians. An enormous price.

The reconstruction of the city of Caen lasted until 1963.

- The creeping barrage as used in Caen would be used again by the British a few months later (12 October 1944) in the Battle of Overloon.

- No specific information is known about the military action on Wednesday evening 22 November 1944 in which Swinley was killed. As reported, the allied attack on Venlo bridgehead took place at this time and it may be assumed that the military action on Wednesday evening was part of it.

- The Burma Railway, on which Mary's second husband John Patterson was forced to work by the Japanese, is officially called the Burma-Siam Railway. It ran from Nong Pladuk (Thailand) to Thanbyuzayat (Myanmar, at the time called Burma) and was 415 kilometers long, most of which ran through Thailand. Burma belonged to the British Empire, but was occupied by the Japanese who then made plans to invade India from Burma. The railway would thereby become of great importance for the supply of troops and equipment. In the end, the Japanese attack on India never happened.

The construction of the railway (16 September 1942 - December 1943) would cost hundreds of thousands of lives due to exhaustion, disease and malnutrition. The figures are staggering: 15,000 prisoners of war (including 7,000 British, 4,500 Australians, 3,000 Dutch and 131 Americans). In addition, about 100,000 forced laborers from Thailand, the Dutch East Indies, Burma and Malaysia.

Many survivors had psychological problems after the war, including severe post-traumatic stress disorders.

In 1957 the successful film *The bridge on the river Kwai* was released, which is about the construction of this bridge by British prisoners of war in the Thai part of the railway.

## The photos:

The family photos reached us through Andrew's grandson Andrew Swinley in Singapore, the 7th generation Andrew in the family.



*Andrew Swinley (Photo: Collection Andrew Swinley)*



*Photograph in 1943 (?), showing from left to right:  
Andrew's sister Mary, a family friend, George Simpson (married to Andrew's sister Elizabeth),  
Andrew's wife Mary and Andrew Swinley.  
Photo taken in front of Andrew's parents' house in Methil, Fife.  
(Photo: Collection Andrew Swinley)*



*Tribute of the 7th generation Andrew Swinley to his grandfather. The medals are:*

- **1939 -1945 star:**

*British Military Award to Air Force and Navy personnel. A condition for the award was that the recipient had been in operational service for at least six months during the period 3 September 1939 – 8 May 1945 (2 September 1945 in the Far East). The 3 colors of the ribbon symbolize the 3 parts of the British armed forces: army, air force and navy.*

- **France and Germany star:**

*British Commonwealth Award for involvement in combat in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, The Netherlands and Germany during the period 6 June 1944 - 8 May 1945. The award is one of the six campaign stars or campaign medals of the United Kingdom and the British Commonwealth. The colors of the ribbon symbolize the national colors of the United Kingdom, France and The Netherlands.*

- **Defence medal:**

*British Commonwealth award which is included in the campaign medals and was awarded to non-operational services (service personnel who worked at headquarters, training camps, airports, etc.). This award has also been presented in British overseas territories such as India and South Africa. The colors of the ribbon symbolize the enemy attack on the British green land and the Blackout (in which the entire United Kingdom had to be shrouded in total darkness at night in order to make it more difficult for German aircraft, ships and submarines to target).*

- **War medal:**

*British decoration for people who served a minimum of 28 days in the period between 3 September 1939 and 2 September 1945 in the British Army or Merchant Navy. The medal*

has a diameter of 36mm and is made of a copper-nickel alloy. The colors of the ribbon symbolize the colors of the Union Jack, the British flag.  
(Photo: Collection Andrew Swinley)



Andrew Swinley's grave in the CWGC Overloon War Cemetery  
(Photo: Collection Andrew Swinley)



*The crucifix in Gildestraat, Holthees, Andrew's temporary burial site  
(Photo: Collection Piet Peters)*

## Sources and credits:

Letter Capt. John A. Ford of the 302. Field Battery to Mary Jane Hunter Swinley

Letter Buster (Andrew's military comrade) to Mary Jane Hunter Swinley

Andrew Swinley - Singapore

Operation Aintree - The Battle of Overloon & Venray (authors Antal Giesbers and Herman Dinnissen, Giesbers Media, 2004)

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The Overloon War Chronicles Foundation aims, among other things, to retrieve the photos and stories of as many graves as possible in the CWGC cemetery, to pay tribute to the fallen there and thus keep this history alive. More information about the project and the Overloon War Chronicles Foundation at:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/OverloonWarChronicles>

Email: [overloonwarchronicles@gmail.com](mailto:overloonwarchronicles@gmail.com)

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