

Appendix A

Michael's D-Day by Betty (M.E. Wood)

This is Michael's account of his 'Longest Day', June 6th 1944, as far as I remember it after a gap of thirty eight years. It is a pity to have such an experience totally unrecorded for our grandchildren, so I am jotting it down at David's suggestion, to add to his war memoirs.

Michael was not among the very first to land at Arromanches, but it was nevertheless quite early on D- Day, which as we remember was cold, windy and rainy at times. There had been time for the Luftwaffe to be alerted and to be attacking in increasing strength, but his first dangerous moment , which he thought might be his last, was when he jumped off the DUKW to go ashore. There was a heavy swell running and a wire cable had been run ashore to enable disembarking troops to haul their way up to the beach. Each man was carrying a load of (I think) eighty pounds on his back. David will be able to verify this. Michael jumped into deep water but as the undertow ran back, the cable caught in the top of his pack and took him down to the bottom, where he struggled in vain to free himself while his lungs were bursting. Finally the next swell came in, lifted the cable and he surfaced and reached the beach. The crossing of the sand was unpleasant but he got to the top of the cliffs. When you realise that the weight he was carrying was immensely increased by the weight of sodden uniform and boots, this in itself was an ordeal which does not seem to have been much commented on by other reporters of D-Day. Nor did he comment on it himself, as far as I remember, and the thought has only just occurred to me.

Once at the top of the cliffs, they had to strike inland. It was, of course, hoped that Caen would be very quickly reached after the landings, but this was not to be. They were walking in the usual Indian file on each side of the road and he was chatting to his opposite number on the other side when a mortar bomb dropped. When they got up and began to move forward again, he turned to continue the conversation and found his companion no longer existed. He must have received a direct hit and there was nothing left of him.

I don't know how long they continued to march - not long, I guess, because Michael was sent in a certain direction to reconnoitre and bring back a report of enemy dispositions, snipers etc, I suppose. He crossed some fields and came to a brook without seeing anything suspicious, but as he was trying to get across the stream he was shot through the leg just below the knee. The bullet went clean through the leg and bone, doing no damage to actual joints, but he bled pretty freely. The only thing to do was to crouch in the rushes (I don't know why I say rushes, but the picture left with me is that he was able to take cover in some sort of vegetation) and watch. After a short time he saw a glint and a movement on the other bank and shot at it. When he next tried to move there was no response from the sniper and finding he could hobble he set off to get back to his unit and report.

He had to recross the field which had been entirely peaceful on his outward trek. But now it was raked by fire from the British on one side and the Germans on the other. Somehow he managed to get to the other side, but not before he had been hit through the elbow - a remarkable wound in that the bullet went in below the joint and came out just above it, doing no bone damage. Looking at my own elbow, I can't imagine how this was possible, but I saw the two wounds. Probably he had his arm bent and it went through both sides.... I don't know.

By then he was pretty faint from loss of blood and took refuge in a small cottage, where he found both German and British men being bandaged up by the owners. He was tied up as best they could but then felt terribly sick and went outside to vomit. He was aware of something above him and looking up saw that the sky was dark with incoming troop gliders. (British)

Presumably with the extra glider forces and the movement of the fighting further inland, things became quieter in his immediate vicinity and he was able to get back and report. He was then loaded onto a jeep on a stretcher and taken back to the beach to await shipment back to England. He said this was the worst part of the whole day - lying helpless and totally exposed while German bombers strafed the beach. Eventually he was put aboard one of our ships - still being unpleasantly dive bombed - and was back in Ronkswood Hospital at Worcester sometime during the night.

Next day I was called to our next door neighbours, the Bullocks, as there was a phone call for me. It was Michael. I said, 'Good Lord, I thought you'd be in Normandy.' He said 'I've been and come back'. It scarcely seemed possible, but casualties on that first day were far fewer than had been expected and the British were shipping all those unable to take an active part, back to England out of the way as soon as possible. He explained that he'd been wounded but not seriously and I said I'd phone Mother and Dad immediately to tell them that he was all right. But he said 'It's all right. I've written to them and the letter's gone and it's better that they should hear from me than get a War Office telegram first.' So I left it, thinking that perhaps he was right. Had we had our own phone then, I expect I should have got in touch with them in spite of his decision and I wish I had. A short time later I was again called across to the Bullocks where Mother was phoning tremulously to say they'd had a telegram to say that Michael had been wounded. I said 'It's all right. He's in Worcester and has just phoned me and I'm going over tomorrow.' You can imagine the strafing I got then for not having got in touch at once, though I could not have beaten the War Office, which was all geared up to tell next of kin and had not, at that moment, enough to do. Unfortunately that state of affairs did not continue, though of course the casualty lists were nothing like those of the 1914-18 war. Nevertheless to people who have lost a husband or son, it matters little whether the lists are long or short if their people figure in them.

I went over to Worcester next day to see him and a handful of lads who had come back with Michael, all very cheerful and showing me the bullets which had been extracted from various parts of their anatomies - one had a bullet through his neck - no serious damage. They all looked tallowy with M and B, but were all mobile. When I took Dad over the next week, we went to Malvern with Michael, who was limping but not in much pain, and he was stopped again and again by people who realised he was a D-Day victim and wanted to shake him by the hand. It was very touching.

He came to Hereford for a few days after he was released, to convalesce for a little longer.³ I remember soaking and soaking his bloody battle dress top and underwear, but it was before the days of the washing machine and I never did get them really

³ It was during this time that I took notes for this account.

clean. I don't suppose it mattered. The trousers were a write-off anyway. Then he went off to Bradwell. He got off the bus on which we were travelling into town (Hereford) in order to take the short cut to the station. We waved goodbye as the bus moved on with me and the children. That was the last I ever saw of him.