

George Baxter's Diary - D-Day: June Sixth 1944

Chapter 1

Harwell near Didcot.

This all started in the 2nd week of May, when we were taken to an encampment of tents at Harwell.

It was set out in rows, the Intelligence Unit had the use of 2 Nissan huts, one to live in as a home for the next 17 days at least, the other hut next to it was there to build the model for the D-Day landing area. There were many tents of the same size in which 10 men could sleep, and large tents for the N-A-F-F-I and the Mess Hall.

We were now on shut down, which meant all our mail was censored and we had to be careful what we said in our letters home, I told Daphne (my future wife) this may happen, so she would not worry if at some time, it was a bit longer between letters, she knew we would be on manoeuvres. It was no leave, no passes.

Our day started at 6am. As the reconnaissance planes took off for France. They were to check if the Germans had made any changes on the ground, we knew that they were planning to put up poles with wires across them to try to stop Gliders from landing, we knew the holes were there already, but as far as we could make out, they were not in place.

We had put in every hedge, tree, bush, pit and house, large and small. And of course, the thing that helped me most when I did land, being white it showed up clearly, was a big chalk pit. Every footpath and lane were on our sand and plasticine model in colour where possible, we spent every day as long as we could, taking it in turns to go for meals, but by 8pm we had to stop as it was time for food and bed. after the first few days we got the bases down. The RAF planes went up as soon as it was light, watching anything that may have been changed or if the wires were in place. These wires would cut off the wings of the gliders, that would cause many of the troops inside to be killed or injured. This did happen at 1 or 2 places during the war, but not on the 6th.

It was our job to lecture the officers, we took turns to do this, and to let only those who needed to see our work, in. There were guards around to check us in and out.

But to get back to 5th of June.

When we were still updating the model to keep up with information coming in, we had all the top brass who needed to know. We had already got to know most of them over them coming in and out of our office in the months before.

We, being the Intelligence Section of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry the 52nd.

11 Total Intelligence Unit
1 Officer Osborne
1 Sergeant Green
Corporal Hunt (left before D-Day)
Corporal Harris

Corporal Hanbury (Tracy)
Private Sandericharson (Sandy)
Private Basil George Baxter (me), known as Daisy to army mates but George to my family.
Private Putman
Private Barrett R
Private Rider (Jim)

This group was dispersed amongst the Regiment.

On the 5th we didn't stop working until 6pm, after our meal we were told to relax, there was a film with Greer Garson and Walter Pigeon in it, as a husband and wife, it was called " Random Harvest" , he went to war, came back having lost his memory and she helps him to get it back, she takes him back to the village where their bungalow was, where they had lived before the war, it was very sad, the boys were very quiet that night, they said it was not the kind of film they would have chosen themselves, sad though it was it was something to watch.

During the 5th we had loaded things ready, and we did it personally, a jeep and trailer was to be shared with the signallers, who were included in our unit. We added extra ammunition because of the inborn fear of running out of grenades etc. We were overloaded by 1/4 of a ton even by the loading list also depending on the weight of the individual man.

I carried my rifle, telescopic sights (as a sniper) a small pack of personal gear, a change of clothing, shaving gear, emergency rations (sweets and chocolate), binoculars, maps and large map case, compass, 2 grenades, ammunition for intelligence action and reconnaissance, 250 boxes of 303 (2x50 in bandoliers) 200 rounds. We were meant to carry 1 bandolier and 100 rounds. Water bottle filled with water, a shovel, I put this on the trailer, we were ready for the 2nd front.

June 6th. It was breakfast, eggs and bacon with as much tea and toast as you could eat. And I did. We went back to the hut (Intelligence Unit only) where the models were, which we had made for the landing area of the airborne troops, collected more maps and destroyed any relevant material. No correct names were used on the model, all coded. Confirmed the model was no longer required, then destroyed it. It took 17 days to make and 17 seconds to destroy.

Chapter 2

June 6th

We went back to the N-A-F-F-I canteen to say goodbye to the staff, it was 10am by then we had been in placement for 17 days and had made friends with most of the staff. The Intelligent Unit was then dispersed amongst the Regiment. The main road to Didcot ran right alongside the perimeter fence. we looked right across straight down the runway, there were calls to load up, we got into 3 ton trucks and were taken across the road and into a gateway to the airfield and then to a parking area, we hopped off and sat around waiting to be called.

Thoughts of family and feeling sick at what was ahead, some of them are noisy, some are quiet, I wrote a letter to Daph, this was my first time in action as most of

the men with me. Tea and cakes were distributed, we knew the airborne had landed as we had heard it on the service radio.

12 mid-day approximately Horsa Glider

We went onto the main perimeter track (walking or staggering with the weight we carried) .

We checked the glider load. Collected a flask of tea (the flask survived the crash and we still have it today) it was put into the trailer.

I sat at the back, one of three seats across the aisle and facing the engine. A small safety belt fitted across our laps, back pack still in place.

On a piece of paper in my pack was written "One crowded hour of glorious life, is worth an age without a name".

A lorry tows the glider to the point we needed to be on the runway, in the distance, at the right point 2 RAF people place the tug rope in the right place, laid out ready to hook us up, they have three ropes and use a lorry to go from one to another to hook us up ready for the tow, it is all synchronised and the 3 gliders took off one behind the other, there was a different feeling to the usual take offs, as we were about to go into action. We had crashed into the sea and we had had bits knocked off the wing tips before coming into land on previous practice runs, but that's another story.

Chapter 3

This was a different feeling to the usual take off, by now the door was shut at the side of us as we prepared to take off, the noise of all the aircraft was terrific by now. It was very bumpy as you proceed down the runway, checking out of the windows, they should have been lifting by halfway down the runway and acceleration like ours did not seem as good as it should have been, our tow plane was an Albemarle a twin engine ex-bomber refused by the RAF, looking for power, they were not good enough.

I undid my seat belt and stood up to get a better view from the window, things did not seem right, she was not going fast enough, I could see bare grass, the glider was lifting but the Albemarle was not, everyone was getting uneasy without saying a word, i could see the perimeter fence coming towards us.

The plane lurched upwards, we went over the fence, we lost all speed and the tow plane disappeared underneath us, we went over the wire and the speed again dropped, we were floating, a glider pilot must have detached the tow rope.

At the end of the runway was a small hill with a wood on the top, the first branches of the first tree hit underneath us, and removed the tail, with the tail removed she pitched forward onto her nose at a 45% angle which then removed the two wings, there was a hell of a noise of branches and wood. With the tail removed she pitched forward, with the jeep moving about in the front, I was still trying to stand, but finished up leaning on the jeep.

The nose settled where there were fewer branches, then the nose slid down as we moved about the glider, the pilots were trying to reach us and we were trying to reach them, but we were both trapped, we started chopping away at the debris, while all the time there was the continuous streams of gliders and planes about us.

The Signalling Sergeant was in a lot of pain with his knee. Someone helped him get out, I felt panic as I smelt petrol from the jeep, which was blocking our path to the exit, we three at the back could not get there, we tried to reach the pilots, it just couldn't be done, so we looked around to see how we could find a way out.

We three seemed to be the one's who were trapped, we were too high to jump and the only way was to slid down the toggle rope at the back where we found a hole where we could reach the rope to get us down, I called out "Petrol" as we went (I was glad we had done our cliff training at Ilfracombe, it made it easier as we had done it all before) it was much better for us, we just hoped someone had heard me shout as we slid down the rope. And they started to get out of the holes in the nose, which had slid down a bit more as we got out at the back. It was now with its nose buried in the ground.

Chapter 4

A continuing stream of gliders and planes were still going overhead, it was hard, knowing where and what was going to happen.

I did feel sorry for the sergeant, he had to wait to get the full treatment needed for his knee injury, I know they put one or two of the big pads we carried on it. We each had one in a packet in our kit, I didn't see him again so have no idea what became of him.

We moved away as quickly as we could, in fact we needed to be away from the smell of petrol on the ground as soon as we could to be safe. We had already seen by now which way they could come into the wood, watching the gliders passing over us we wondered if we were lucky or not. We were sure we had been seen coming down.

My Officer was frantically tearing around wanting us to get back as soon as possible, I just looked at him for a moment and thought he hasn't been in this kind of mess before, he was in a panic.

He said " Baxter we must get back to camp and get some other transport, we must get there as soon as we can," I said " We didn't know how far we were from the Airfield and I am sure they would have seen us crash," I was sure there were more than just us to be collected and they would be here as soon as all the planes and gliders had got away.

The trouble with our Officer was he had never been in a crash before, so I had to tell him what was going to happen. His worry was that we were in the Intelligence Section and we needed to be there for recognition of objectives and setting up headquarters.

I said to him " As a veteran of many crashes that he would find after half an hour he would feel the shock come out and he would lose strength from his legs, the shakes

would start and it would get out of control." I knew if he walked back to the airfield as he intended, he would not get there, due to reaction to shock.

So we sat it out, until the last aircraft had flown over. About another half an hour and a lorry came to collect us and a crash tender with a crane on it. We all got into one lorry, the crane lifted the jeep and trailer out almost intact. We collected all the items to do with security, codes, maps etc. (We picked up the very same jeep and trailer a few days later from the Normandy beaches and my flask was still there.)

Chapter 5

The lorry took us to where our tents were, the first place we made for was the N-A-F-F-I, the shock had presented itself by the time we were on the lorry, it takes 2 to 3 hours to recover.

I never used exhaust soot to black out, I had used grease paint , which was redder, when I looked in a mirror I saw it made me look mortally wounded, I realised then why I had got so much sympathy with my cups of tea and eats.

We had a quick check over by the medics, we were then took back to the airfield in a lorry, they took our names, details, jobs etc. I was then separated from my gang I had started out with, as I was the only one who was qualified as a paratrooper apart from the Padre to use a chute.

As I had thought, there had been other crashes, so there were others being sorted out too. They took out those they needed. This done they made up three plane loads, those left were destined to go by sea.

We waited for some planes to return before we could go, we had a meal with the air force and then while the planes were landing, we waited in the hanger. This is where they picked up, after they landed they were told to go and get refuelled for another trip, which the crew were not very happy about doing again.

I did not see my Officer again until he joined us a few days later in the campaign, like some of the others, he had had to come by sea.

I was detailed to which plane I had to go on. They were Albemarle's, I had only jumped from Halifax's before, I had done 3 jumps from balloons and 5 from Halifax's. The interior of the Albemarle was small as well as cramped, most of the men with me were Officer's. I believe they were hoping that by the time we arrived the troops that had been dropped earlier, glider and paratroops would have secured the landing area to make it easier for us to find our way to headquarters.

I had had to get rid of some of my gear, mainly arms, I was using a kitbag tied to my leg, this was to give me more space to carry my gear , I had never jumped with this before.

Chapter 6

I felt more apprehensive than I did in the glider, I had to chose, whether to take my rifle or my sten gun, I settled for my rifle although it was more awkward to jump

with, it was set up for me especially sightwise, and I felt for my job of having to lie quietly would be more suited to my needs.

I could see out of a small porthole opposite, the pilots revved up and went onto the runway, it wasn't a bad ride we took off and headed south. We were very subdued, not knowing each other at all. I tried to sleep as it would take an hour, I did wonder if we would be OK this time? As I had been in so many crashes, I thought the law of averages were in my favour and I would get there alright this time.

The navigator opened the hatch (the hole in the floor) we all stood up, checked our static lines, the red light was on, as we approached the French coast, I seemed to note a distinct revving of the engines, they were not supposed to do this, but the pilots were making sure they could get away as quickly as possible as they came over the drop zone.

Everything seemed to happen at once, there were shouts of go, I was number 3, I don't really know what happened next, one minute I was standing reasonably composed and the next I was pushed from behind, I was hit by a blast of cold air, it was getting dusk by now, I didn't know which way up I was, but my chute opened and after swinging about a bit, I appeared to be the right way up. And the land was approaching fast, it was very noisy with explosions in the air and on the ground, most of the German ack ack were firing at the planes, giving the 3 planes all they had got. I saw the ground coming up fast, I got into my training position and landed with a thump, I don't know how long I laid there, I was trying to find out where I was. I was in a cornfield, which gave me immediate cover, I got clear of my chute and sorted out my kitbag, making sure my rifle was loaded, I could not see anyone else and it was rapidly growing dark.

Chapter 7

By peeping up I could see about two hundred yards away, a house with a glider parked in his front doorway. It had made a good landing, so I felt reassured that our troops were about. I felt it was no good wandering about in the dark, so I moved into the middle of the field taking my parachute with me, it was a camouflaged one so I could wrap myself in it and dozed until it started to get light. I woke to distant explosions of mortar fire just now and again, but not much activity in the direction of Pegasus Bridge, I had recognised my surroundings enough to know where I was as daylight broke, I decided to make a move as I would be easily seen from the air in daylight, I knew where I was from the model we had made, I could see when I looked up in the dim light, the chalk pit from our model making, I went in the direction of the bridge.

I walked close to a big thorn fence, and headed south, where I knew I would find friendly troops. I had not been walking long when I bumped into some RUR's (Royal Ulster Regiment) 5 or 6 of them, I went with them, I had let them walk up to me until I realised who they were, They wanted to get to St Hinarine, I was able to show them which way to go, we collected several more on the way, I wanted to get to Ranville.

There was a fair bit of small arms fire going on, I didn't know if it was friendly or otherwise, we reached some houses and collected several more airborne, para's and glider lads, a motley crew we were, as we marched to Ranville.

Some troops in the houses beckoned to us to keep down, as we arrived at the same time as some Germans, we did as requested and almost immediately a battle ensued, we just got our heads down in the nearest ditches, it was soon over and the Germans scarpered, we made our way into the first building as the firing slackened, I decided where i was wasn't good.

Chapter 8

I headed for another building as I approached a British airborne trooper (Private Barrett) came towards me, I was surprised, we hugged each other, he had seen my glider go down and did not know what had happened to us , we had a love hate relationship, he was a red head , he got my back up when he went drinking, but it was good to meet up with them. soon friends surrounded me that I knew from our regiment, we all swapped storiesI was surprised at the lack of noise,I had expected a continuous noise of battle. But all we heard were bursts of small arms fire. I had hard tack for breakfast and a drink of water. We were all glad to find others on the way, it was a relief to me, I was not on my own anymore.

The Generals glider had landed on top of another one and he was badly shaken, Darrel Brown was in command, his part was really second in command.

Headquarters was in Chateau Benaville, most of our people seemed to have arrived in tact, and the taking of Pegasus Bridge was done.

It was the morning of 7th June 44 the objective of the Ox & Bucks was Escoville and we were to attack from the north in open order, as soon as possible we lined up 2 companies each side of the road.

I did not know where the firing had come from, as we moved slowly on the road nearer the village, there was a battle started we dodged from cover to cover this was as we had trained in England, we then proceeded to Ranville and on to Herouvillete where we found no opposition, we then proceeded to Escoville. Barrett was with us, I knew he was down the road some way ahead of me, here we found 14 German tanks and armoured cars as we attacked them we laid down a ring of 3ins mortar fire, and called on the artillery and the Navy, the field Officer can call on any big guns for support at this time, it was the Cruisers 16ins guns which were in range. They make a horrendous noise, but this did halt the germans, they retired to Escoville.

this was my first baptism of fire of the 16ins guns, it made me understand what it was like for my father and uncles in the first world war the noise was terrible.

Chapter 9

One of my first friends to die was Lance Corporal Cantwell who was near where the tanks came at us, he had three sticky bombs and said he would have a go to get a medal for his son, this he did. He got two of them, but the third tank he got the sticky bomb onto the tank, when one of the German infantrymen got him, it was over very quickly. We found out later, that on the morning before he came to France he had had a letter from his wife to say she was now with another man.

Other men had Piats, a small anti tank weapon, that could take off the tank tracks, the range of those was about 100 yards. We were on our way back to Herouvillette as we had realised we could not hold Escoville as the Germans had got more men in slit trenches and were well dug in.

On the 7th day of June another friend got killed, Lance Corporal Frank Minns. Frank had taken over the section when the Corporal was wounded, he told the men he would try to hold the Germans off, he took cover between the wall and a tree, he had a bren gun which he fired in short bursts, two men did their best to cover Frank, while he was using his bren gun a bullet hit the wall and ricochet back, it hit his bayonet scabbard and pierced his heart, this had been done by a sniper while he was firing his bren, he just didn't have a chance, he was a special friend and a very brave man.

Frank is mentioned in the book "The Devils Own Luck".

I would miss him very much when I went home, we would be travel to Felixstowe, where his wife and my Daph would be waiting at the station together to meet us. Daph was sitting with her in their house that evening and she told Daph she knew Frank was dead, they had been married 7 years. The next day she got the telegram. Daph wore his wife's veil and headdress at our wedding in 1944, we still have it. Frank was well thought of by the men they would refer to him as a gentleman.

Chapter 10

Lance Corporal Frank Minns and Cantwell both died trying to hold back the Germans, and in doing so saved many lives. We were on the road about two more days, small battles, we were told to leave. It happened that during one of these battles Jim Rider and I were holed up in a barn, we only had our rifles, the Germans were throwing stick bombs at us, suddenly they left us, we were covered in mud and muck, we made our way back to HQ hoping to clean up.

On the road near Ranville one of the lads named Lofty had been up to Lu Busel Ranville to do a drawing, walking back an anti-tank shell hit him (it removed his head). This was terrible for the men near him.

There was a French girl in Ranville who was married to a German, she fired at the British soldiers from open country as a sniper, the Military Police got a direct hit, one man killed, one man injured, she was later shot by a bren gunner.

The building they had talked about having as an HQ was Chateau St Come, but the Germans were holding this. And we needed to clear the area. It was a mess by the time we had finished fighting over control of it, it was covered in slit trenches, torn up trees and the Germans had best part wrecked the Chateau.

Looking up a slope an attack came that was mounted by the Germans at Amerville, an attack where the Germans were mounted on bicycles, they came down the open fields to Ranville. We who were watching could hardly believe our eyes. Our guns opened fire it was mass murder so many killed and wounded. How did they think this would work, we found out they had come from Paris.

Skills of map making were all needed to help in my job and we were used for sniping, but we were sent to make maps of what lay ahead and that was going as close, as you could get up front to make sketches of what was out there, when things got bad we did as trained and ran for cover if sniping or drawing maps, if possible you had someone to cover your back, this was instinctive from training.

We spent one day, Jim and I, me drawing and Jim sniping from a big house come barn, there was a big shell hole in the side and a small round window to look out of, so he watched out of the hole, while I mapped what was in front of us this worked well a few times. This farmhouse was in the village.

Chapter 11

Artillery fire from the Navy was always busy at night, both sides moved supplies and troops at night as the RAF made the Germans keep their heads down during the day. But it didn't stop the firing of small arms and snipers during the day and getting near enough to kill.

It was during one of these bombardments I got my comeuppance. We were going from house to house fighting when something happened and it all went black, the next thing I felt was being carried, I heard a voice say " This ones a goner, I have never seen so much blood from a mans head before, we had better put him with the last one." I suddenly said " Oh no you don't you can take me to the first aid post and get me fixed up. " Later they gave me some pain killers, saying, " You will have a hell of a headache later". How right they were. I made sure I was not put on the wounded list, I didn't want my Mum upset or worried. I went back later to see where it had happened, the tree was bare of leaves as if they had been blown off, and there were tiles on the ground, so I had a good look at them and found blood on some of them, so it seems that a shell hit the roof, knocked off some of the tiles and that was what hit my head.

Chapter 12

I remember walking along one day talking to Darrel Brown (General) about some plans he was making and there was a small group of Officers behind us, when a plane came over low and fast , but he didn't even look up, but just kept walking, those behind us dived into the ditches, I felt like diving too, but dare not, i just kept walking with him, but when they got back on the road, he said " That was a very bad example for the men to see , I don't want to see that again. " I must say he was very cool about it all, I had to admire him for that.

He was a man who was willing to listen to what you found when up close to the front and your ideas of what you thought about some of the things that were going on. I can remember it being 3 days before Jim Rider and I got our boots off and got our feet washed in the river ditches, we both had some clean socks in our small packs which we carried with us, it did feel good to have clean feet and fresh socks.

We were in Normandy for 18 weeks and there were many artillery bombardments from both sides, which did not do our hearing any good. We did many trips out as snipers, doing drawings and going with support for the listening post, and many times we spent a night in a wet trench, when it rained sometimes it didn't seem to know how to stop, Jim and I often shared a trench, we would put wood on the floor

to keep our sleeping bags dry. We did try to dig a trench round our slit trench so the water could drain away, sometimes it worked.

There were many casualties day after day, but on 11th of August 44, some of us were told to get ready for a trip after a day digging and moving and more digging, but we got rushed to some completely unexpected treat when George Formby and his wife Beryl suddenly arrived at a farm behind the lines. They stood in the doorway of a barn, we stood around while he sang. It was terrific.

There was a terrible time when the stud farm caught fire from the Germans big guns.

And the day a lad in a bungalow near by it dropped a detonator and blew them all up.

At one time for 2 weeks only, I took my cigarette ration, it was a time when we were roped in to help bury all the dead, there were so many bodies on both sides and cattle, The smell was sickening.

I used to exchange my cigarette ration for chocolate and sweets, I found out early in life, if anything could spoil the taste of good food it was a cigarette.

Once after 2 days and nights without sleep we were cleaning up the HQ ,the SM gave me a broom with about a dozen bristles on it and told me to sweep up, I was so angry I chased him around the table swearing, he threatened to stop me 3 days pay and disappeared. He never stopped my pay.

These are some of Corporal George Baxter's (Daisy) Memoirs typed from his hand written notes. And notes taken during conversations.