

Major Eric Goldrein RA



Eric Goldrein volunteered immediately on the declaration of war. He was at that time 18 years old and about to take his place at Cambridge University. The Recruitment Board advised him to go off to University for two years and then join up. Life as an undergraduate took on quite a normality, but after what became known as the "phoney war" up to Spring 1940, the realities of war hit home and situation worsened. Eric joined the OCTU Officer Cadet Training Unit where his Commanding officer was Colonel Sebag-Montefiore.

During 1942 and 1943 military training was extensive across the Country, building up strength of armament and manpower in readiness for the coming Second Front. Eric joined the 11th Armoured Division Anti-Tank Regiment and spent months in landing practices and manoeuvres across the Yorkshire moors. As the time for invasion drew nearer, Eric's Regiment was moved to the south coast close to Southampton, within the strictly controlled wired area.

"We had been training for so long, I certainly had a sense this was a momentous historical event in the making. The main body of my Division went on the first day, although I didn't get there until D-Day + 4, landing on Gold Beach in King Sector. I walked down the ramp of the LTC. The immediate danger on the beach itself had passed, but all around were the sounds of shellfire and mortars.

As we moved forward there was no respite 24 hours a day there was the continuous loud noise and vibration of shelling. At night the flashes lit up the sky all around. Oddly enough, it didn't stop me sleeping. We were just so tired; I would just curl up in a slit-trench and be out for the count within minutes."

Eric was a Lieutenant in command of a troop of four artillery pieces. These were 17 pounder Anti-Tank Guns, each with a 12 ft long barrel.

“These guns were formidable in the field. Each could fire an armour piercing shell with a muzzle velocity of 3,000 feet per second. This could knock out a Tiger Tank at a range of 800 yards.

As Troop Commander it was my job to site these artillery pieces correctly so they had the most favourable field of fire, and of course that they were best concealed. I went every day to the positions in a Jeep and would crawl through to each gun emplacement. This task did have its benefits as I would always get a hot mug of tea on each visit.

We were of course constantly on the front line and were taking casualties from mortar fire all the time as the enemy naturally targeted the guns and supporting infantry. I think we were too busy to be frightened, but we didn't dwell on the danger and just concentrated on the job we had to do.”

Having been on the ground in France for over seven weeks, Eric and his gunners had experienced tough fighting all the way from the beaches. In the aftermath of D-Day the German High Command recovered from their initial confusion, and resistance became resourced, disciplined and fierce. The Normandy bocage countryside favoured the defenders who used the hedgerows, earth embankments and woodland to costly effect.

On 1st August Eric and his driver went out in a Jeep across the known lines on a recce to find new gun positions.

“It was early evening when I was caught. We'd just turned down a narrow lane and there was a burst of machine gun fire. I was hit from behind in my right shoulder. The driver had already stopped so we could check our position and a group of enemy soldiers appeared out of nowhere. I could still walk and we were both marched off to a nearby farm building where I was presented to the Commanding Officer of this group. He was a Colonel, probably in his late thirties. He didn't speak any English at all and I made it clear that I couldn't speak German. Oddly enough we conversed in French, a language at which we were both quite fluent.

My driver was taken outside but I was seated in a corner of the room whilst a Medical Orderly was brought in to tend my shoulder wound. Of course it hurt but I was lucky to have been hit with just one bullet which I learned was from a Schmeisser machine pistol. They just gave me a field dressing and hooked the wrist up with my own tie!

I could understand German well enough to realise the Colonel and his Adjutant were dealing with a constant flow of grave news all through the night. I didn't let on to my understanding of German but it was clear that every message coming in to this local centre carried with it another military setback. As an officer myself I was held there awaiting an escort to take me off to their HQ for closer interrogation. By early morning the Colonel was in a quandary and we had by then established something of a relationship I helped him to realise that British & Allied troops were pouring into Normandy and that his situation, already dire, was only going to get worse. He was taking serious casualties and could see his position was steadily weakening. In these strained circumstances I managed to steer talk to his option of surrender. Then of course there was the practicality of who would take the surrender. I heard myself saying: ‘Don't worry about that; surrender to me.

When I think back, it's such a surreal scene. I had my right arm in a sling so couldn't salute. I had no experience of taking a surrender.....at the ripe old age of twenty-three!

So, the Colonel came to attention, saluted me and I returned his salute with my left arm. Then he presented me with his handgun, a 9mm Luger, and made a short formal announcement of surrendering his command to me.

Then the Colonel started talking terms. This wasn't so much a negotiation; more like haggling. He suggested we could take 6 of his men forward under a white flag and try to find an authority to discuss terms of surrender. I really couldn't see this as a sensible way to proceed and eventually managed to persuade him the only course of action was a complete surrender. The Colonel eventually agreed as his position was quite hopeless, I told him to get the weapons piled up in the ground.

We set out at first light with me at the front, the Colonel and his Adjutant alongside, followed by 35 other ranks. In proper military order we marched along the narrow road, heading North towards the coast. Quite soon I heard tracked vehicles and we came upon a forward carrier patrol of the 1st Worcester Regiment.

The patrol consisted of three bren carriers and I put one at the front and one bringing up the rear of our small column. I travelled in the third vehicle along with my two captive officers. Before long we reached a main HQ assembly area where I was able to leave my group and report to the MO in a tented area. Once there, and in good hands, I promptly passed out.

I later awakened in the British Military Hospital which was well established in a group of large tents pitched not far from the landing grounds. Treatment there was first class; with all those pretty nurses around our spirits were uplifted. I was operated on and the bullet was removed. I still have it to this day as a memento. That brought to an end my own modest contribution to the Normandy Campaign!"



The Tables Turned !

THE extraordinary story of a British artillery officer who, after being captured in Normandy, eventually persuaded a German colonel to surrender himself and the remnants of his battalion into his hands, is reported by the "Military Observer" of the 43rd (Wessex) Division.

The artillery officer, Lieut. E. Goldrein, was out reconnoitering gun positions for his anti-tank battery at the time of his capture. As he stopped his jeep in a lane to check his position by the map, he was fired on by a hidden machine-gun post. Both he and his driver dived for cover, but were forced to surrender to Germans who the next moment came down the road. They were taken back to the German battalion headquarters, interrogated by the battalion commander, and told that they would be conducted seven or eight miles back later in the evening. The effort to evacuate them was unsuccessful; their escort detected a British patrol on the way and hurriedly returned them again to battalion headquarters, where they spent the night.

It was the proximity of our patrols which gave Lieut. Goldrein his opportunity. In French, which he speaks fluently, he pointed out to the German colonel that his position was hopeless and that British forces were already in rear of his headquarters. Without knowledge of the real situation, Lieut. Goldrein tried to convey the idea that the Germans were as good as surrounded. He succeeded so well that, by the middle of the next morning, the German battalion commander began to talk to his captive about the conditions of his surrender to the British. The colonel was finally persuaded that further resistance by the remnants of his battalion were useless, though they were not directly engaged by our forces at the time.

It was agreed that Lieut. Goldrein's driver, Gunner G. F. Swann, should, in company with a German sergeant-major, locate our nearest forces and bring in a party to conduct the Germans to our lines. This was done, and an infantry officer came forward with his men in three Bren gun carriers to collect the Germans. The battalion commander had surrendered himself, his adjutant, and thirty-five other ranks to an officer they had taken prisoner the evening before!

Eric was subsequently shipped back to Blighty to recover. He was then offered a variety of staff positions in England. However, Eric explains that he was still young and stupid, keen for more action, travel & adventure. Still with the Royal Artillery, he was shipped out at the end of 1944 and eventually landed in Salerno in Southern Italy. The war was still raging of course, but hostilities had moved away from Italy by that time and Eric celebrated VE Day just north of Florence. From there the troop, 300 men & 80 vehicles, travelled through the Brenner Pass and up to Hamburg where Eric was finally based as part of the Army of Occupation.

“We’d been at war for so long I don’t think we really thought much about what we would do once it was all over. There was a general superstitious attitude which would not allow us to have thoughts of post war plans. We just didn’t talk about it.”

But, with hindsight, how does he look back on those days now? Was he just doing his job along with all the others or was he perhaps aware at the time of being a part of something very special?

“We were so proud to be involved. It was exciting; deadly dangerous of course but we didn’t dwell on that. We were young and believed in our own immortality as all youngsters do. More than anything else, I would say the greatest pleasure in looking back is not being dead. To have survived is the real triumph, especially when so many sadly didn’t.”

Eric still has the bullet which was shot into him on that evening in France, in the Summer of 1944.

“I often think... if that soldier had just moved the muzzle of his machine pistol ever so slightly, I would be under one of those Portland Stone monuments. As it happens the bullet missed anything important, I survived and have enjoyed 65 bonus years. We’ve had two children and they’re enjoying their own life. We’ve lived so much and I can honestly say the experience of those days has always helped me to put the rest of my life in perspective”.

In June 2009 D-Day Revisited returned to Normandy with Eric, as well as his wife Inge and son Timothy. Eric was able to return to many of the places he remembers from his time in service, and after so many years have passed he described it as *“a very sentimental journey”*.

Eric’s wife, Inge, came to England with the Kinder transport group. She was one of the 10,000 children who escaped Nazi Germany in 1939. Herself from Austria, Inge discovered in the post war world that she’d lost almost all her family in the Holocaust parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles. It seemed a natural question to ask Eric about his views on the Jewish aspect of the War...

“I think it’s just too horrible to contemplate. To some extent the Allies had an awareness of what was going on in Germany and further East, but there was a reluctance to publicise it in case it became caught up in the propaganda exchange. That was probably correct. In my period of service all that I did notice was that I was usually made Orderly Officer at Christmas time!”

Eric demobilised with the rank of Major and contacted his Cambridge Tutor who invited him back to continue his studies. So, after a return to the family home in Liverpool, Eric returned to University and subsequently graduated in Law. He returned to Liverpool, became a

respected Barrister, married and raised a family. On retirement Eric was elected as Lord Mayor of Hale where he still lives with his wife Inge.



The above photograph shows Eric (centre) standing alongside fellow Normandy veteran Len Buckley and several serving members of the Parachute Regiment at Pegasus Bridge in June 2009.