

So to start off with, you were to carry the Bren gun equipment ashore?

And plus explosives. I carried approximately 25 pounds of explosives ashore as well.

And where were you supposed to put all that stuff?

Well, as soon as we got onto the beach, we knew that we would have to discard all our equipment. And most of us had to discard our weapons because we were back into the water to remove all the mines that were on all the tetrahedrons. That is the obstacles that were in the water-- and also that we couldn't take arms into the minefield itself.

The chaps who carried the metal detectors ashore, we found that it was quite useless using those for the simple reason that there was so much shrapnel around that as soon as you switched your detector on, you just picked up noise. So we had to do the old-fashioned way of prodding for the mines.

The object of clearing all these minefields was that we wanted the fields for de-waterproofing the armor that was coming ashore that day. And they had to have an area, a marshaling area, where all the de-waterproofing was carried out. The only vehicles that came ashore were really the small vehicles, like the Jeeps and things like that, which-- quite a lot of them-- and ambulances, of course. We had ambulances coming ashore on the first day, but mostly armor that was coming ashore.

So were you satisfied with the briefing that you got?

Oh, yes. Yes, excellent-- the briefing that we actually got was quite good. And as I said previously, that the sand tables were very, very large, and you knew when we were going ashore on D-Day, you could see in front of you the sand table. In actual fact, it was the actual place where we were going to land.

Who was in charge of your company?

We had a major in charge of the company, a captain, and then each platoon had its own lieutenant in charge, approximately 60-65 men in each platoon.

And did the men in your company come from all over the country?

Yes. They come from all over the country. It was from the very north, up from the Hebrides, right down into the Channel Islands, we had personnel. So it covered every part of the country.

And did everybody obey the security arrangements in this transit camp?

In the transit camp, yes. As a matter of fact, before the transit camps were closed at various times, when we were going on exercises, they were closed at various times. They-- although there was a lot of civilians in the same area, they removed all the ladies who were pregnant. They were moved out of the area. And children going to school still carried on with their school.

The whole area itself was guarded by the Royal Artillery, our particular camp, because-- for the simple reason that the royal artillery weren't required for the first three or four weeks. Because we could use the navy. The Royal Navy was our own artillery.

How long were you at Chandler's Ford?

Chandler's Ford, I should say, we were there approximately six weeks. But we did a couple of exercises. We used to have our money changed into various currencies they called BAFs at the time. And we have our money changed into these various BAFs. One particular time, it was Dutch, another time it was French, and then, of course, French again.

So that's British Armed Forces currency?

Yes, force's currency we could spend.

Did the troops get fed up of being at Chandler's Ford waiting for the big day?

Not really. We had a lot of entertainment. We had rather large marquees, with 24 hours a day film shows. They were on all the time. And the films that we saw were before they were released to the general public. They came straight over from America.

And I think I saw Going My Way about 12 times, I think-- I should imagine, with Bing Crosby. That was on 24 hours a day for the whole week-- for a whole week. Then they changed-- they had several tents with different films going on. But that was one film that I can always remember and that I always liked.

Did any VIPs come round to give you pep talks?

The-- yes, we had a pep talk from Field Marshal Montgomery. We had a parade for Winston Churchill and also for His Majesty the King.

Did you get into the frame of mind where you thought, well, I might not come back or I might get maimed?

No, no, that thing never entered my head. That was one of these things that it's never going to happen to me. Some of the chaps thought that way, but I can't-- I can recollect, I never did.

Did they say that to you?

Yes. There was one or two who said that they didn't think that they would come back. Fortunately, they did. But there was one that he had a saying that roll on death. And he got killed the day after D-Day in the minefield just off the beach.

Was he in your unit?

Yes, he was in my platoon. Yes. He was in the next section to me. I was in number 1 section. And he commanded number 2. He was a corporal. And that was one of his favorite sayings.

Did he say it in a jocular way?

I don't know. It was just one of those things that he used to bring into the conversation. Oh, roll on death. And that was it.

How old was he?

I should say he was about 30 years of age.

Can you tell me what happened after the six weeks at Chandler's Ford were up?

Well, when they were up, yes, we got-- we were sent down to-- when we didn't know it was going to be that particular exercise that was going to come out to be the real thing, what happened was that we paraded on the road again. From the tannoy, they said that our serial number had to parade on the road. And we went on to the road. And we had to be-- when we traveled in these trucks-- by the way, they were personnel carrying trucks, carried about 30 men-- the-- we had to be very, very quiet.

And also, the back was down so that if the truck went along the road, it looked as if it was nothing, no one inside. We had to be quiet. And we went to Southampton into the docks and got on board ship. And that was on June the 1st, which was nearly a week before D-Day, and then moved out, and went behind the Isle of Wight.

What happened there?

We spent a couple of days behind the Isle of Wight. And they let us off onto a beach. They pulled up onto the beach. And we got off there and played football. But before we could do that, there was a unit that was completely-- penned us in sort of thing. They were all armed. We weren't allowed off the beach. And they made sure of that. So we could kick a ball around on the sand, and that was all-- that was our exercise.

Did you realize this was the big thing at that time?

No. When we got back on after-- on June the 4th, we went out, and we-- then we knew it was going to be the real thing. And of course, we came back on June the 5th because, as you know, the D-Day was put off for one day and-- because of the weather. And it was quite wild, the weather. It was a lot of green faces around.

And then we came back. But of course, we didn't land. We're still offshore. And we knew exactly that-- we were told that that was the real thing. But it had been canceled for 24 hours. And then on the 25th, we set sail again. And we landed early in the morning of the 6th.

What happened on the voyage?

Chaps were being sick. And we were still-- we were cleaning our arms. We had a lot of Canadians on board ship who were cleaning their arms and also sharpening their knives. You've got to realize, a lot of these Canadians were brothers of chaps who had been killed at Dieppe. And they were quite mad. I should think that they were all looking forward to this landing. And they really wanted to revenge what happened at Dieppe.

Did you eat food on the journey?

Oh, yes. Yes, we carry on eating food. It was-- there was no galley on board. But we could manage to heat our tins of food up. We had the compo that we could use. Yeah, we didn't go short of food at all.

Did anybody use any alcohol or drugs?

No. No. No alcohol. I don't remember anything-- anyone having alcohol. And of course, I don't-- drugs, at that time, I don't think were invented, I shouldn't imagine. But they did exist, of course, because everyone had a file in their pocket, on their battle dress. But that was morphine, that was because if anyone had a serious injury. But that was the only only drugs that we had-- which we had to carry, anyway. But as regards the things that you get nowadays, no, nothing like that.

Were there any vehicles in the LCI?

No, no vehicles at all. No, it's purely infantry.

Where were you on this craft, at the front or the back?

On the front. On the front going in, we got hit going in and we lost one of our ramps. There are only narrow ramps that you went down, like a gangway. We lost the starboard one. And that blew some of us down. So we had to be helped to be picked up. And we all got off the portside.

What do you think hit you?

Another craft. Another craft hit us with a bang. The skipper we had was a Canadian. And he said that the trip was a one-off trip. He had to get us ashore. It didn't matter if he got back. Because we did-- he expect-- he fully expected to have the bottom of the ship blown off with these tetrahedrals.

What do you remember about the collision?

Very little. We were-- it was just that one. The ship that was going in alongside was blown off course by an explosion. And he just collided with us. It didn't-- I don't think it caused any damage at all, except it tore our-- one of our ramps away.

Did water come in?

No. No, no, we were all up on deck. So it wouldn't have mattered anyway because we were all up on deck, just in case the bottom of the ship had blown out with these-- the mines that were on these obstacles. Because you didn't know-- you couldn't get between one or the other. It was quite narrow. The only things that could get between them was the LCIs themselves, the small ones that carried about 30 men.

And they came from the-- their mother ships, scrambling down the nets, and then coming to shore that way, like the-- like you see nowadays with the Royal Marine commandos. That was the type of ships that we had, or the type of landing craft. There was no vehicles. They came ashore later on during the day.

How far off shore did the collision take place?

Oh, quite near the shore. It was less than 100 yards, less than 100 yards from touchdown sort of thing-- very near. It was high tide at the time. And you could just see the tops of these Obstacles but you knew that every obstacle carried its mine. It carried a mine which was intended to take-- to rip out the bottom of a landing craft. There was teller mines, which was like an anti-tank mine, covered in tar for-- keeping it from being corroded by the seawater.

How deep was the water?

When we landed, 4 foot 6". And that was when the wave was down at its lowest. And when it went up, it went up to about 6 foot. So most of us were swamped. But there were a couple of sailors there that used to try and help you. We did lose one. We did lose a chap that got swept away.

But that was in another craft. That was in another unit, that he was never seen again. But we did have a chap in my unit, in another platoon, who was picked up by a Canadian, was twice his size. And he just helped him up sort of thing. But it was quite deep. It was very, very deep-- a lot deeper than what we were used to on our exercises.

Did it make much difference to the equipment you were carrying?

No, because as soon as we got on, as I said before, as soon as we got onshore, then all your equipment was discarded. That was left on the beach. And then you went on to your various tasks that you had to do.

Do you remember being under fire as you--

Oh, we was under fire all the time, yes. We was under heavy fire all the time. The assault infantry that was on our ship, they were going ashore, and they were going straight through the minefield. They looked as if they never had a care in the world. And they were very lucky, as a matter of fact, because the minefields were a mixture of anti-tank and anti-personnel.

The job I had was to accompany my troop commander, or platoon commander as it was then, on a reconnaissance to find other marshaling areas. And the only way that we could get off the beach was to hitch a lift on the back of an Inns of Court regiment recce car, a reconnaissance vehicle, which was armored.

And we had to climb on the back of this and hold on. The corporal in charge of the vehicle said that he would not stop. It was a matter of getting off the beach, up to a little crossroad approximately 200 yards in the distance. And he said, he wouldn't stop, but he would slow down. And as he slowed down, would we kindly jump off and then go our own way. And he would go the other way.

But before he could slow down, we were blown off. He was hit twice with anti-tank. And unfortunately, that was the end of the armored car and also the driver and the corporal of the armored car. Myself and my subaltern, we were in a ditch and we were all right. We just got blown off with the blast. Being on the back of the vehicle and not on the top, we probably got away with it.

So no injuries to you?

No injuries to us at all. No.

How did you know it was an Inns of Court recce car?

Well, I knew that at-- after, when the inns of courts brought more vehicles ashore. They were a part of Bing Force. Now, Bing Force was a reconnaissance unit that had to go in very, very fast for about 25 miles and blow up certain bridges so that the enemy couldn't bring any tanks up to the beachhead.

Their vehicle had no Allied markings on. They were painted black, the same colors as the German vehicles. They had a lot of sappers with them. That was the object of taking these sappers to these bridges quite a long way inland for the first day to blow up the bridges.

But unfortunately, that failed, owing to what they call nowadays friendly fire. The American Air Force managed to beat them up quite heavily. They didn't carry out any objectives. And on their way back, they were also hit by the Canadian Armor.

How soon after landing were you blown off the recce car?

Oh, matter of minutes, matter of minutes. That was-- my first job was to accompany the platoon commander off the beach and to recce further places where they could bring vehicles ashore and de-waterproof.

So once you've been blown off it, what did you do then?

We just carried on. We carried on with the job that we had to do. And it was a matter of three or four hours later when we came back, this armored car was still stuck in the middle of the road. It was still burning fiercely. But you could see that the remains of the corporal and the driver were in the vehicle.

What do you remember happening to you next?

Well, the next thing I knew that we were just carrying on in the minefields, picking up mines, searching for the mines, disarming them. And then what we used to do, we had pioneer corps people with us. And they used to pick up-- after we disarmed these mines, they would take them back along the beach. And we would blow them up in situ, possibly about 20 at a time so that there was these explosions going on.

But that was away from the people who were landing actually on the beach. It was quite a distance from them. And we used to get rid of the mines that way, by blowing them up several times during the day. There was quite a lot of minefields was there, quite a lot.

How did you find the mines?

Prodding. Prodding. And once you got the pattern of a minefield, it made it quite easy.

You mean the pattern in which they'd been laid?

Yes. They were-- the Germans were very methodical on that sort of thing. And they used to lay these in very, very good patterns. And once you found that pattern, then it was quite easy. That made your job a lot easier. You knew that there

was probably three or four paces between each mine. So your prodding then was a lot easier.

And you just went forward in lines, carrying out these-- you had these white tapes that you used to carry behind you so that you cleared an area of 3 or 4 foot wide. Then you had another sapper by the side of you doing the same. So in the end, you get half a dozen sappers, and you've got 50 or 60 feet that you were clearing at any one time.

But didn't the Germans stick one in irregularly every now and again?

No, no, they didn't do that. No. No, they were very methodical. And we never did find the German-- when you lay a minefield, you have to write down. Because you-- at some time, you might have to pick it up yourself. So when you did your own pattern, then it had to be very, very accurate. And you had to write that down, that had to go down on paper, and it had to be very accurate just in case that you had to pick up your own mines. And they were actually just doing the same thing.

What did you probe with?

The end of a bayonet, sort of in a bayonet. The bayonets that we had were the little what we call pig stickers sort of thing. They were very, very small, probably 8 inches long, little round thing, sort of pointy on the end. That was with the Mark IV rifle.

Couldn't you set the mine off by probing it?

No because what happens when you probe, you probe at an angle and not a direct push. An anti-tank, you could walk on an anti-tank and it wouldn't go up. You probably have to have 300 pound pressure before it would do. But with an anti-personnel mine, then you're talking of about 5 pound pressure.

Now, the majority of anti-personnel mines that we found were what they called S mines. And they-- the only thing that was sticking out of the ground was three little steel prongs. And they looked like a little blade of grass. That's all it looked like. And once you found that, it was quite simple to remove it.

You must realized that these mines had been down for a couple of years. So you knew that there was no mines that were booby trapped. Otherwise, the wire of the booby trap would have rotted through sort of thing-- wouldn't have been any good. So we knew that there was no booby traps on minefields that have been laid for a considerable time.

And we used to take these S mines out. Now, if you trod on an S mine, that-- what happened was that it that jumped out of the ground and exploded approximately four foot above ground. And there was about 350 ball bearings in that. And they just scattered all over the place.

We lost three chaps on the second day with one of the S mines. They were going in to try and recover a flail. A flail is a tank with the chains on the front. And that had got knocked out. And the crew was still inside. And we decided to send a small team in.

And unfortunately, one of the sappers-- or we assumed one of the sappers-- trod on an S mine. And then that killed the three of them. They were quite close together. And that was it. And they were-- the injuries are all in the head-- well, from the shoulders up.

So most of the mines you were removing were S mines rather than--

S mines and teller mines and also French-- a lot of French anti-tank mines. On other beaches, of course, there was British mines. When we pulled out of Dunkirk, all the stores that were left behind, they used those to a great advantage. So it was British mines and everything. But when we pushed forward, of course, the mines were a different type of thing altogether. Because the mines then were booby trapped. Because they were being pushed back and they were laying mines that were booby trapped.

Mr. Finigan, reel 3. How nervous did you feel clearing the mines?

At the very beginning, quite nervous. We had a number of NCOs that had been posted into the unit from-- who saw service in North Africa and Italy. And they were sent home to reinforce the-- all the various units. So we had a number of NCOs who were battle acclimatized, if you will say the word. And they were very experienced-- very experienced, indeed.

I had a sergeant who was a reconnaissance sergeant who had an MM. And we looked upon him as almost like God. He knew everything. And he was very, very clever. And he taught us a lot. And we felt very, very confident in the minefields when he was around. We felt very confident, indeed. It was a little bit more apprehensive when you started finding mines with booby traps because then it took a longer time to lift a mine. Because you had to work your way around the outside of the mine and also underneath the mine.

And if it was rather hard ground, then it was-- you had to do that by your hands sort of thing. You couldn't dig a mine out with a shovel. This is-- it had to be done by fingers, by your hands.

Why not a shovel?

Well, because if you lifted a-- lifted it with a shovel, then the igniter on the underneath part of the mine, which was attached to a peg that was underneath that, and that just pulled the igniter out. And then the mine would go up. You had different types of igniters that you used. You used a pull igniter, which was-- you lift a mine up, and the igniter was pulled.

And then you had another one, which was a pressure igniter. So you could press down on a mine, and the igniter would accept-- get the mine up. And we used to use those more with our booby traps in buildings, treading on a doormat, or a floorboard, or anything like that-- a pressure igniter.

But on D-Day, you were clearing a channel through the minefield.

Yes.

How deep was the minefield before you worked your way through it?

I should say that it was approximately-- the mine field itself was approximately 40 yards wide. And it was the whole length of the beach, if you can see what I mean. The whole beach-- it was in the dunes beyond the actual the shoreline. And then the minefield had just carried on for miles, and miles, and miles until you come to a small town. Then it would go round that one, of course, and carry on.

How long did it take you to work your way right through the whole width of the minefield?

Well, not very long, not very long. I suppose we cleared a minefield in a possibly half a day. And then the vehicles or the tanks would come ashore and de-waterproof. They would blow all their cowls off. They had extended cowls for their exhausts. They were all metal.

The turret-- of course, the tank couldn't move its turret around because it had this waterproofing around the turret had to be blown away by electrically charge with cortex. They had a cortex fuse. And that was all blown off before they could swivel their turrets then. But it was only a matter of minutes of coming ashore, going into the marshaling area, de-waterproofing, and off they go. It didn't take very long. It didn't take very long at all.

But you didn't clear the whole minefield, you just cleared a path through it?

Path-- well, eventually, we cleared the whole lot because when the vehicles started to come ashore in earnest, then we were getting far, far, far more vehicles than we could possibly cope. So we had to clear the whole lot.

And it was the pioneers who were helping them?

Yeah, they were removing all the mines that had been lifted, taking them down the beach, further down the beach. And then we were blowing those up every half an hour sort of thing, about 20 at a time.

Did you feel it had all gone successfully on the first day?

You didn't really know what was going on at all. They probably knew more about it at home than we knew on the radio. Or you knew what was happening on your little sector. You didn't know what was happening a mile up the coast.

But on your little sector--

On our little sector--

--were you OK with what--

--we were happy with what we were doing. We were very happy with what we were doing. And as a matter of fact, the beach that we actually cleared, we-- and made safe, and kept all the exits open, that was the beach that was selected for-- let me say, in turn, there was His Majesty the King, there was Winston Churchill, there was General de Gaulle, also Field Marshal--

Montgomery.

--Montgomery. They all landed on our beach. So we felt that we had done a good job. We felt that we had made our beach quite safe. No doubt, other sapper units in other beaches thought they had done exactly the same. But we thought, being that they landed on our beach, it was through our endeavor.

What was the name of your beach?

It was--

Juno or Gold?

Juno, Juno-- Juno Beach. It was just between Courseulles and Graye-sur-Mer.

Once you were doing the mine clearing, were you being shelled?

Oh, yes. Yes. Yes, we were being shelled. And occasionally, the Luftwaffe would come over and drop a few bombs. It was rather surprising because although we had air superiority, we saw very little on the beach as regards fighters. We saw that our own bombers going over.

But we never saw any fighters. They were further inland. And they were doing their job sort of thing further inland, which was probably a good thing. Because they were knocking out trains, I suppose, and vehicles, and what have you.

How did you spend the first night in France?

Working all the time. I think we were about two or three days before we managed to get some sleep.

Just mine clearing the whole time?

Mine clearing and also making more exits. We had to lay trackways down so that vehicles could use it because in the soft sand, there's all sorts of-- we kept rather busy, kept rather busy.

Did you personally lay trackways?



Oh, we laid trackways, yes. We laid track, which was Summerfelt track, which is like a wire-- a lot of wire on canvas or sacking, rather. It was all sacking. And the vehicles used to use that. The actual beach itself, when the tide went out, what happened, then, was that the tank landing craft used to come in, and beach themselves, and then wait till the tide went out before they opened their doors. And then the vehicles and the tanks, they could come out and drive on the hard sand.

So you must have been exhausted if you had gone without sleep for so long.

Well, we were on pills or tablets. They said that they were vitamins. But we couldn't dispute that. They might have been pills to keep us awake. I don't know.

Didn't you feel sleepy?

Not really. Not really, not for the first couple of days.

Is that because you were so excited?

A lot of it was excitement-- I suppose the excitement and also fear. You get-- everyone has got fear. It's not-- as I say, it's not everyone's cup of tea to be under fire. Everyone is afraid. A lot of people don't show it, that's all.

Do you think you showed it?

I don't think so. I don't think I did, for the simple reason that at a later date, the platoon officer used to take me on all his recces. And he said, do nothing else but reconnaissance work.

So eventually, they did give you a chance to sleep.

Oh, yes, yes. Yes, because we stayed on the beach for approximately three weeks. Our job, our main job, then, was over. Our job was to get the vehicles and the men ashore. And that was purely our main job. And once that was all over, then we were put on other tasks.

After the beach, we went on training, as a matter of fact. They had a new idea as regards rafting. And we ended up on a canal trying out this new type of raft that they had knocked up.

It was too late before the landings in Normandy. And they brought it down then. And what we used to do-- our main job after that was carrying out assaults on river, river assaults. Every time we come to a major river, then we were called forward to take the infantry across.

What did that involve for you?

It's storm boats, taking the assault infantry across, and also, these rafts, they were assembled in rather quick time. And they used to take the light vehicles and tanks onto the other side of the river.

Storm boats?

Storm boats, they're like little craft that you probably get about a dozen chaps kneeling down inside, very shallow craft, but very, very fast-- quite fast.

Where did you do this river crossing work?

On the various rivers that we came to, like the River Seine, the River Meuse, and the Rhine. It was mostly major rivers. A lot of the rivers were very, very narrow. And of course, they didn't need those sort of thing.

Do you remember the big breakout from the Normandy beachhead?

Yes. Yes, I remember the big breakout. That was when-- I can always remember the Falaise Gap, when the Americans met up with the British. And I think that the Germans lost about 300,000 men in the Falaise Gap. And that was a smell that you will remember for the rest of your life.

There was no doubt about it, that the stench and the stink of everywhere you look, there was-- you couldn't travel on the roads. You couldn't travel. The German transport-- they had a lot of horse transport-- was nose to tail. And you-- if you traveled anywhere, it had to be the adjoining fields. You couldn't travel on the roads at all because of the dead. It was something that you just cannot describe.

So was it the animals or the men--

Animals and--

--who were rotting?

--mostly men and the animals, of course. Mostly horse-drawn transport, with probably two horses in each cart. And of course, on top of that, you've got the cows and the animals in the fields that were also killed by shrapnel and things like that. But it was one big area of stench, death.

How did you feel about it? Did you feel exultant, or--

No.

--pitiful, or what?

Very pitiful, I think. You didn't realize what we had actually done. You thought to yourself, why didn't they give in?

Did you see German prisoners there?

Yes, we saw German prisoners. They used to come down every day. When we were on the beach, of course, mostly on the beach, they used to come down and go back into the landing craft back to England. This meant--

What--

They used to help-- when the tank landing craft came ashore and discharged all its vehicles and tanks, they used to immediately transform it into a hospital ship. And it went back with operating theaters so that all the wounded, irrespective of whether they were British or German, they all went back on. And the heavily wounded were treated on the way back to England.

They had these theaters there. And they were carrying operations. And they saved a lot of lives. The dressing station is what they called the field dressing stations. They wouldn't have any-- if a chap even went with a boil on the back of his neck, he was sent straight home. There was no doubt about it. Get him out the way. Get him out the way, send him home, have his treatment, and then come back.

And that's what was happening. If a chap had toothache, they were doing that-- severe toothache, although we had a dentist on the beach. We had a dentist who was kept rather busy.

So was there any malingering or self-inflicted wounds?

Not as I know of. Not as I know of. I suppose, overall, on the actual D-Day landings, we had about 20% casualties, I should imagine. That was with wounds, mostly. But they came back to us, apart from a few that had more serious wounds. And they came back so quick that you didn't-- you hadn't realized that they'd been away.

But did this sending home of people with minor medical complaints just apply to the sappers or also to the infantry?

Oh, yes. Yes, if they had sprained their wrist or something like that, they'd send them straight back. There was no hanging on to them because they were just in the way. It was quicker to send them back, and then treat them, and bring them back again. And what the German prisoners of war used to do, they used to carry all the stretchers down onto the tank landing craft-- carry all the stretchers and help the wounded. Because it wasn't only their own people, it was ours as well.

Did they do it properly?

Oh, yes, yes. They did it very well, yeah. I suppose they were glad that they were out of it.

What did you see as you pushed up through France?

Pushed up through France? It was some things were quite comical. Other things were-- I remember one occasion where we were going to take the part of the highland division over the Seine and we had these special rafts that we were going to use. And we were told to go to a particular little village that was on the banks of the Seine.

And we arrived there before it was taken. We didn't know that, of course, at that particular time, but it was before the infantry had arrived. And we were on these sledges. They were being pulled by armored cars. And they were then pushed into the water and then assembled as a raft. And we arrived on the road, making this awful noise, being driven on these sledges with the pontoons on the top.

And we just waited in the village there, sitting on top, sitting on the side of the road, having a meal, when a German column of cyclists came past us. And they realize then that they were in British territory sort of thing. And they just gave themselves up.

But they didn't know. But at the same time, we didn't know. About two hours later, the British infantry-- it was the highland light infantry came up. And they were rather annoyed that we were in the village before they were. But that sort of thing used to happen.

This was on the banks of the Seine?

Banks of the Seine, yes.

So the cyclists didn't resist?

No, no, they-- we stood up sort of thing. And they just stopped. And that was it. They put their arms down there. And we just made them sit on the side of the road in the middle of this village. They didn't know where they were. All we were given was a map reference of this little village. And we had to go there because that was where one of the crossings was going to be. But we arrived there too early. The infantry hadn't taken it, hadn't taken the village.

How many of the cyclists do you think there were?

20, approximately 21, probably. But we had another case in Holland, where we built a class 9 bridge. Now, a class 9 bridge was one of the lightest bridges. And you couldn't take any heavy vehicles over it. But once you finished a bridge, you handed it over to the Royal Military police, and they did the traffic control. And also, you leave a sapper or two to carry out any maintenance with any damage caused to the bridge.

And this particular time, what happened was that we had handed over to the military police. And then we went on. And we went further up to the front, which wasn't very, very far away. But about an hour after we left, a German convoy arrived with very heavy vehicles. And this lance corporal military police sort of thing held his hand up there and said, I'm sorry, you can't come across.

And the German officer in charge of the convoy, he realized, then, that he wasn't in his own part of the country. And of course, he said to this lance corporal, how far am I behind the lines? And this lance corporal said, oh, about 40 miles. In actual fact, it was only a matter of five, four or five. So he just gave himself up there and then with the remainder of the convoy. But that's the sort of thing that could-- happened all over the place.

You haven't said anything about any contact you had with French civilians.

We had very little contact with French civilians for the simple reason that we were so busy. It's not like the headquarters of a unit. They used to pull in a little town sort of thing, and set up their headquarters or their company offices and all that sort of thing.

The remaining-- the remainder of the unit would go out and carry out various tasks that we had to do-- bridge-building, clearing mines, of course, and various other-- putting up water points. That was all carried out by the sappers, of course, you see. Troops had to be watered.

Where did you go to-- on your path through France and Belgium? Can you remember the names of the places?

Oh, I can't, no, no. It was so-- when we got over the Seine, it was a matter of just bash on. And that was it. We just bashed on sort of thing, right up into Holland.

So you didn't go through any big places like Brussels?

No. No. No, we went through Eindhoven in Holland. We went through Eindhoven when the American paratroopers were landing. And then-- but we couldn't reach the Mars because of the Arnhem deal because the roads were so chock-a-block that we just couldn't get our bridging supplies up.

And if we could have gotten there, we would-- probably, it would have been a different thing altogether. We felt that we let them down, but we just couldn't get on the roads. The roads were just nose to tail with vehicles.

Were you still with the Canadians by this time?

No, no. No, we left the Canadians at the beach. Our job was to get them ashore. And that was it. Once they were ashore, that was our job finished.

Who did you transfer to, to a new division?

No, no, we weren't divisional troops at all. We were just called upon to do any particular task that was required until we come to a major river sort of thing. And then we did-- we supported the Highland division. And we supported-- up in Holland, we supported the Guards armored division.

Was there any particular division which impressed you more than the others?

No, not really. We thought that the Guards overdid it slightly. They used to stop for tea. And the batman used to lay out the tablecloth sort of thing. And it was almost like a mess night. Where our own officers would sit down with us, the Guards officers were completely different. They would sit down on their own.

And the Highland division?

The Highland division, we were only with them for a matter of a few hours because once we got them over the side of the river, that was our job finished again.

Once that winter came up after Arnhem, where were you then in the Netherlands?

We built-- it was a very, very cold winter. I can always remember that. And Christmas, there was the breakthrough at the Battle of the Bulge. When the-- but they brought over the airborne, the Sixth Airborne again. And troops were diverted because what the Germans' intention was to take Antwerp.

But of course, that's-- they were stopped. But what we had to do, we had to build a gunnery range for the Royal Artillery. Why, I don't know. I think it was leading up to the Rhine crossing. And they were going to practice on this gunnery range. And we had to build this range. It was built of timber, small saplings, the road was. But it was very, very cold. It was ice, ice everywhere. We had to dig through the ice, like a permafrost, about a foot deep.

So a gunnery range consists of a wooden road?

Well, there was-- all there was there was-- there was no-- it was just a matter of open-- it was right on the border of Belgium and Holland. And we built this road so that they could use it to bring their vehicles and guns up. But whether they used it or not, I don't know. As soon as the job was finished, then we just carried on. By that time, we were preparing to cross the Rhine. And of course, that was done under-- when they were bringing up supplies and reinforcements. That was all done under a smokescreen during the day.

Did you take part in that?

Yes. Yes.

Whereabouts?

A place between Xanten and Rees.