

1961 REGIMENTAL CHRONICLE
1st GREEN JACKETS, 43rd & 52nd.

“THE LONGEST DAY”
D.B.F.

Sometime in June of this year, after a certain amount of lobbying, the War Office ordered the Regiment to provide a contingent of about eighty men to go to Normandy to assist in the making of a film about the D-Day landings of June 1944. This film is being produced by Mr Darryl F. Zanuck of 20th Century-Fox, and is taken from a book, "The Longest Day," by Cornelius Ryan. The book is a collection of true individual stories of that one day, of the Germans as well as of the Allies, of servicemen and of civilians, and the film keeps closely to this theme. The stories are woven together by the thread of the tactical plans of both sides, and by what is historically recorded as actually having happened.

One of the stories told is that of the capture of Pegasus Bridge and it seemed appropriate that the Regiment, whose achievement it was, should be chosen to re-enact the episode.

Although four of us who were in Normandy on the night of 5th/6th June 1944 are still with the Regiment—Tod Sweeney, David Wood, C.S.M. Bailey and I—only Bailey and myself were at Knook when the time came to form the contingent for the film, so the commanding officer decided that I should command it and Bailey be in charge of administration. C.S.M. Ball was chosen to be the contingent Serjeant-Major because he would have joined the original Pegasus Bridge party on the day after D-Day, if he had not been delayed by the tow-rope of his glider breaking over the Channel.

On the 24th July, accompanied by the film company's British Military Adviser (Colonel J. R. Johnson, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C., Rtd, late Royal Welch Fusiliers), the commanding officer, C.S.M. Bailey, and I were flown over to Normandy on a reconnaissance. This lasted four days and was a gastronomic holiday. Useful work was accomplished, however, with the French Air Force and the film company, in preparing for the arrival of the British troops. We also revisited Pegasus Bridge, where we were warmly greeted by Monsieur Georges Gondree and his charming ever-embracing wife.

On the 30th August I returned to Normandy with the contingent's advance party, consisting of C.S.M. Bailey, C.S.M. Higham (our master chef), clerks, cooks and storemen.

The French Air Force, at Carpiquet on the outskirts of Caen, had taken a great deal of trouble to make us welcome. They had refurnished and redecorated their barracks (the film company had not been quick enough to prevent this being done at film expense), had given up part of their Serjeants' mess to make a separate dining hall for us and had put their kitchens and their master chef at our disposal. The film company gave the princely sum of 21/- per man per day to spend on food. Portraying a vivid resemblance to the late Laurel and Hardy, the two master chefs became inseparable. Aply assisted by Cpl Weldon, never can British soldiers have fed so well anywhere. The officers were accommodated, not uncomfortably, in Caen's leading hotel.

The main body of the contingent under Robert Hay-Drummond-Hay landed at Orly Airport on the 1st September and were taken to a restaurant in the Champs-Élysées, where they were given a foretaste of the standard of food that was to be maintained throughout the following three weeks. Later that evening they arrived by coach at Carpiquet prior to starting work the following day.

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The story of the Pegasus Bridge episode was to be filmed in reverse, i.e., the daylight arrival of Lord Lovat's relieving commandos to be filmed first. This was because Peter Lawford, the actor taking the part of Lord Lovat, was available only for those two days. From then on the film was to be shot at night. This also meant that for the first two days the Regiment were to act as commandos.

Parading at the stores of the wardrobe master the soldiers were fitted with commando battledress and equipment while French sempstresses flitted amongst them sewing on shoulder titles and flashes. The next problem was to change them from a bunch of awkward recruits in unaccustomed uniform into seasoned troops who had just landed on the beaches and fought their way six miles inland. After one or two abortive attempts this was finally accomplished by taking them to the beach and, to the amazement of the hundreds of gesticulating, near-naked French holidaymakers, marching them bodily and fully equipped into the sea. This, combined with compulsory growths of beard, provided the right effect. The no-shaving order was not, in fact, well received by the soldiers, who disliked the embarrassment rather than the discomfort. A gift of a situation arose, pounced upon by the press, of a soldier being charged for shaving without permission.

The director of the film, so far as the sequences affecting the Regiment were concerned, was a charming and obviously most able Englishman named Ken Annikin. He had an assistant who eventually became a favourite with the soldiers—an irrepressible Israelite, gloriously named Willy Iscovitch. Permanently clothed in a black silk blouse and white jeans, armed with a whistle, a megaphone and an assortment of coloured flags, he bounded and leaped, shouted and whistled, waved and mimed, urged and cajoled as he flung himself backwards and forwards between the camera and the soldiers vainly trying to anticipate, in his halting American-English, his remarkably patient master's wishes.

However, neither the director nor his exuberant assistant were permitted to have it all their own way. Always on the set, with his teeth firmly clenched on a cigar, was the small dynamic figure of Darryl F. Zanuck himself. He knew what he wanted and by hell he was going to get it. Only once was he shaken out of his formidable self-confidence and that was when Lord Lovat, who had flown out at the film company's invitation, tall and elegant of figure, with superb and enchanting nonchalance, assumed undisputed control of the direction of the scenes involving his own commandos.

Following the commando scenes came the night shooting of the glider landings and the assault on the bridge. This meant changing the soldiers' routine from day into night. They were given breakfast at 6 p.m., lunch on location at midnight, supper and bed back in barracks at 7 o'clock the following morning.

Having arrived on location they would be made up by the cosmeticians and then told to stand by until wanted. There was a great deal of standing by during the making of this film, which rapidly became very boring and tiring. It is to their credit that, despite this boredom, the soldiers received considerable praise for the way they threw themselves into the constantly repeated rehearsals with the same enthusiasm and realism as they did when the cameras were rolling. Perhaps they had been hardened to it by their training as Demonstration Battalion at Warminster.

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Taking advantage of the contingent being in Normandy and his being with them at the time, the commanding officer took this opportunity of holding a memorial service at Ranville Military Cemetery, where so many of the 52nd are buried. At the same time he laid a wreath at Brouay Military Cemetery to the memory of the dead of the 43rd. The service was a simple but very moving occasion. Brigadier Tony Read flew over to be present as did Padre Peter Malins, who conducted the service, David Wood and Robin Evelegh. Also present were Major John Howard, the commander of the original Pegasus Bridge party, and Richard Todd, who was taking his part in the film. It was appropriate that Richard Todd should be acting this part because he had himself jumped with the 7th Parachute Battalion, who had also landed in Normandy on the eve of D-Day, to assist in the holding of the Bridges

Throughout the time we were there the film company remained generously attentive towards us. Coaches were always available to take the soldiers into Deauville or Caen, or anywhere along the Normandy coast, whenever the strenuous business of filming permitted a break. Meals were prodigious and delicious. I have one personal unforgettable memory, as a guest in a private house, of sitting down at 12 noon to a sublime symphony of a luncheon, and being helped to rise from the table some fourteen hours later at 2 a.m. Their generosity remained with us right up to the last minute of departure. In the restaurant at Orly Airport they expressed their appreciation to the British Army, and the Regiment in particular, by breaking open case after case of champagne. A very merry party indeed; we flew from France in the wrong aircraft.



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The film, "The Longest Day," September 1961
Lord Lovat (Peter Lawford) leads his scouts over Pegasus Bridge. Leading men, left- and right-hand files respectively, Lieut. Hay-Drummond-Hay, Sjt Morgan

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The film, "The Longest Day"
The Officer Commanding Para Regt., C.S.M. Ball, Major Howard and
Richard Todd, who played the part of Major Howard