

CONTINUUM STUDIES IN MILITARY HISTORY

The 56th Infantry Brigade and D-Day

*An Independent Infantry Brigade
and the Campaign in North West
Europe 1944–1945*

Andrew Holborn

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the Campaign in North West Europe
1944–1945*

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*‘NOS A GULIELMO VICTI VICTORIS PATRIAM
LIBERAVIMUS’*

*(‘We, once conquered by William, have now set free the
Conqueror’s native land’)*

Inscription on the Commonwealth War Graves
Memorial to the Missing, Bayeux

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Preface

Comprised of three regular battalions of infantry, 2nd Battalion The South Wales Borderers, 2nd Battalion the Essex Regiment, 2nd Battalion the Gloucester Regiment and Brigade HQ, 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade was formed only in early March 1944. Its specific task was to land 'under command' of 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division on D-Day. This division itself was made up of three brigades of very experienced infantry.

56th Infantry Brigade's infantry battalions had all been on Home Service since June 1940 and were not experienced in battle. Despite this, and quite remarkably, within only 13 weeks of formation, 56th Infantry Brigade's task was to land on Gold Beach on D-Day as follow-up troops and fight inland taking the town of Bayeux by nightfall. After this the brigade was expected to provide infantry for 7th Armoured Division in a quick push south to take Villers-Bocage.

This study traces the journey made by the three battalions of 56th Brigade from 1940 through to a highly concentrated forming up and training period specific to the Normandy landings in 1944. It follows their actions from the landings through the Normandy campaign and the rest of the Campaign for North West Europe, by which time the brigade had served in four different divisions and lost its 'Independent' title to become a permanent member of 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division.

No study has previously been made of 56th Infantry Brigade, and extensive use has been made here of primary evidence from the National Archives and other sources. A considerable amount of new evidence has been gathered by interviews with surviving veterans of 56th Infantry Brigade. The evidence is used to explore issues pertinent to life in the army at home during the war, training for war and the Normandy campaign.

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I owe a great debt to my tutor, Harry Bennet, who has been constantly encouraging and helpful with comments and ideas over the past four years. He has been a key person in enabling my progress.

All three regimental museums – South Wales Borderers Museum at Brecon, Essex Regiment Museum at Chelmsford and Soldiers of Gloucestershire at Gloucester – were helpful and encouraging, and often provided documents or contacts. In like vein, the 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division Association has been a source of information, help and contacts.

The Imperial War Museum Departments of Documents and Books, Photos and Film Archives were unfailingly helpful and interested. Equally, the National Archive at Kew was crucial in providing primary sources. The staff at the National Archive were very helpful, either face to face or via e-mail, in providing links to sources, on occasion when a dead end seemed to have been met.

I received much assistance from the LST and Landing Craft Association, Veteran Affairs Canada and the Naval Museum of Manitoba when trying to gain information about 264th (Canadian) Landing Craft Flotilla.

Finally, this work has gained enormously from the information, interest, help and encouragement of the members of 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade who contributed in so many ways. A list of their names and regiments appears at Appendix 1.

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List of abbreviations

ACV	Armoured Command Vehicle
AFPU	Army Film and Photographic Unit
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CTC	Combined Operations Training Centre
CWGC	Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery
DUKW	an amphibious transport vehicle
FFI	Forces de l'Intérieur
FGCM	Field General Court Martial
FOO	Forward Observation Officer
FSMO	Full Service Marching Order
IGN	Institute Géographique Nationale
IO	Intelligence Officer
ITC	Infantry Training Centre
LSI	Landing Ships Infantry
LCA	Landing Craft Assault
LCM	Landing Craft Mechanised
LCOCU	Landing Craft Obstacle Clearance Units
LCT	Landing Craft Tank
LST	Landing Ship Transport
LAD	Light Aid Detachment
LDV	Local Defence Volunteers
MT	Motor Transport
MTO	Battalion Motor Transport Officer
OCTU	Officer Cadet Training Unit
OTC	Officer Training Corps
PTC	Primary Training Centre
PIAT	Projector Infantry Anti-Tank
RAC	Royal Armoured Corps
RHU	Reinforcement Holding Units
RSC	Royal Corps of Signals
SWB	South Wales Borderers
TARA	Aerial Reconnaissance Archive
TEWT	Tactical Exercise without Troops
TCV	Troop Carrying Vehicle
WOSB	War Office Selection Board

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Introduction

This book investigates the role of 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade, which was raised barely three months before the D-Day landings. The study focuses on the raising of the brigade, its training and deployment in operations from April 1944 until the end of the war in Europe in May 1945. The brigade was given important tasks on D-Day, during the Normandy campaign and throughout the remainder of the war in north-west Europe. It was the smallest tactical formation in the British Army. No proper evaluation of a British infantry brigade involved in the north-west Europe campaign appears to have been attempted before; certainly the role of 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade in this campaign has not been investigated. This book will therefore offer an examination of the campaign from a fresh perspective and provide insight into the British Army at brigade level in the later stages of the Second World War.

Works on the Second World War have concentrated on army, divisional or battalion level, but the critical role of an infantry brigade in the structure, organization and operations of a division has not previously been attempted.¹ The rank of brigadier is the highest field officer rank. An infantry division usually contains three brigades, each of three battalions. An infantry division would also have attached to it 'under command', artillery, heavy mortar, anti-tank, medium machine gun, signals, provost, engineer, armour and other units depending on the task in hand. Some elements of these units would be passed down as required and come under the command of the divisional brigades.

As late as February 1944 Montgomery (the overall land forces commander in operations) decided that 50th (Northumbrian) Division would replace 49th (West Riding) Division for the assault and exploitation of the landings on Gold Beach. In planning for D-Day, General Graham of 50th Division decided he required an extra brigade to fulfil all his allotted tasks. Further, Montgomery recognized the need, after the landings and initial exploitation, of a spare brigade under 21st Army Group's direct control to deploy as required. Hence 56th (Independent) Infantry Brigade was raised and was unique in respect of being an Army Group formation rather than part of a divisional unit for the majority of the Normandy campaign. In the event, plans for a swift breakout after the landings were not realized and the Allied army had to quickly adapt to the changed situation during June, July and early August 1944, fighting in the close confines of the Normandy countryside known as the bocage.

The research methodology for this book has involved an examination of primary and secondary sources from the British National Archive, Imperial War Museum,

National Army Museum, regimental museums, county museums, museums in Normandy and site visits. This material includes written, oral, photographic and film sources. Many books have been written about D-Day, the Battle of Normandy and the latter stages of the war in Europe. These secondary sources, where relevant, are used to examine how discussion, argument and even myth over the effective role of British forces in the campaign have developed over the last 60 years. In this study the most important primary source was provided by the surviving veterans of the brigade, the majority of whom have not been interviewed before. Some 44 members of the brigade have helped by giving interviews and materials. Useful information was also gathered from veterans of other units and French people who as children lived in France. Despite the passing of over 60 years, memory has provided a useful and vivid link with the events of 1944–45, and this oral history has provided a test for the veracity and usefulness of some primary and secondary written sources. The relationship of this project to the evolution of military oral history will be discussed in the conclusion.

There are a number of reasons that make the operations of this particular infantry brigade and its differences from other infantry brigades at that time worthy of investigation. The brigade was formed as a new brigade in March 1944. This gave it little time for the three battalions to get used to working with each other and to train for their expected tasks on D-Day and after. It was made up of three regular battalions – 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers, 2nd Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment and 2nd Battalion Essex Regiment. These had been ‘Home Service’ battalions since 1940 and had not, before February 1944, expected to play an important part in the coming invasion. They were under strength because they had been used in the previous three years as reinforcement units based in the UK. As an ‘independent’ brigade they were to be ‘under command’ of 50th Division for the initial landings. They were subsequently expected to be taken under command by 7th Armoured Division (General Erskine), as an extra brigade of infantry during the planned quick exploitation and breakout from the bridgehead. In the event they came under command of 7th Armoured Division only for a brief period of time; between June and September 1944 they fought as part of four different divisions and from September 1944 remained with 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division for the remainder of the war.

This was a unit that followed a much more complex path than expected from January 1944 to the end of the campaign in Normandy, reflecting how the campaign developed very differently from how it was planned. In one aspect in particular the brigade bears close scrutiny. Of the four infantry brigades that landed on Gold Beach on D-Day, it alone was not already tried in battle. 50th Division as a unit had been brought back from Italy by Montgomery as an experienced division to ensure all went well in Normandy. As with the three other 50th Division brigades, 56th Brigade had important and clearly allotted tasks on D-Day. It was to land, drive inland and take and hold the ground around and south of Bayeux by that first evening. In addition, it was the unit that was tasked to hold the extreme right flank of the British Army in Normandy, and make the junction with US forces. As things

turned out, even this complex task was made more difficult by events on Omaha Beach and the fact that German resistance elsewhere was tougher than expected.

The training of the brigade in the three months leading up to D-Day was not always specific to task. Its late addition to the D-Day order of battle meant that it had to follow a steep learning curve. Many of the men had been in those battalions for some time. A few had fought in Norway or France and had suffered defeat in 1940. In the interim the battalions had provided Home Defence and men for units fighting abroad. By 1944 the battalions comprising the brigade were a mix of regular soldiers and conscripts of all ages. Some were recuperating from wounds or disease caused on active service in Italy or Burma, while others were considered too old to stand up to the rigours of combat. This meant that replacements were joining the brigade to bring the battalions up to full strength very nearly to the day of embarkation for France. The number of replacements was considerable. The Brigade Headquarters of some 200 men also had to be built from scratch.

Once landed in France the Allies found that defeating the German Army was much more difficult than expected. Realization of this simple aim was often confused and complicated by differences of opinion and personality between the Allied generals and the Allied leaders' differing political hopes and aspirations for the future. Without doubt the invasion of Normandy was an extraordinary event in the world wars of the last century. The organization and training of the large inter-service and international Allied force that landed on the mainland of Europe was more difficult than any previous operation carried out by the Allies. They then had to maintain this force by sea and fight and defeat a tenacious, well-trained and equipped enemy versed in the arts of holding defensive positions in a campaign lasting over 11 months. Failure on D-Day or soon after would have significantly altered the course of the Second World War, and it is doubtful if such an invasion could have been re-launched. This was fully realized not only by the Allied leaders, both military and political, but the German General Staff as well.

Important primary written evidence concerning 56th Brigade can be found at The National Archive: Public Record Office (TNA: PRO) in the following series: WO or War Office; ADM or Admiralty; AIR or Air Ministry and CAB or Cabinet Office. Of greatest importance are the unit war diaries in the series WO 171. On a daily basis a record had to be kept of actions and their results by each of the three battalions² and the Brigade Headquarters.³ These diaries were kept on a foolscap sheet, typed or even sometimes handwritten on 'Army Form C 2118 War Diary or Intelligence Summary'. They provide a fascinating insight into the day-by-day progress of the brigade. The war diaries often contain as annexes complete operational orders. That for D-Day (56th Brigade Operational Order No. 1) runs to 25 pages. The war diaries provide a brief overview of events, sometimes including casualties and positional map references. Their annexes may contain individual patrol reports, passwords and minute tactical details. All the war diaries carry a weekly register called a 'field return'. For the officers this gives names and ranks, but only numbers of men for non-commissioned officers and other ranks. However, this is a very useful piece of information for tracking casualties, reinforcements and appointments.

An important addition with the 2nd South Wales Borderers War Diary between January and May 1944 and then from January 1945, is a copy of the battalion weekly mimeographed newspaper, which included Battalion Orders as well as lectures and accounts of inter-battalion rugby matches. Once committed to action this seems to have been either discontinued or not saved with the war diary. A copy of each war diary appears to have been officially filed with the Army War Diary Section within a few weeks of writing, according to official stamps observed on some of the war diary pages. However at Brigade HQ and in the battalions they were written typically by a 19- or 20-year-old intelligence officer (IO) holding the rank of lieutenant, or a member of his section, usually within a few hundred yards of the front line. They are inevitably not completely reliable. No one was specifically trained to do this job – it was something you ‘picked up’. Sometimes during very difficult fighting there are even gaps in the war diaries for a few days. The war diaries of some units operating in the same areas as 56th Brigade have also been examined to add to the available evidence in some actions or operations. However, not all war diaries were kept at the end of the Second World War. An example of an important loss to researchers is that of the war diary of 47 Commando who landed on Gold Beach on D-Day. ‘The unit diaries for April to July 1944 unfortunately have not survived for 47 Commando Royal Marines.’⁴

There are other official documents at the National Archive with direct relevance to the brigade. A good example is WO 219/3077. This is the Landing Table document, which shows that already by mid-April 1944 the specific type and number of ships required to land 56th Brigade, including all its tracked vehicles and motor transport on D-Day, had been worked out at a time when the brigade had been in existence for only six weeks. Cabinet Office papers were often written about specific actions in order to provide the Cabinet with detail of operations and intelligence or a historical record. Useful papers in this series provide sometimes detailed information for actions involving 56th Brigade, such as CAB 44/247, ‘Operations 7th–16th June 1944’ and CAB 44/248 ‘Operations 16th June–29th August’. These are extensive written documents including maps from the Cabinet Office Historical Section. Shorter papers include the taking of Le Havre in September 1944, CAB 106/958 ‘Operation Astonia’.

A number of studies were written soon after the end of the war and were officially sanctioned. In the first instance some studies and papers were written to inform and educate the British and United States military as to how an event or campaign developed. Doubtless these formed the basis of lectures or modules at staff colleges and military academies in both countries. *D-Day: 30 Corps and Gold Beach*, completed by May 1950 by Lieutenant-Colonel A. Warhurst, who took part in the Normandy campaign, was of particular use in this study. These types of narratives (the official description) are put together by the careful scrutiny of battalion and other unit war diaries and the interrogation of key people within a few years of the events. Much of the detail from narratives such as that produced by Lieutenant-Colonel Warhurst were then incorporated in the later 18-volume official British History of the Second World War. The two volumes directly covering this study are *Victory in the West*,

volume 1: *The Battle of Normandy* (1962), and *Victory in the West*, volume 2: *The Defeat of Germany* (1968). It will be noted that these two volumes were published quite some time after the war had ended and did not escape criticism for a bland exposition of events and a favourable view of General Montgomery.

Other, but very different, important contemporary works written by the War Office concern various training manuals. Examples of direct relevance to this book are *Infantry Training*, Part 8: *Fieldcraft, Battle Drill, Section and Platoon Tactics 1944*. This manual for tactics up to platoon level was used from March 1944. It allows us to understand the tactics used by the smaller units within the battalions, but being published so close to D-Day one wonders how much time officers and men had to draw conclusions over its content. Similar pamphlets in the series, such as *Infantry Training: The Anti Tank Platoon 1943* and *Infantry Training: The Carrier Platoon 1943*, help us to understand how these vehicles and weapons were to be used to aid the infantry battalion in action. One other pamphlet, *Military Training Pamphlet No. 63: The Co-Operation of Tanks with Infantry Divisions*, is worthy of examination because of the controversy that was later to surround infantry/tank co-operation in Normandy. Yet again, this was published too late – in May 1944 – for time to be given to digest its teaching.

A further source of primary written evidence lies with the regimental and county museums, where veterans of the war have deposited diaries or notes they made at the time or later. The keeping of such diaries was strictly against orders, yet those that have survived often shed a very real light on events. Fortunately, three such diaries were copied for me by the veterans themselves. However, a search of the relevant museums showed only a small number of records exist. The generation who fought during the Second World War seems to have been less likely to produce writing for us of this type than their fathers did after the Great War of 1914–18. Yet each of the 56th Brigade battalions left some sort of history of their actions. 2nd South Wales Borderers had a definitive history written by Major Boon, published in 1955,⁵ 2nd Essex published a smaller booklet in the late 1940s,⁶ while articles published between 1950 and 1980 in their regimental magazine, *The Back Badge*, trace the war history of 2nd Glosters. These are highly informative about actions and personalities down to at least NCO level, but of course offer little critical evaluation within the battalion actions, although they occasionally offer veiled criticism of other units or orders from above.

In the Imperial War Museum collections are important primary evidence in the shape of contemporary photographic, film, oral and written archives. Film or photographic evidence can be used to confirm any manner of detail – what the infantryman carried into battle or even the sea state or weather for a particular day. However, there is unfortunately no great store of this material directly relating to 56th Brigade. Even though trained soldiers from the Army Film and Photographic Unit landed on D-Day and carried on throughout the campaign, when examining the archives one is struck by the lack of material considering the breadth of the action.

Another useful resource lies with similar documents and articles pertaining to the German forces opposing 56th Brigade. However, primary evidence documents

such as war diaries seem to have all been destroyed in the fighting and retreat by the German Army. Useful documents exist but are further removed from the unit. Examples include *D-Day: German Appreciations and Operations 6th June–25th August 1944* and *German Operations in North West Europe 20th August–16th December 1944*, both authored by the Historical Section of the Canadian Army. They give a narrative from the perspective of the German Army from captured contemporary sources or interrogation of German prisoners of high rank.

The above gives an overview of the main sources available directly relevant to 56th Brigade and its operations. It is important also to understand the context within which 56th Brigade operated. The 1944–45 campaign has been frequently written about over the last 60 years, yet it still invites comment, discussion, investigation and controversy.

Because official British documents concerning the campaign were not open to public examination until 1974 (usually their original ‘release’ date was 2045 or later), early writers based their works on their personal memories and on interviews or correspondence with the main protagonists. Later writers could examine official documents, briefing notes, appreciation notes, personal papers of staff officers and notes from staff college courses.

The works of three authors who took part in the Campaign in north-west Europe are worth exploring at this stage. Chester Wilmot’s *The Struggle for Europe* is a well-written and comprehensive work. Composed by a war correspondent that landed on D-Day by glider with 6th Airborne Division, Wilmot unusually had access to both western Allied and German sources available just after the war. In the Preface to the 1964 edition the military historian Michael Howard shows the scope and quality of the work:

Now as then it stands out as one of those rare works of military history . . . which have enduring value both as an eyewitness account and as authoritative survey of a large and complex campaign . . . it fell to Wilmot to give the English speaking world the first general survey, based on documents, of the manner in which strategy and grand tactics had been shaped on both sides of the hill, and of the bitter conflicts which lay behind the great decisions of war.⁷

Written without access to Russian sources at the height of the Cold War and of course without reference to ‘Ultra’ – knowledge of which did not enter the public domain until the 1970s – Wilmot’s work has stood the test of time.

The second author has a similar pedigree as a war correspondent who landed on Gold Beach later on D-Day. Writing about the war from the invasion of Italy in 1943 until the end of the war in Europe, in *Eclipse* Alan Moorehead completed a very different and worthwhile work. In his Foreword to the book, Moorehead writes: ‘In the beginning it was my intention . . . to try an experiment: merely to sketch in the military details and tell the story of the collapse of German Europe sociologically and politically, psychologically and even emotionally.’⁸ This is a highly informative, readable and personal account of the war. It shows insight into events and personalities and received critical acclaim when first published.

The third author is Milton Shulman, who wrote *Defeat in the West*. Shulman was an intelligence officer with the Canadian Army, and with Lieutenant-Colonel Leslie Chater interrogated 26 captured senior German officers. He correctly claims that his book contains some 'unique primary source material', and, for the investigation of 56th Brigade, the notes from the interrogation of the Le Havre fortress commander and some of the commanders of divisions, which at times faced 56th Brigade, provide useful evidence.⁹

The British novel *From the City, from the Plough* by Alexander Baron brings to life the journey of a fictitious unit, the '5th Wessex Battalion', from January to July 1944. First published in 1948 this novel was critically acclaimed by *The Tribune* as 'magnificent'.¹⁰ Baron served in the army in the Second World War and landed with the first wave on D-Day. *From the City* was his first novel and is purported to have sold over a million copies. There are uncanny similarities between characters and events in the novel and some of the stories I have been told by veterans or read in battalion or personal diaries from 1944. The strength of this novel is that it highlights the effect of the Normandy battlefield on the ordinary British soldier. Some of the detail disguises real events and it is skilfully written. While serving, Baron made notes on events and questioned men from the front during rest periods. Many veterans have or had read a copy. In his own Normandy campaign history, *Caen Anvil of Victory*, based around the controversy relating to the taking of Caen and Montgomery's strategic claims, Alexander McKee – himself a Normandy veteran – states that 'The best description of 5 Wilts (5th Wiltshire Bn.) at Mont Pincon is in Alexander Baron's *From the City, From the Plough*, a novel, written as fiction, but factually by far the best thing done on the Normandy Campaign.'¹¹

The early release in the 1970s of wartime documents held at the British National Archives allowed historians unparalleled access to 'new' sources and led to a number of important critical works in the 1980s. One of the most important is *Decision in Normandy* by Carlo D'Este.¹² This clear and comprehensive work centres on the strategy of Montgomery and the debate on its success or failure that still excites controversy today. D'Este encapsulates its content in his Introduction to the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition: 'Montgomery's so called master plan became one of the most debated and least understood stratagems of his military career. It generated nearly endless debate and to this day arouses fierce reaction in his critics and admirers.' D'Este writes fluently and authoritatively about the campaign and focuses on the post-war controversy surrounding the relationship between Eisenhower (Supreme Allied Commander) and Montgomery (Army Commander), and Montgomery's assertion that the Normandy campaign in particular followed his master plan. In addition to interviews with important politicians and generals, D'Este availed himself of American and Canadian material that had been available since the end of the war as well as the 'new' British National Archives material.

At about the same time as the release of the PRO documents, the death of Field Marshal Montgomery released Nigel Hamilton from his promise to Montgomery to publish his three-volume biography only after the death of the field marshal. The three volumes cover Montgomery's life as follows: *Monty, The Making of a*

General 1887–1942 (1981), *Monty, Master of the Battlefield 1942–1944* (1983) and *Monty, The Field Marshal 1944–1977* (1986). Hamilton explores the disagreements between Montgomery and Eisenhower, and Monty's insistence that his battle plans from Alam Halfa in 1942 onwards always went according to plan. His sometimes harsh and seemingly thoughtless treatment of fellow generals is fully explored, including an assessment of Montgomery's character. Hamilton's analysis of how Montgomery developed as a field commander and especially the development of his tactical appreciation of the battlefield is of interest. In the Epilogue of *Decision in Normandy* D'Este makes it clear that he and Hamilton had a lively debate by letter.

Montgomery's own autobiography, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein* (1958), caused no little controversy. Without doubt it is flawed by Montgomery's relentless pursuit to show himself in a good light. However, that does not mean that he was not one of, if not, the best battlefield commander(s) on the Allied side. *The Memoirs of Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein* is a useful book on a number of counts. Montgomery reproduces primary evidence in the form of notes that he used and letters he wrote, as well as telling the story from his point of view. He gives a fascinating picture of those working around him.

The Longest Day by Cornelius Ryan is an early text in the long line of writers who have presented D-Day by the use of oral history with supporting evidence linking the story.¹³ It is a good example of how eyewitness testimony can be simply woven into a text that holds and fascinates the reader. The use of oral history adds to our knowledge of the events of D-Day, providing detail not usually found in official documents. The best accounts are very human and hold the reader's attention through the power of personal narrative.

The most widely read of these offerings since the mid-1990s was written by the American writer Stephen Ambrose. Two volumes, *D-Day* (1994) and *Citizen Soldier* (1997) have been commercially successful. The first follows the planning and preparation for the invasion to D-Day, while the second book takes up the story from 7 June until the end of the war in May 1945. Major criticisms have been levelled at Ambrose's work. He undoubtedly concentrates heavily on the American experience in Normandy, yet on D-Day the British sea and air landings were not only more successful than the American, but they also put ashore far greater numbers of men and material than planned. Moreover, critics have expressed doubt as to whether or not some events took place as Ambrose wrote of them. As an American writer it can be understood that Ambrose wrote initially for an American market. As Director of the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans he had easy access to its repository of US military oral history. In fact, it seems that a number of American writers including Ambrose have undervalued the contribution of the British Army and its successes from D-Day to the end of the Normandy campaign. For example, Ambrose mentions almost in passing some problems faced on Gold Beach, but fails to mention the bravery of the assault battalions who doggedly continued in their task of reducing strong points and fighting inland to allow passage for the follow-up troops of the second wave, including 56th Brigade. Further, his description of the

Gold Beach topography and defences is clearly inaccurate and replicates mistakes made by earlier American authors.

Exploration of the actual battleground is an important aid in the understanding of what happened, why certain decisions were made and why often enough confusion rather than order seemed to reign. To understand relatively small unit actions from brigade down to company level it is vital, where possible, to visit the actual ground. Richard Holmes has written, 'I had not visited the battlefield (El Alamein) before working on this project, and I am reminded, yet again, of the unwisdom of imagining that one can really understand a battle without seeing the ground.'¹⁴ For this study I therefore undertook a series of visits to Normandy, Belgium and Holland to determine, where possible, the course of actions and difficulties caused by the terrain. Publications that have helped achieve this aim include the *Battle Zone Normandy* series.¹⁵ Most of the authors have some connection with the Royal Military Academy, which, as part of its teaching has undertaken battlefield tours. Well illustrated with photographs, maps and diagrams, both contemporary and modern, these books are ideal for a person who wants to delve into a certain area of the battlefield. However, they give little in the way of extra insight and for the serious historian no attempt has been made to acknowledge the sources of information. Two similar volumes in the *Battleground Europe* series, *Gold Beach-Inland from King*¹⁶ and *Gold Beach-Jig Sector and West*¹⁷ are disappointing since they really offer only an overview with little insight into some of the actions. A useful and more comprehensive battlefield tour book for D-Day and the Normandy landings was Major and Mrs Holt's Battlefield Guide, *Normandy Beaches*.¹⁸

The picture we have of the 1944–45 campaign is deeply problematic as a result of significant gaps and problems with both the primary and secondary sources. This study uses fresh primary sources and the veterans' viewpoint to address a significant gap in our understanding. It closely examines the journey made by a British infantry brigade from relative safety in the UK to speedy mobilization and intensive training, fitting it for close combat from D-Day, to the completion of the liberation of Europe with the capitulation of the German Army in Holland in May 1945. It adds to the understanding of British Army operations in Europe 1944–45, from the level of brigade down, the problems faced and overcome by commanders in the field at different levels, underlines the differences between British and German tactics and adds a significant body of oral history to the historical resource. Together, these viewpoints give a unique worm's-eye view of British operations in the campaign in north-west Europe.

Notes

- 1 J. T. Boon, *History of the South Wales Borderers and The Monmouthshire Regiment*, Part 2: *The 2nd Battalion The South Wales Borderers. D-Day 1944 to 1945*. Pontypool: The Griffin Press, 1955; A. A. Vince, *2nd Battalion The Essex Regiment, The Pompadours. D-Day to VE Day in North West Europe*, Essex Regiment, late 1940s; various authors, *Back Badge* magazine of the Gloucestershire Regiment. Regimental publication, late 1940s to 1984; E. W. Clay, *The Path of the 50th. The Story*

of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division in the Second World War 1939–1945. Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1950; P. Delaforce, *The Polar Bears. Monty's Left Flank. From Normandy to the Relief of Holland with 49th Division*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1995.

- 2 The National Archives (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO) WO 171, War Office: Allied Expeditionary Force, North West Europe (British element: War Diaries, Second World War), (i) WO 171/1380 2 SWB, (ii) WO 171/1295 2 Essex, (iii) WO 171/1298 2 Glosters.
- 3 TNA: PRO WO 171/650 56, Bde War Diary.
- 4 Nigel Taylor, Duty Officer National Archives. E-mail to author, 2 May 2008.
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- 6 Vince, *2nd Battalion The Essex Regiment*.
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- 9 M. Shulman, *Defeat in the West*. Chailey: Masquerade, 1995.
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*In the Wings. Continental War to Home Front.
2nd Battalions Essex, Glosters and South Wales
Borderers. June 1940–December 1943*

This first chapter will describe how the three battalions that eventually formed 56th Independent Infantry Brigade – 2nd Battalions Essex, Glosters and South Wales Borderers – made their wartime journey from early exposure to battle, then service on the Home Front from 1940 to the end of 1943. By then, at least some officers became aware that the battalions would play some part in the invasion of France in 1944.

An important feature of this chapter is to show the differing backgrounds and experiences of some of the men who made up these battalions, and how induction, training and service in the army affected them during this period. It will also show how the use of the army evolved and developed over three-and-a-half years – from an inexperienced army lacking the experience of modern war yet expected to have to fight off a German invasion to an army ready to take on the enemy through one of the most difficult of military operations, an opposed landing on an enemy coast.

During the first half of 1940 all three battalions were involved in operations against the German Army. 2nd South Wales Borders saw action in Norway and the 2nd Essex and 2nd Glosters were involved in the so-called ‘Phoney War’ and then the desperate fighting in France and evacuation of the British Army at Dunkirk. Their service was typical of regular units at this time. They suffered from having to use inadequate weaponry and tactics on behalf of an alliance that was still struggling to shake off the results of pursuing peace at any price after nearly two decades.

The 2nd South Wales Borderers were part of 24th (Guards) Infantry Brigade in Norway, first as part of a unit called Avonforce from 1 to 19 April 1940 and then Rupertforce from 19 April to 13 May 1940.¹ Although the battalion was involved only in a small amount of fighting, it suffered 6 men killed and 13 wounded. Two men won the Distinguished Conduct Medal for gallantry. The conditions were trying, exacerbated by a lack of equipment suitable for the Norwegian weather and limited air support. When this unsuccessful campaign came to an end, the 2nd South Wales Borderers were embarked on the cruiser HMS *Effingham* and were lucky to escape without casualties when the vessel struck a rock and was wrecked on 17 May 1940. The battalion had to be transferred to another destroyer before evacuation home to a nation now living in uncertainty and near chaos compared with the situation of only a few weeks before.² One newly trained soldier, joining 2nd South Wales Borderers on their return to Britain, provides this interesting vignette:

I was called up on 16th October 1939 to go to Brecon. I lived in Swansea. The food was absolutely awful; the numbers of people being called up swamped them. We had a lot of lads

from Lancashire, they couldn't understand us and we couldn't understand them! But it worked itself out! I joined the 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers in Scotland in 1940 when the Battalion came back from Norway. Rather a strange brigade there – a battalion of the Scots Guards, South Wales Borderers and the Foreign Legion!³

The 2nd Essex were present during the Phoney War in France and then the retreat and evacuation at Dunkirk. Most men came off along the Mole at Dunkirk in good order on 30 May 1940 and were evacuated to England. However, the confusion that reigned during the evacuation is apparent from the regimental history: 'the Battalion was dispersed from Aberdeen to Bulford. By 10 June 1940 Battalion HQ was at Newcastle-under-Lyme and consisted of only 3 officers and 37 other ranks.'⁴ It took another fortnight for the battalion to gather to near full size of 23 officers and 895 other ranks. Peter Giggens, then a newly trained recruit to the Essex Regiment, was caught up in the chaos of a battalion returning from Dunkirk and having to quickly reorganize:

I was called up in 1939 and after training and roadblock duties near Billericay, was sent to Dover to join 2nd Essex in France. We paraded daily at Dover Harbour then told we were not going over that day. After some days we noticed some soldiers coming back from France and one day some wounded being unloaded from the ships. Finally we were briefed about what was happening at Dunkirk and sent to Stoke on Trent with some of those evacuated at Dunkirk, then on to Keele Hall where the Battalion was reformed.⁵

Another new 2nd Essex soldier, Charles Benford, was similarly on his way to Dover at the same time when his progress was checked. He had completed four months' training before he was sent on a draft from Billericay Station to Dover in May 1940. He was expecting to go by boat to France to join 2nd Essex and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) already fighting the Germans. On the first night he was billeted in Archer Hall, Billericay, having previously loaded his kit bags on to a train to Dover. The following morning the officer in charge fell ill and was taken to hospital. Unfortunately, nobody informed Warley Barracks of this event; so, another day later, having slept on a hard floor covered by only one blanket with his haversack for a pillow and nothing to eat, Benford waited for orders. In the end the soldiers prevailed upon the senior corporal to go to the police station for information. The police allowed the corporal to phone Warley Barracks and explain the situation. In due course an officer arrived to take charge. Later a 15cwt lorry arrived with food in hay boxes. 'Then another officer arrived. He addressed us and told us it would be doubtful if we would continue to Dover as they were having a spot of bother. We would have to stay there until further orders.'⁶ Following his complaint to the officer about the hard floor and having only one blanket, another lorry arrived carrying straw palliasses and two extra blankets each. To keep them occupied they were detailed in parties of four to go to the bus stop, get on the buses and check people's identity cards. Eventually they received an entraining order and went to Newcastle-under-Lyme, where they were billeted in Keele Hall. There