



Photo by George Bates

Normandy 2008

OBITUARY

Lance Sjt Raymond Hubert Rayner

Army No. 5382222

Born 2nd November 1919

Died 2nd April 2015

Known to all as 'Tich' Rayner

by

Penny Howard Bates

The death has been announced of a much loved and respected veteran of the 52nd Oxford & Bucks Light Infantry, Sjt 'Tich' Rayner, who also trained with the 'Coup de main' assault force who captured and held what became known as Pegasus Bridge and the Orne River Bridge in Normandy. This glider-borne force was part of the 6th Airborne Division that spearheaded the Allied invasion of France on D-Day 6th June 1944, under the command of Major John Howard DSO.

Tich was born 2nd November 1919 in Aylesbury, Bucks, and being the smallest of his mother's thirteen babies, she announced "what a tichy!" thereby giving her new son a nickname for life. Tich joined the local Bucks Bn in 1935 as a boy soldier aged 16. When war was declared in 1939 all Territorials were mobilised and Tich was keen to begin training. Promoted to Corporal, he was part of the BEF (British Expeditionary Force) sent to France in April 1940. Tich's unit, the 1st Bucks Bn found themselves at Hazebrouck and lost many men. Ordered to retreat to the beaches at Dunkirk, he was successfully evacuated back to England.

Tich was serving in Ireland in 1942 when the call came for volunteers to join the newly formed Airborne Forces and he literally jumped at the opportunity, breaking a leg on a jump during training for the Airborne which put him off parachuting – but he was one of the few Glider Troops who wore the Parachute Qualification Badge. He was then transferred to 'D' Coy, 2nd Ox & Bucks. L.I. under the command of Major John Howard - described by his men and not always kindly, as a sports and fitness fanatic. Tich found favour because he was a boxer from boyhood, and said that the Major sometimes got into the ring with him.

Tich earned the second nickname of 'Slap' due to his boxing style and was an enthusiastic member of the boxing team. It was nothing for him to run 6 miles before breakfast and then join in the strenuous training for active service required by the Major.

He took part in the legendary march from coastal training in Ilfracombe back to their camp in Bulford at the end of August 1942 when 'D' Coy came in first in the Regiment to reach camp. Tich said that it was only him and his best friend Pete Barwick who managed to go out dancing the night they arrived back in Bulford!

Pete Barwick now lies in the quiet cemetery in Hérouvillette, for he died liberating that village on 7th June 1944. Tich always had tears in his eyes as he laid a wreath on Pete's grave.

But Tich loved dancing, and met his wife Joan at a dance and they married in January 1944. Their only child Janet was born in May 1945.

After two years of training, the zeal and fitness of D Coy meant that they were selected for the prestige task of securing two vital bridges across the Caen canal and the River Orne, to be the first Allied soldiers to arrive in occupied France landing by gliders, three by each bridge just after midnight on 6th June 1944, the first action of D-Day. But Tich and his '22 platoon' missed the action at Pegasus Bridge because the pilot of the Halifax tug that was towing

their glider made a navigation error and released Glider No 4 in the wrong place. There was cloud cover as well and the glider pilots struggled to recognize any landmarks beneath them from their well-practiced training. Spotting a river bridge they made a perfect landing but it was a bridge near Varraville over the river Dives, very near to the area of Normandy that had been deliberately flooded by the Germans to deter an invasion force. The small bridge was defended by a token force of German soldiers but Platoon Cdr Brian Priday gave the order to overcome them and take the bridge. This done, Priday realised that they would have missed the action that they were supposed to have taken part in at the canal bridge, so he took bearings in order to find their way back to Ranville where they knew the Regiment were due to set up Regimental HQ later on D-Day.

A recon party was sent ahead into a nearby wood and a short time later they heard Plt Cdr Tony Hooper's voice approaching them but talking unnaturally loud. Taking cover Priday saw that Hooper had his hands up and was being prodded along by a German soldier with a gun. Priday took aim and shouted "Jump Tony!" and fired at the German as Hooper leapt aside. But as the German fell down dead, his finger must have squeezed the trigger of his gun and the bullet hit Tich Rayner in his upper arm and then deflected towards Priday, fortunately ricocheting off his map-case. However painful at the time, this incident would provide Tich with his reputation as being "the only British soldier to be shot on D-Day by a dead German!"

The group then set off across country for Ranville, at times wading through the swamp with their guns carried over their heads and hauling poor Tich along with toggle ropes they had tied around his chest. After more close shaves with German patrols and spending a night in a barn, they eventually found the Regt. HQ in Ranville and were joyfully welcomed by the rest of D Coy who had also re-joined the Regt after handing over the two captured bridges to forces that landed on the beaches on D-Day. Tich had his wounds dressed and was evacuated back to England.

Tich made a full recovery after a spell in hospital and re-joined the Bn in time for the Ardennes offensive in December 1944/January 1945. Tich was a Provost Sergeant working with the RSM when he was part of 'Operation Varsity' and the Rhine Crossing in March 1945. He had an appalling job, tasked to recover bodies on the battlefield from gliders, retrieve dog-tags for identification and organise burial parties. The distressing sights he witnessed stayed with him for life. He'd had enough by then and elected to be demobbed in 1946 and return to civilian life, where he took up painting and decorating both in Aylesbury and Oxford. In the mid-1950's Tich went into business with a partner doing building and decorating work. It was a successful business and he did well. He became a Freemason in the 1960's and attended meetings into old age for as long as his health permitted.

For many years Tich buried his memories of the war not wanting to be reminded of those times, but he returned to Normandy with Joan for the 50th Anniversary of D-Day in June 1994. From then on Tich attended many of the annual pilgrimages to Bénouville in Normandy becoming a very popular and respected member of the 'Coup de main' group which, after Major John Howard's death in 1999, was led by his daughter Penny and her husband George. For many years Tich was assisted by the Baulk family of Bletchley to return to Normandy, and became a volunteer at Bletchley Park where Dave & Linda Baulk along with their son Geoff had set up a 'Pegasus Bridge' display in one of the huts. Tich became somewhat of a star performer giving talks to visitors and school groups on his wartime experiences. His final visit to Pegasus Bridge was in 2012 with the Baulks. He leaves behind daughter Janet, 2 grandchildren, 5 great-grandchildren and 1 great-great grandson. This alone is surely as fine a legacy as any man would want to be remembered by.

But Tich Rayner's memory will forever associated with Pegasus Bridge, being trained extensively for that assault and despite being on Glider No.4 which never made it to Pegasus Bridge, they landed by the river Dives, and this resulted in Tich being "the only British soldier on D-Day to be shot by a dead German".

He was a fine and brave soldier who did his duty for his country however dangerous or distressing that turned out to be. But Tich was also a most kind and gentle man, sincere and always ready for a laugh. Such men are all too few, and Tich will be sadly missed by all his friends and family.

"Ham and Jam"