

**Interview**

with

**MR. ALEC WARDMAN**

and

**Pupils of Lady Hawkins' School, Kington**

*Captain Alec Wardman commanded the Carrier Platoon of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Herefordshire Regiment during the liberation of Europe in 1944 and 1945. He went to Lucton School, where he was in the Cadet Corps. Before the war he was training to become a teacher at Saltley Training College, but was called up in May (presumably of 1940). The students were rushed through their exams, which he passed. He joined the Warwicks, and went to Officer Cadet Training Unit at Sandhurst. He was there for 4 months, and was then commissioned into the King's Shropshire Light Infantry and went to Shrewsbury. He then went to Northern Island in a carrier platoon with the Herefords, then continued to work with carrier platoons in the UK. In 1944 he landed in Normandy on D-Day +7 with the 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, where they arrived in 'Liberty' boats. He was in charge of all the rear vehicles as his battalion fought into France. The battalion went through Cheux and up onto Hill 112, then on to Pegasus Bridge. It then went on to the outskirts of Caen where they were attacked in a corn field, and then they went across to Bordeaux. He saw lots of action in France, before heading North following the retreating German troops. They arrived in Amiens, then had to force their way through crowds of cheering Belgians. On 4th September they reached Antwerp, then continued to chase German troops west of the River Maas. He ended the war in Palestine.*

*Striping a Bren Gun at Saltley College; carrier platoons; flame throwers; water proofing; Carden-loyd carrier; landing with liberty boats in France; fighting into France; death of his friend Paul Barneby; Pegasus bridge; bivouacking; 'schu' mines; an attack on a lane near Bordeaux, and a mine field; life inside the carrier; Taurus bridge; Bercy; Flers; Flers memorial to the 11th Armoured division; Flers reaction to Herefordshire people today; Collaborating women having their heads shaved in Belgium; Antwerp; Battle for Arnhem; eating German food rations; freezing conditions near Maas.*

**[Recording starts 0:20]**

... earlier years before the War.

Q. What was your ambition before the War?

A. Well, I was going to be a teacher. It was the one thing my schoolteacher recommended to me, that I became a teacher.

Q. How did you get into the army then?

A. I was called up into the army like a lot of other chaps were. But we were called up. I was at Saltley Training College then and we were called up before the Easter break. We were called up in May, I think. It would be May probably and we took a rushed exam, but we didn't know whether we'd got our teacher's certificate. I didn't learn that I had got mine until somewhere about December of that year. Normally you knew in the July. So I was sweating a bit, waiting to get the news whether we had got it or not, or whether I would have to go back to college after the War. But nobody thought the War was going to last that long. While I had been at Lucton School I had been in the Cadet Corps there and passed what was known as Certificate A and Certificate B in machine gun, so when I went to Saltley I automatically went in with the corps there which was part of the Birmingham University line. But I was sergeant major of the corps there and I was the only sergeant major in the corps in Birmingham. I picked up quite a lot there.

**[2:28]**

I must tell you one thing that was very laughable. I went with some others on a course to Budrooke Barracks before the War started. Now, we had a Bren gun at Saltley College which the army hadn't got; it was the original Bren that went to the Birmingham Small Arms Factory for them to make the prototypes. So I knew everything about a Bren. I've always been mechanically minded, but I can strip it out as easy as can be. We got to Warwick and we got out the first morning and the sergeant started to talk to us about the Bren and he said, "I don't know much about them, I'll be quite honest; we've only just got them." He stripped it out into its four main parts and, strangely enough, he picked on me to do it. Well, I whipped it not only into its four main parts; I broke it down still further. And he looked at me and he said, "Where the hell did you learn about that?" I said, "Well, we've got the original Bren at Saltley College. I can strip him down with my eyes shut." He says, "You know all about it?" I say, "Well, I know a fair bit." "Right," he says, "you carry on and instruct the platoon." And it was a platoon of recruits, 30 lads. He said to the corporal, "You look after 'em, I'm going to the mess for a drink." And he left me to it.

But what I wanted to say was this. When I was called up, I was called up into the Warwicks, went out the first day on weapon training and who should be in charge but the sergeant (who was now a sergeant major) that I'd trained on the Bren. He took one look at me and he said, "Have I seen you

before?" And I said, "Yes." He says, "Where?" and I said, "Last year." And ... Oh, I'd better not put this on the tape.

[4:47]

Q. You can.

A. He said, "Oh, I know who you are now. You're the bugger who taught me all I know about a Bren gun." He said, "Well, you can carry on teaching 'em now." And I always laugh about that because I never thought he'd recognise me and then he said to me – he was our platoon sergeant major, and he said – "You've done OTC training, then." And I said, "Aye, I've got certificate A and certificate B." He said, "Well, are you down to go to OCTU?" (that was officer cadet training unit where they were training officers) and I said, "No, not that I know of." "Well," he said, "you'd better report to the Company Commander and tell him you ought to be." And I didn't go, I didn't bother. I said, "Well, they had all my particulars when I came the first day I went there. If they can't sort that out, what the hell do they take 'em for." Excuse my language, but I do use it occasionally. The next day he marched me down to the Company office on a charge of not reporting to the Company Commander and I then was put on the list and shortly afterwards I ended up at Sandhurst, which was the top OCTU. But it was the Warwicks (which was Monty's old regiment as well, you see) and I went down to Sandhurst. I had four months there. I was then commissioned into the KSLI (the King's Shropshire Light Infantry) and went to Shrewsbury where I went down with the transport platoon and I had quite an enjoyable time there.

[6:42]

Then I was posted over to the Herefords in Northern Ireland. I spent the first part there with a carrier platoon. But I didn't last long with them; I was given charge of the transport when they found out I was a good transport officer. I had the transport all the time then until we ended up in Yorkshire where we were training on the Wolds and that and I applied for a transfer to REME (the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) because they were short of people and I was, as I say, mechanically minded and I could use my hands and everything. It annoyed the CO, so he transferred me to a rifle company, which, after being a technical officer in charge of all the battalion's vehicles, was a bit annoying. About two weeks later they transferred me to the carrier platoon because Paul Barnaby (the one whose death you've got), he told the CO straight: he couldn't get any luck out of the new transport officer because he knew nothing about track vehicles and he was entitled to a technical officer with his platoon (the carriers), so he got me then and I was responsible for all the track vehicles in the battalion, of which there were 13 in the carrier platoon; there were seven in the motor platoon; and there were seven in the anti-tank platoon. And then they issued one to each company commander, so it was quite a number of track vehicles. I went over to Normandy as that, but, as you've got the story, Paul was killed ... Well, he was wounded the first day in action and he died on the way back to the hospital.

[9:10]

Q. Can I stop you there, Alec. Could you just tell us about the build-up to going over to France in 1944 and your expectations and just build up the story of the first week or so and perhaps tell us about Paul Barnaby in that way?

A. Yes. Excuse me, I've got to stop and think a little bit: it is 50 years ago.

Q. Sure. You talked about the liberty ships, for instance and it must have been very busy.

A. Well, I can tell you something else. In England I was sent on a flame-thrower course. It was the first flame-thrower course at Winterbourne Gunner and nobody knew a damn thing about them, bar the chap who built it, and then after that I went back and went on what they called a tactical flame-thrower course, which nobody knew anything about the tactics for it either. They'd got no experience of it. But I ended up ... I was the flamethrower expert not only for the division but for the corps, which is three divisions normally. I also went on waterproofing course – at Harrogate that was; I always remember that one – and I came away from there with 99% marks. So I ended up as a waterproofing expert. Anybody that had problems with waterproofing contacted me, because we did a lot of training. We did our training into the landing ... We got permission to use one landing craft a day from Grimsby; there were three in there for overhaul and we could use one every day to practise landing at Cleethorpes. Well, we used to run in for nearly a mile on the flats there, you see; they are absolutely ... But in between, there are deep runs which were eight and ten feet deep which meant we used to have to go in and haul them out. My pal (a chap called Drummie Lowe(?), another officer who was with me there), he and I were the only ones allowed to do that. We used to come out from the water, up to the golf clubhouse where the cooks had got dixies of tea and jars of rum. We used to have half a can of tea and half a can of rum. By the end of the day you was three parts cut – if you know what I mean by that. This was in January we were doing it, by the way, and everybody got soaked. The ones landing got soaked as well because you stood up in the vehicles with your foot on the accelerator, so when you hit the cold water you didn't pull your foot away because you'd got to keep the engine revving to get out.

[12:39]

Then we went down to Aldershot and I had to do a lot of experimental waterproofing down there with what was called a Carden-Loyd carrier, which was issued to the anti-tanks instead of the ordinary carrier. A Carden-Loyd carrier had the engine at the back and the crew could get in from the back and there are seats along the side. They were a similar build except for that, but they hadn't found a method of waterproofing them; they kept on drowning, as we called it, which meant you'd got to haul them out with a winch then. We eventually ended up with part of a non-returnable petrol can (they were four-gallon square cans and they were only thin metal; you chucked them away, sort of thing); I made a screen for the distributor. They were Ford engines and the distributor was at the back and what was happening, the water was washing round and flooding the waterproofing off the distributor. All

we did was put a bit of tin there and it stopped that and we could take a Carden-Loyd in – there was a ramp and everything down at Aldershot out in a big lake in a park, and we ended up we could take a Carden-Loyd in – take it round in a circle and back out. Then a gang from the War Office came down to see it and within 24 hours every unit had got these – I don't know what you'd call them, masks or flaps or what – to fit to their Carden-Loyds before the invasion.

The next thing was fitting the waterproofing to the carriers and that was done on the parade ground at Aldershot by teams of REME welders. They had to weld brackets on and then we put a two-foot high metal screen on the top and waterproofed that all the way round. So we in the carriers used to drive in dry where the ones in the trucks drove in wet.

[15:15]

Q. When you landed for proper, I think it was D-Day plus 13 ----

A. Something like that.

Q. ---- can you tell us about how dry you kept due to your waterproofing and also about what you saw when you came ashore and how you felt perhaps?

A. Yes. There is a little story about the landings in actual fact. We came in with the liberty boats and they'd held us in the Channel for about three days so that we actually ran more or less out of food. We had boxing matches on the hatch tops [check – 15:53] and that to keep amused and eventually we got there; we discovered we were going to be offloaded by cranes (because we were dumped in the hold with all the vehicles) onto what was known as a Rhino. Now, a Rhino consisted of big metal tanks; they'd be about 6 by 4 by 4 sort of thing, all bolted together and at the back they ran two pieces out and on the end of each piece they've got a big outboard engine mounted with propellers on to propel them. At the front you've got a ramp, which was a sort of fixed ramp, so when you came in that ramp hit the deck, hit the sand and that was it; you'd got to get off there.

Well, our ramp, one of the guys (they'd got two engineers on these engines), one of the clots, dropped a rope into the propeller, stopped the engine and we were heading for the beach one minute and the next minute we were starting to circle round because only one engine was driving and we were right by the mouth of the Orne and on the opposite side of the Orne on the headland was a damn big gun and he was starting to shell hell out of us because we were going right round in front of him. And they brought up two Canadian rocket ships and they could fire about a hundred rockets at a time and they came up and they gave us cover while we circled right out to sea; we had to circle and come back in. In the meantime I'd got some mechanics with me on board; we had discovered that you could tip these engines up out of the water. So we tipped the damn thing up and cut the rope off. These engineers were stuck flabbergasted; they didn't know what to do. So when we came in, we came right into dry land and – I'm going to be quite honest – I jumped off onto dry land and we drove the vehicles off straight onto dry land and we only had one vehicle down and that was somebody who was being very knowledgeable. It was the jeep belonging to the transport officer who had taken over from me.

He saw the others going off into shallow water and he told his driver to take his waterproofing off. And he drowned his engine and it was the only vehicle that drowned and we left him to it. We drove up the beach; it was all under fire, right, from these guns, and, oh, I think it was about a hundred yards up on a little road there's a square on the left, a long, tree-lined square, and we drove in round there and I gave the order to take off waterproofing. That meant you took the waterproofing off the distributor; that was the only thing you took it off so that it could breathe. And then we followed the route-marking up to where we bivouacked in an orchard.

**[19:29]**

We bivouacked there for about three or four days before we went into battle. There we went past places as they were still fighting, but you just had to keep going; that was it. We didn't even know where we were going. We were routed by the people who were already there. I always remember, I went up into the next field and there were some squaddies; they were the TA from Knighton, artillery lads, and I knew some of the lads – an absolute coincidence. Then, from there, the battle plan was we were to go down through Cheux, over Hill 112 and then down and capture a bridge across the Odon. It wasn't as easy as they thought. I was fortunately left out of battle and in charge of all the rear vehicles and we were bivouacked in a wood and the first row of guns was just behind us in the wood and when the initial assault went in there were over 5000 guns firing, not to mention things like the Warspite, the Navals, these things came over, they were as big as dustbins and didn't they make a noise!

That was our introduction to battle. I didn't even go into battle. But the battalion itself went down through Cheux and up on to Hill 112, which is one of the famous spots in the War in Normandy. Paul Barnaby, who was the carrier platoon commander, was told to reccy to a place called Estry, but no further. Well he did go further than he was supposed to and he saw a German soldier lying wounded on the side of the road who shouted for water and he got out of his carrier to give him water and a Spandau opened up at close range, shot him badly and the driver. Well, they turned round and got 'em back; the driver died and so did Paul. And I had to take over the carrier platoon and I'd never done any tactical work with the carriers; I'd always been mechanical, so it was rather a shock to have to do it.

**[22:22]**

Then, the next place we went into action was what is known as Pegasus Bridge. We crossed over Pegasus Bridge in the late evening and bivouacked alongside a hedge. Well, it wasn't a hedge because it was about 25 yards through it; it was all bushes. They didn't bother to make a decent hedge. I always remember that night because there were some horrible flying beetles which, if they stung you, you came up in terrific lumps. A lot of the lads were blinded when they were bitten in the face. The next morning we went in on the attack and we went in on our own. There were supposed to be three armoured divisions going in and there was a hold-up at Pegasus Bridge, which, I gather, was with the Guards Armoured Division. I can remember going down and there was a square wood on the right-hand-side and we went down past this and we were getting dive-bombed all the time. And a lot of our

vehicles had parked in this shadow of the woods, got bombed, including our three-inch mortar truck – a three-tonne truck that carried three tonnes of ammunition, the mortars. And it'd got my personal belongings on it as well, so I lost all those. Anyhow, we went down, we went under a railway bridge, turned left and there was another high embankment with another railway line on; this was a network of railway lines. And that's where we had a lot of shoe bombs were dropped on us by these planes.

[24:47]

The shoe bomb is a nasty little thing. If you tread on it or near it it blows your foot off. And I always remember it was the one place where we threw the motorbikes away because we'd got to get over this embankment and go, you know ... No way would you get the bikes up and over a railway line, and we'd found they were useless anyhow, as far as that goes. We went on up over this railway line and the Mons and the KSLI were behind us; when we came out there was an enormous cornfield stretched for miles, or seemed to, and it sloped up and then there were trees on the ridge and over on our right there were tall factory chimneys; it was a place called Collombelles on the outskirts of Caen and Jerry had got his OPs up there so you can guess we really got it and the tanks did too. We lost 300 tanks in this enormous cornfield because they were up above the corn and there's a bang and they went. The Germans used to call our tanks (the Shermans) Ronsons, "Light first time," because they would. One shell into 'em and up they went. They were petrol fuelled and not very heavily armoured either.

Anyhow, we carried on as best we could and then the rain started and that was it. They pulled the tanks back straight away and us, otherwise we would have been left there and we'd have never got out of the cornfields because of the rain on the ground. It was just a sea of mud. I always remember coming back out; we came back past some of the gliders that had taken the airborne troops in and we stopped in one place not far from some of these gliders, and I always remember a couple of lads came running down and I recognised them: they were two lads who left us when we were in Ireland and joined the parachute regiment. It was a coincidence just meeting them there.

[27:17]

We came back out then and we moved right across towards Bordeaux. We bivouacked in a field there and that was the first place I came across a thing called calvados. I don't know whether you've ever heard of it; it is apple brandy – Bulmers make it now – and it's pretty strong. A couple of lads who'd come back from the first attack at Cheux had found a bottle of this calvados – they didn't know what it was – and they got into the corn where we'd bivouacked and they emptied the bottle between them and the doc (that's the medical officer) had to pump 'em out or they'd have been dead. Somebody fortunately went looking for them and found them.

We had quite a few days and that's the first place I got a decent wash. We'd got some artillery chaps just over the hedge from us and they'd made themselves a shower out of a non-returnable petrol tin with holes knocked in the bottom and they'd got a hand-pump, you see, and they'd got a big tank over an open fire and they used to pump the water up in the tank and you had your shower, sort of

thing. We went from there for the attack, the next attack – I forget what we called it. Anyhow, we went in up a narrow track which ended in a lane with high banks and we were supposed to take the Germans' first line of defence, which were sort of outposts and then wait for, I think it was, a 500 bomber raid on the main lines. Well, apparently in England the fog had come down so we ended up sitting there with no bombers. Well, we were sitting in what had been Jerry's front line and he knew exactly what was there so he really laid into us. I had one of my best friends killed in the lane and another one Drummie Lowe(?), the one I mentioned already, went what we call bomb happy and was sent back to England; he didn't know what had happened, where he'd been or anything. He never came back to us; they wouldn't let him. Well, I know it was rock, shaley rock, and you couldn't dig into it and I know we pulled my carrier up by a hedgerow which had got a bit of a bank to it so it gave us a bit of space under the carrier and we lay under the carrier while he shelled us. Well, then we were told we had got to move on. The bombers did come over but they didn't do much; they got the wrong places I think. And we started off. And the first thing I noticed were a lot of our rifle company lads in a sort of sunken field on the left-hand-side of the road and a lot of them had got their feet blown off and the others were just standing still. So we knew there were schu mines in there but we didn't know what other mines might be there. Anyhow, we took the carriers in, went carefully; all we hit were schu mines, thank God, and we got them all out. Then we went on from there ----

**[31:36]**

Q. Alec, is it right that in the carriers you padded the seats under so that if the mines exploded ----

A. You hadn't got room to pad anything, no. You'd no room to pad anything under the seats. You'd got your seats down low.

Q. What was it like actually being in a carrier whilst under fire or just moving around in general? What was life like when you were moving on the road?

A. You hadn't got much. You could stand up; that's about all you could do. We used to eat on the move; that was very often the only time you got to eat. And we cooked our own food. All the rifle companies, the sort of foot soldiers, they had cooks back behind who cooked them a meal and brought it up in insulated containers at night and first thing in the morning. But we cooked our own. We used to be issued with a 14-man pack. That was a box of food, a wooden box it was, not cardboard, thank God, and you'd got enough food in there for 14 men or enough food for one man for 14 days. Well, that came up at a night and then I had to distribute it to my sections. I started off with four sections of three carriers and, due to casualties, we hadn't got the crews to crew them all so one section of carriers was left back with the cooks' wagons with a lance corporal driver in charge of them and they formed protection for B Estlen(?), that's the cooks' wagons, while they also kept the carriers in good repair. If we had any trouble with a carrier we got on the blower back to B Estlen(?) and the corporal would bring ... and he'd carry her up, swap 'em over and take the other one back and get it fixed. So that's ... I had just the three sections with me, like. I've lost myself now.

[34:22]

Q. That's fine. You were talking about the food and movement and also I was wondering, not just about food and what the food was like and what you and your mates thought of the food, but the reactions of the French people and the people that, as you move through the countries ... And also about sleep and things like that. Did you get much sleep? You must have been on the move all the time.

A. You didn't get much sleep. You didn't. That's why Paul Barneby died, because the doc couldn't keep him awake. If he could have kept him awake he'd have lived, he said. But anyhow, we got down to ... Oh, dear.

Q. Is it Flers ...

A. No. We took some time to get to Flers. [short pause] Sorry I'm keeping you waiting, but the old memory doesn't work very well at times and yet I can visualise the places. It's thinking of the names. Now, this is it: recaptured St. Martin-des-Besaces, where there is now a very good museum. Basically, the 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured museum. By this time we had lost over 200 men, either dead or wounded and we had a stroke of luck at St. Martin. Our reconnaissance threads [check - 37:02] – and I'm going to read this – “located a track which ran for about ten miles through the Forest l'Eveque and was not protected by the Germans.” In fact, what happened was they intercepted a conversation between two German divisional commanders asking who was looking after the track and nobody was, “And in less than two hours the whole of our division poured down the track and broke right through the Germans, and that was when we forced a crossing over the Souleuvre,” which they call Taurus Bridge now. I've got some photographs of it somewhere.

[37:51]

Q. Because of the bull and Taurus is the bull.

A. Yes, that's why it's called the Taurus Bridge. For the next fortnight our time was passed in combat with two German SS divisions and one tank division. German tanks were everywhere and these were mostly Panthers or Tigers, the big ones. I don't think some of them knew what they were doing actually. I met one on a track, he turned tail around and so did I. No use a carrier trying to tackle a Tiger tank. We ourselves were completely exhausted as we'd had very little sleep for three weeks and we were short of men, who had become casualties. We learned afterwards that we (and when I say 'we' I'm talking about the 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division) had destroyed the second SS divisions, had destroyed the two SS divisions and most of the tanks. I can see the place now, a place called Bercy(?). I can tell you a little story about that.

Bercy(?) was down in a very deep valley. The KSLI and the Mons ... The Herefords had fought to the top of this, the hill, looking into this valley. The Mons and the KSLI went through us and secured the ... Well, they didn't get right up the hill on the other side but they were a fair way up. Down in the bottom was a church and half a dozen houses, a little place called Bercy(?), but to get down to it, you went down a zig-zag down this slope. There were no hedges, no protection or

anything. They were having trouble with the Germans were coming up a road in the bottom of the valley and attacking the Mons and KSLI from the rear. So I sent down with one section the carriers and a troop of tanks to guard this road up the valley at night because that was when they were coming up. The first night we went down we were in a wood just behind the cross-roads and Jerry tanks started coming up and the one tank opened fire on him so they didn't move; they went back. But when we came to come out in the morning, you came out before it was dawn because they could see you going up this road and, I said to the tanks, "For God's sake, don't start your engines up for ten minutes after we're gone. Give us ten minutes to crawl up the bank." And we went off quietly and we hadn't got half way up the bank and they started the tank engines and Jerry absolutely pisted this slope all the way up. And when we got back to the tallin(?) [check - 41:39] we looked at the carriers and ... We used to carry our blankets on the back rolled up, and on the back of my carrier I'd got a charging engine for charging up the radio batteries and I'd got two cases of ... two packs of food and then we'd got all our blankets wrapped up and rolled on the top of them. When we pulled the blankets off, you'd have thought the moths had been into them; shrapnel and bullets had gone into the blankets and gone round and round and chewed them all up.

[42:19]

The quartermaster wasn't very pleased the second night when the same thing happened again. And the third night, a couple of the tank chaps got badly wounded and their own commander couldn't patch 'em up; I had to go and do it for him. But that was the last night we were down there, I'm pleased to say.

- Q. Alec, could you ... We've got the picture of Flers memorial for the 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured division. Could you just tell us a little bit about what happened there and why Herefordshire veterans, Herefordshire regiment veterans go back there year on year and why that's so special for the Herefords?
- A. The memorial is special to the division. It is a divisional war memorial and I did all the collecting with the Herefordshire regiment for money to build it. I can tell you it cost us ... You'll think this is nothing. It cost £4000 and the granite it's built of is the same granite that General de Gaulle's memorial is; it is the red granite. The town of Flers did all the rest. St-Georges, which is the area it's in, gave the ground and Flers has maintained it; they put the trees in and they look after it; they'll do that forever more. But it is our one thing in Normandy that all the division try and get to. I was organizing visits for the Herefordshire Regiment because I was fortunate to go on the first meeting with the people of Flers after the War. I was billeted with probably the foremost fighting soldier in Flers. He was a lad with the underground and he used to run all their messages and he joined us when we were going through Flers and went with us right up to Antwerp and then he was called back to France and he ended up in French IndoChina and you will probably never have heard of this. You might have heard the name of a place called Dien Bien Phu; it was famous for the last stand of the French and

Michel (that's his name) was a sergeant major and he was at that fort – it was only a fort – and he got the chaps out from it and he's got their top honour, not the Croix de Guerre, ... Oh, dear.

[46:26]

Q. Legion d'honneur.

A. The legion of honour. His eldest daughter, as a matter of fact, went to a special school run by the Legion of Honour people, and she is a television bigwig in Paris now and she's actually been in this school. She came over to us for a week when she was about twelve and I went down to Southampton and picked her up from there. The whole family has been over, like, but ...

Q. Alec, how do people react when Herefordshire people go over to Flers today?

A. Well, they always give us a banquet there. Oh, yes, if you've got the bull up, ... I don't know whether I've got my bull badge with me. It should be in here. Wait a minute, I think it's here. **That's** what you wear and everybody recognises you. Even the small children know what the bull is, and it's amazing that they don't forget you. That's ... I'm sorry, I'd forgot about **this** one. This is the one they gave in 1990 from Cannes, where they built a big new museum. It's not officially a medal but they call it a medal. But that's ... This is what I wore: "Alec Wardman. First Herefordshire". You can pass these round.

Q. Alec, I was just thinking beyond, beyond Flers, you then went with the ...

A. Oh, we ----

Q. Did you go into Belsen and places like that or around?

[48:50]

A. In where?

Q. Some of the camps. You saw some of the camps, did you?

A. Oh, Lord, yes. We went from Flers, we started out and advanced to Antwerp ... No, we went as far as the Seine and just before the Seine we were given a break. I think we had about three days, if I recollect rightly. It was the only break we ever had. We were waiting for an infantry division to force a crossing over the River Seine and get a bridge built. When that was built, we went off and over it. On the way there, though, I must tell you, we had an argument with an American division who were trying to use the road that was allocated to us. In the end they had to let us through but we found out later, although they'd got American markings on vehicles, they were General Leclerc's French Division who wanted the quickest road to Paris and they were on it, but they were on the wrong road; they had to give way to us and we went on then.

We went along what was known as the Falaise Pocket. Well, we were on the southern edge of that and the Germans were retreating north of us and you could see them tearing along the roads. Mind, a lot of their vehicles were horse-drawn. We pushed on through Argentan and Gace to a place called l'Aigle. That's where we rested for three days. We were able to maintain our vehicles, which

had been on the move for over five weeks with very little chance of maintenance, of doing anything to them because they were on the move all the time.

**[51:09]**

Oh, 29<sup>th</sup> August we crossed the Seine at a place called Vernon and began the long trip towards Antwerp. On the evening of the 29<sup>th</sup> the order came to advance with the words "It's moonlight tonight," in other words, "You've got moonlight, you can see how to go." But it wasn't, it was pouring with rain and there was no moon that night. We were moving on byroads little more than cart tracks in places. Sometimes we found the German vehicles had joined our column. They were quickly dispatched when discovered. The next morning at 5 am our leading tanks entered Amiens. And I just mention in passing, we saw what I call one of the cruellest dealings with the Belgian people which was to take Belgian women who had associated with the German soldiers (they brought them up to where we were resting for a couple of hours) and shaved off all their hair, this being standard procedure in most places after they were liberated. However, on we went, sometimes having to force our way through crowds of cheering Belgians who blocked the road and streets. We were helped by the Belgian underground (or White Brigade, as they called themselves). They would fire their weapons over the heads of the crowds to make them get to the sides of the road. They also took care of the hundreds of prisoners which we captured as we could not spare men to look after them. We had to keep going. The Germans were retreating as fast as they could to the line of the River Scheldt where they might be able to stop our advance. But on 4<sup>th</sup> September our leading troops entered Antwerp. Some bridges had been blown by the Germans but a Belgian engineer officer led the lead-in tanks via a little-used bridge into the city. By midday one squadron of tanks had reached the docks, which are probably the largest in Europe, and reported that they appeared undamaged.

**[53:44]**

There were several fierce battles in this city as the infantry regiments proceeded to clear it of Germans, prisoners being held in Antwerp Zoo and the Germans made a protest to the League of Nations about their prisoners being put in a zoo. It was the only place we'd got to put them.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured division had made a record advance, as in six days since crossing the Seine it had covered 340 miles. All the vehicles, including the tanks, had travelled on their own wheels and tracks, some 580 miles since we broke out alongside the Americans on July 30<sup>th</sup>. After four days in Antwerp the order to move on came and we headed into Holland and the battle for Arnhem. The Guards Armoured Division was to make the direct advance to capture the bridges at Nijmegen and Arnhem. We were to protect the right flank, the side from which any German counter-attack was expected. In other words, we went up between them and the Rhine. Our column advanced to capture a bridge over the Wilhelm canal, but just as we arrived there, the Germans blew the bridge. However, at 9pm two companies of the Herefords crossed the canal in assault boats and the engineers started to build a Bailey bridge. But at 2am the Germans put in a fierce counter-attack with heavy shelling on the

bridge area. The area had to be evacuated by the engineers. I was ordered to take two sections of my carriers, dismount their guns and cross over the other side, which we managed to do on a lock gate; it was a lock. And one gate was still intact and we crossed over on that to assist in repelling the counter-attack. The Germans had by-passed our two leading companies. There was a lot of hand-to-hand fighting and eventually things became quiet and the engineers carried on with the bridge, which was completed by first light.

**[56:17]**

The tanks went over the bridge but the first two were blown with mines, which were pulled across the road and under the tank tracks by some Germans who were hiding in a culvert just outside the village. They didn't last very long because we were looking straight into the end of the culvert, so naturally we just opened up into it. We lost about 30 killed and about 100 injured in the battle there. That was the battle to force and hold the crossing point. I say here it was a night which I shall never forget; I can still see it in my mind's eye, and I can. Incidentally, I wrote this for my granddaughter who is at university at the present moment, so this was done for her when she was at school; they were doing a thing about the War. I left the worst things out. We advanced further north and stopped at a place called St. Anthonis. We had exhausted all our fuel and any that was coming up was needed by the Guards Armoured Division for their advance to Nijmegen. It must be remembered that this fuel and all the supplies were coming from the Mulberry Harbour back in Normandy (that's the famous concrete harbour). The German food depot had been captured (we had captured it) and to save transporting fuel we were now issued with these German rations. I must tell you that they weren't very nice either. We had some pork issued and I should think every lad had dysentery from it.

A great deal of the winter was spent in clearing Germans from the area to the west of the River Maas, an area which was very wet and boggy, with canals for drainage everywhere. You dug a slit trench for protection but could only dig about two feet deep and then the trench filled with water. So you banked the soil up round the trench and hoped you'd not have to get into it too many times because you were soaked through every time you did. This was winter-time too.

**[59:00]**

I remember one night when we were occupying positions near to the Maas opposite the town of Roermond when we had about 28 degrees of frost – Fahrenheit, that is. Even the antifreeze in the Vickers guns froze. The Vickers gun is water cooled but we put antifreeze in them to stop them freezing and we'd also got straw piled over them and they'd frozen and bent the barrel of the gun, despite the fact that the guns had been covered with a good layer of straw. What we had to do afterwards was put a frost guard who stood by the Vickers with a mess tin of antifreeze. He had to keep dipping his fingers in it; the minute I started to freeze, he had to tell the lads to get on the Vickers and fire them a couple of times.

Q. Alec, can I stop you there. We've only got a few minutes left.

A. Sorry.

[1:00:03 – conversation about buses and arrangements for tomorrow]

[1:01:00]

Q. We've got some other pictures now particularly of capturing the Nazi symbols. You were talking about Admiral Doenitz's ... is that jumping off?

A. Yes; this was off his car. They are not big things. They are a typical pennant that was on the car. One was triangular, that length and that depth and the other went the other way. We actually got Doenitz's field marshal's baton [1:01:41]. But Colonel Churcher, who was ... Well, he was a brigadier then. He was our commanding officer when we went over. The first day the brigade was in action the brigadier, he didn't go bomb happy, he just lost it. He sat in his Citroen crying. And Jacky Churcher took over and commanded the brigade and the Herefords at the same time. He then ... He was commanding the brigade and the brigade went into the barracks and took over Doenitz and all these others, so Jacky (he was always known as Jacky), he got the baton. Well, he was regular KSLI, so he gave it to the KSLI museum. We did try to get him to give it us at Hereford because we've got the what's-er-names there.

[1:02:54]

Q. Standards? Or flags?

A. Oh, heck, my memory has gone again; it's deserting me all the damn time. Well, they were what I took, off Doenitz's car anyhow.

Q. Yes, the pennants.

A. Pennants. Well, it wasn't a pennant, it was a solid thing, see, and they are in a frame in the museum at Hereford now. They used what was the officers' mess there. When I was in the TA only the officers went in there. Now when we go in there for our reunion anybody uses it.

Q. Did you see Doenitz or any of the leading Nazis yourself?

A. Yes, we did. As a matter of fact, I got his finance minister walking down the road with a briefcase full of money! It was mad; it was mad in those days. One thing that happened when we were in Flers [*sic. Meant Flensburg perhaps – no fjords in Flers*], they'd got a big ammunition place underground, down the side of the fjord, dug into the side of the fjord. And just on the edge of the fjord, all down there, were a stack of destroyers and that, German destroyers all there, and they'd got people in defusing the mines and that and somebody made a boo-boo: they blew the lot up. Not only did they blow it but they blew all these destroyers upside down and there were a lot of barracks there they blew, and all our chaps were rushed down there to get their troops out and that, out of the thing. And prior to that the Germans, they'd got the idea we were occupation troops; they didn't think we were regular troops, see, because none of us had got any medals. Well, a German got a medal for sneezing, sort of thing, and they thought a lot more of us after that. And about two days later we got the medals issued, well the medal ribbons and that, and didn't it make a change in the town of Flensburg. Previously you'd always

got to push your way through the Germans on the pavements but once we'd got the medals up they got off the pavement damn quick.

[1:05:34]

Q. Could you, Alec, take us through your medals, just quickly say what they are?

A. I've got to look at them to tell you what they are, to be quite honest, because ... I ended the War out in Palestine, by the way, at probably the worst time so **that's** a Palestine medal there. **This** is the War medal; **This** is the ... Oh, dear I can't ... Home Services, for being in England during the War; **this** is a France and Germany star and **that's** the ... No, **that's** the France and Germany star and **this** is the War star. **These** are ... **That's** the market garden one, which was for being part of the attack up to Arnhem. **This** was the one the French issued after the War to us for being in Normandy. And **this** one is what is known as **the** Normandy medal. I've got other small medals at home, which I do call medals, like I think I showed you this one that they issued in ----

[1:07:35]

Q. That's Caen, is it?

A. Yes, it's the Caen one. I think it is 1998, is it?

Q. 1999.

A. You had to go and collect that at the museum there which is a sort of War memorial; a huge place it is.

Q. Alec, that's brilliant. Just to round off, are there any ----

A. Any questions.

Q. Any questions. Everyone has been listening, fascinated with your stories.

A. I'll bet they are.

Q. Have you got any questions you feel we could add?

A. Do you want to have a look at these? You can do if you want to.

Q. Alec, we haven't had time to scan any of your pictures. Would we be able to borrow just a few and bring them back to you tomorrow?

A. Yes.

Q. Would that be all right, just to borrow so we can have a chance tomorrow morning to take some scans of them?

A. Mmh.

Q. No more questions.

Of your experience during the War, is there one thing that still makes you laugh more than anything, the happiest event or anything that stands out as a really funny event?

A. No.

Q. No one funny thing. Comradeship? What did you personally get most from from the War?

A. Well, it was comradeship; that's why you see all these pictures. I'm still in contact with the few that are left; they always get a Christmas card from me. One thing I didn't mention was Cerisy-Belle-Etoile;

it is a little French village and it's backed by a hill, which is what I would call a pimple. It's more like, what's the name of the golf course?

[1:10:04]

Q. Bradnor Hill.

A. Bradnor Hill. It's a real pimple of a hill and there's only one road up it and on the top used to be a lovely chateau which was built by an English chap. He also imported I don't know how many rhododendrons there and it's famous over the whole of France for its rhododendrons which are absolutely enormous. When we approached Cerisy I was given orders to go up through a wood to the top and a troop of tanks would go up the road, which is the only road up to the top. Well, we went through a stream and up through this wood and how the heck we got up there I don't know; I've been to it today, you know; I've looked at it these days and, thought, well ... But get up to the top I did with all my carriers and we met the tanks on the top and we bivouacked there for the night; Jerry had fled. And the next morning we pushed off towards Flers. Now the interesting thing about that hill is that Jerry had occupied the chateau and you could nearly see to the beaches from there and there is a stone up there with a map on it showing all the areas they could see but the chateau was bombed to hell by us and has never been repaired. I thought I had a picture of it somewhere, but I seem to have missed it. But we were invited back to Cerisy by the mayor and we've been back there about four or five times. Being a small village, it's absolutely marvellous and they treat us very, very well indeed. The last time we were there. that I organized a trip. we decided we'd put a plaque up on the chateau and that was put up and I haven't been back since we put it up but apparently they've now put a screen over it and everything; it's very well protected. And that's the actual plaque. I thought you might be interested in seeing that.

Q. That's great, smashing. Right, any more questions of Alec? We've recorded an awful lot there; we've got some great stories. What we're going to do now, Alec, is ----

A. Yes, you'd have to sort through that.

Q. We will sort through and edit and put in some of your accounts to pictures.

A. Do you want any of these photographs now?

Q. Yes, please. Shall we stop the recording now; we are all done.

[1:13:30]