

## THE MEDIUMS AT ARNHEM

### Charles Best

In the November issue of "The Gunner" reference is made by the reviewer of "The Red Beret", to the lack of information on the work of the Medium guns in support of the Airborne Forces at Arnhem.

In the issue of December 1946, I gave a very abridged account of the work of my Regiment in the battle. I had always hoped that some more distinguished pen than mine would have amplified the story, but in the absence of other contributors, hope that this account will prove of interest. The 84<sup>th</sup> (Sussex) Medium Regiment (previously 58<sup>th</sup> (Sussex) Field Regiment), belonging to 5 AGRA, was placed under command of the Guards Armoured Division for the crossing of the Seine and consequent support on the advance through Brussels to the Meuse L'Escaut Canal, on the attempt to reach the ultimate goal at Arnhem. 84 was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel G L Fitzgerald DSO, the Batteries 250 (Major Pursglove), 251 (Major Ross Chadwicke MBE, and the story really begins with the breakout over the Escaut canal. The guns had been in action almost on the canal bank and under small arms fire from the opposite bank which caused some casualties. This was prior to the morning of 17<sup>th</sup> when we received orders to advance two guns (I & J Sub-sections, C Troop, 251 Battery) were detached and these guns under Lieutenant S L Stevens, went off with the Guards ahead of the Regiment, and I will detail their story first.

These guns deployed with the Field Regiment that evening. On the 18<sup>th</sup> they were in action near Eindhoven, and waited for the "Dutch Brigade" to come through and "take" the town (for propaganda purposes this was apparently arranged!) and were in action that night on counter battery work alongside the 25 pounders. They finally passed up through the dropping zone of 101 US Airborne Division, over the Grave Bridge and with an OP some three miles on their rear went into action with one gun facing North and one South, but eventually moved up into Nimegan, and came into action there. As soon as the Nimegan Bridge was captured these two guns crossed and were arranged into a position by men from a Surrey Regiment by a star fix. All that night the guns gave harassing fire support to the Airborne by shelling road junctions and groups of buildings in and around Arnhem. At that time they were the only two guns of the Second Army within range and were firing at about 17,000 yards. Fire Control was operated by radio from RHQ through 8<sup>th</sup> Corps RA HQ, and it is believed that contact with Arnhem was maintained through 2 Army HQ back to Whitehall and on to 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne. Lieutenant Leach of 84<sup>th</sup> Medium was dropped by parachute with the 82<sup>nd</sup> US Airborne on I think the 22<sup>nd</sup>, but owing to a damaged wireless set was unable to use it. These guns during the action on the night of 20<sup>th</sup> were out in the open on their own with no known friendly troops near and had to rely upon their sentry detachments for the dirty work. In their own words they felt a bit "strange" in the morning when some infantry of 43<sup>rd</sup> Division moved up and passed them and took a group of farm buildings 300 yards in front of the gun position, from which 150 armed Germans emerged! In this group of farm buildings one end of a telephone line used by the Maquis connecting with Arnhem was discovered. The line apparently in frequent use had never been discovered by the Germans. These guns rejoined the Regiment in Nimegan Park on 22<sup>nd</sup>, but Lieutenant Stevens left immediately with J Sub to carry out special tasks for the 82<sup>nd</sup> US Airborne Division, not rejoining us again until 28<sup>th</sup>.

The remainder of the Regiment had in the meanwhile also had an eventful time, crossing the Escaut on the 18<sup>th</sup> and I well remember the sight of the breakout, Sherman tanks belonging to the Guards on the far side of the bridge. Traffic was of course a big problem and there were frequent long halts, during one of which I got my cooks to brew tea for the

troops and sat on the road and washed my feet in the remainder of the hot water! On up through Valkenswaard spending an uneasy night in a field, through Eindhoven on 19<sup>th</sup> and on up the road over the Grave Bridge and into Nijmegen in the darkness of the autumn night. I well remember the peculiar half light and mist in which we occupied our position in the Nijmegen Park, with small arms fire in the town.

In the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> the position was reorganised so that guns would have an all round field of fire (of this more anon), and we came into action about midday, and from my ammunition book I find that later in the day we were busy with super charged and 80lb shell firing into Germany, and on harassing fire. We were continuously in action during the day and by night of the 23<sup>rd</sup>, had been firing on a switch of 1800, down the main road on which our communication depended as it was cut about midday on 22<sup>nd</sup> between Uden and Veghel by a German force, we received subsequent calls for harassing fire on other occasions on this switch.

Ammunition and food were a problem and for a while we lived on German rations. Excellent cheese and butter (products supplied to the Germans from the countryside). German biscuit, about 6" square and liberally mixed with caraway seed, tinned meat, of which we were rather suspicious, and issues of German cigars instead of our usual cigarettes. These rations were abandoned in a dump by the Germans, but such was the fluid nature of the fighting, that the infantry of the GAD when drawing these rations found Germans drawing from the same dump at the other end!

The scene in the park always has a touch of fantasy for me. The Dutch people, overjoyed at being liberated, promenaded onto the park in their best clothes and I was confronted by elderly ladies asking to supplant the No 2's of our 5.5's in pulling the lanyard and firing our shells at the hated Boche, and they did it one or two occasions. This pleasant interlude was soon interrupted by the appearance on a Sunday morning of German jet planes which screamed in and dropped a load of antipersonnel bombs, proof of the unwelcome results of our shelling. These caught the RC party retiring from church and I spent a distressing morning giving first aid to men whom I had known from pre-war days, through France & Belgium in 1940 and all the hazards of the Middle East. Following the attack we occupied an alternative position nearer the canal and continued in our role there until the airborne operations were abandoned.

In the meantime our sister Regiment 65<sup>th</sup> came up and about midday on the 21<sup>st</sup> opened fire in response to a request from signals received on the Regimental net, and later 419 Battery of 52<sup>nd</sup> Heavy Regiment under command of 64<sup>th</sup> also came into the position. This Regiment maintained its wireless link with the Airborne at Arnhem and fired in its support from the 21<sup>st</sup> until the end, with additional 4.5 batteries from 7<sup>th</sup> Medium and a 3.7 Battery. Perhaps someone from 64<sup>th</sup> will elaborate on their part in the battle which I am not competent to do, but if not you can obtain an excellent account of their days from the book 5A.G.R.A