

A Bridge Too Far

Dear Sir,

A quick note to say how pleased I was to find your website as my father, Graham Marples, served with 1st. Airborne divisional signals from their deployment to North Africa prior to the Italian campaign right through till he was demobbed in 1947 after serving in Palestine. He was at Arnhem, and I believe spent most of the battle attached to the headquarters at the Hartenstein hotel.

I remember being shown the photo you have as plate 6 (the photo of L section in October 1943) in my childhood, and I remember in the 1970's my father regularly going to the Caythorpe reunions.

I also remember my father saying he caught yellow jaundice at some point in his army service, and I believe this would have been soon after this photo was taken, as the travel presenter Alan Wicker recently recounted in the television series "Wickers War" how he was in the same part of Italy at the same time, and also caught Yellow jaundice in an epidemic that swept through 8th Army at the end of 1943.

Regarding plate 6, I can identify my father, and also hopefully put names to 3 more of the faces. However please bear in mind I'm now middle aged and working from memories from my childhood and teenage years of men who had aged 30 years since the photograph was taken!

My father is the easy one; he's seated second from the left on the third row back.

The sergeant at the left hand end of the front row is Tom Fairclough, and I believe the "S Major" you credit the photo to is Sergeant Sidney Major, who is the third man from the left on the front row, in rolled up shirtsleeves and the swastika part of the flag over his knees.

Finally another man I think I recognize is Henry Brook, third from the right on the second row, directly behind the lance corporal who is holding a cigarette in his left hand.

Sadly my father passed away in 1990, and I believe Henry Brook and Tom Fairclough also passed away some time ago.

My father also appears on plate 9 (L section shortly before departing for Arnhem) second from the right in the front row, but I'm unable to identify anyone else. I think the DG Grieve you credit the photo to was Duncan Grieve.

My father is mentioned, but badly misquoted, in "A bridge too far", but I believe there is an accurate story involving him in circulation in a book I have read but cannot remember the title, and sadly the book didn't name him, but if you are familiar with the story and the book I'd love to know what the book was.

As I remember it, my father's version of the story goes like this:

Towards the end of the battle he was operating in the basement of a building which could have been the Hartenstein, when an artillery officer appeared who was a spotter for artillery on the other side of the river. His radio operator had been killed and his radio destroyed, and the airborne radios operated on different frequencies to the artillery.

So, the officer went into the attic to spot as German forces were massing at a nearby crossroads about 100 yards away, and passed commands down a chain of men on the stairs to my father, who passed his messages up to divisional headquarters where they were passed across to the artillery radio chain and back down the chain of command to the battery.

He says the spotters first message was to range with live ammunition as there wasn't time to use smoke, but despite the range the shooting was so accurate hits were scored almost immediately and the Germans dispersed.

The book version of what I believe is the same story is written from the point of view of someone on the radio chain, possibly divisional headquarters, and in their version a spotter has crossed the river to Arnhem, and is working in Arnhem spotting from an attic or rooftop, and again he's using the airborne radio network as his radioman has been killed. The artillery fire is aimed at a congregation of German troops from across the river, and again is remarkably accurate, so the unnamed airborne radio operator is heard at headquarters to shout over his radio something like "Bloody marvellous, we can hear the buggers screaming from here", the inference to me being it was my father he heard shouting!

I hope this is of help to you,

Yours faithfully,

Ian Marples