

Operation Overlord, 6 June 1944

Nottinghamshire

The landings on five beaches in northern France on the morning of 6 June 1944 by upwards of 156,000 troops of 14 allied countries marked the beginning of Operation Overlord. These were contemporary with successes in other theatres of the Second World War in 1944, in Italy at Monte Casino and in Northeast India at Kohima.

It heralded the last phase of the conflict and the liberation of Nazi-occupied Europe. The invasion was the result of long and meticulous planning as well as a triumph of combined operations between all the arms of the services in the sea, on the land and in the air, with the support of the civilian population including industry and agriculture which provided the armaments, ordnance, equipment, rations etc

Men and women from all backgrounds and walks of life were involved and many paid with their lives.

Men and women from Nottinghamshire served in all branches of the Armed Forces during this conflict and it is not possible to say how many people were involved except it would be many thousands.

We can however identify some examples specifically from our own county:

Royal Navy

Whilst there were no ships specifically linked to Nottinghamshire, as the largest amphibious operation ever seen, the contribution of both the Royal Navy, Royal Marine Commandos and the Merchant Navy cannot be overstated with sailors from Nottinghamshire serving in all three services.

Guards Armoured Division

The Guards Armoured Division which trained for D Day at Thoresby and was among the earliest to land on D Day. The division, which loaded from Thoresby, included Rex Whistler KIA, (Major) Willie Whitelaw, later Home Secretary, Lord Carrington later Foreign Secretary, Lord Runcie later Archbishop of Canterbury, and many other men and officers. They had a very high casualty rate in the Normandy campaign, the dense hedgerows of the bocage was terrible tank terrain but they had to batter their way through.

The Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry - D-Day and the Battle for Normandy
The Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry were in the vanguard of the landings on D-Day and the first Yeomanry Regiment to fight ashore. By last light they had reached the outskirts of Bayeux and the next day were the first troops to enter the town. By the

end of the Battle for Normandy in August 1944 SRY had been in action on 50 out of 60 days winning 8 Battle Honours.

The Sherwood Rangers were one of the (4) seasoned regiments specially selected for the hazardous initial landings and B & C Squadrons were quickly into action in their 'swimming tanks' attacking Gold Beach just before H Hour. SRY's main task was to provide fire suppression to support the landing of 231 Infantry Brigade and other vital fighting equipment.

Having been waterproofed on 3rd June SRY's Sherman tanks were loaded six to each Landing Craft with little room for the crews to move around or sleep. They then sailed for Normandy on 5th June. It was planned that they should swim ashore early the next day from c.7,000 yards but due to the difficult weather conditions they were dropped from only a few hundred yards. Eight of SRY's tanks were drowned in the rough seas and eight more were knocked out on the beaches. SRY casualties by that night were 8 killed in action and 20 wounded. On 6th June 2017 the SRY Association unveiled a Memorial plaque at Le Hamel on Gold Beach to commemorate all of our forebears who landed there on that day.

SRY together with Essex Regiment liberated Bayeux the following day with very little damage to the town itself much to the pleasure of the local people who welcome us back every year for a formal commemoration. However, SRY were then involved in some heavy fighting further inland where fighting in the close 'bocage' countryside was very difficult and tiring. Sunken lanes with thick high hedges gave poor visibility and Troops lived with the constant threat of ambush by enemy tanks, anti-tank guns, 'panzerfausts' and snipers as well as indirect shelling and mortaring. In particular, SRY were also involved in some heavy fighting around Caen, notably at Rauray where they captured a Tiger and a Panther tank both intact.

From D-Day to the end of the war, when SRY were on the point of attacking Bremerhaven, the regiment had suffered heavy casualties. 153 men were killed in action, 287 men were wounded, 6 were missing and 4 taken prisoners of war. Most were tank crewmen who were killed or injured by snipers or when their tanks were 'brewed up' by enemy fire. Many of the dead were recovered by Padre Leslie Skinner attached to the SRY from the Royal Army Chaplain's Dept. His war diary "The Man Who Worked on Sundays" is an extraordinary and very moving read.

South Nottinghamshire Hussars Yeomanry -D Day and Normandy campaign

Two South Notts Hussars Regiments took part in the Normandy Landings and Campaign, 107th (South Notts Hussars) Medium Regiment RA and 150th (South Notts Hussars) Field Regiment RA.

The first soldier of the South Notts Hussars to land in Normandy was on the ground before most of the German defenders were awake.

At around 1.30am on D Day 6th June 1944, Lieutenant C Hastings of the 150th Regiment parachuted behind enemy lines with the 6th Airborne Division on their mission to capture vital river and canal bridges ahead of the invasion.

Hastings' job as an Artillery Forward Observation Officer (FOO) was to identify targets and call artillery fire which he did in an exemplary fashion bringing down fire from every gun he could contact.

Coming in behind him, 30 minutes before the main invasion force was fellow FOOs, Captain Hugh Clough with three other South Notts Hussars landing with the Commandos and then Captain Sharman acting as bombardment officer for the Royal Navy and it was on his orders that warships including Rodney, Nelson, Dido and Sheffield unleashed their lethal barrage against the German's defensive position. By dawn the invasion was in full swing, thousands of troops and tons of equipment being hurled onto the beaches in the face of merciless enemy fire.

The first wave of Landing Craft landing at Sword beach included a team of signallers from 107th Regiment providing communications for the assault troops.

The guns of 150th landed on D plus 2 and were immediately in action mainly under the command of 6th Airborne supporting them in holding their forward positions as the invasion progressed and firing 100000 rounds in the first 12 weeks of the invasion.

The 107th Regiment RHA (South Notts Hussars) had been effectively destroyed as a fighting unit on 6th June 1942 when in its gallant Last stand it confronted the 21st Panzer Division and other of Rommel' s forces at Knightsbridge. The survivors subsequently reformed as an 8 Gun Medium Battery armed with 5.5 Guns as part of 7th Medium Regiment and fought at Alamein, through to Tunis and the invasion of Sicily.

They returned to the UK at Christmas 1943 and thereafter began training for the invasion and as a compliment to their fighting record were reformed as a Regiment in late March 1944 which meant that due to such additional preparations they did not land in Normandy until early July when under the command of the Canadians they were involved in the battles for Caen and the Falaise Gap, where their FOOs played a key role in closing the Falaise Pocket where they had the satisfaction of defeating the 21st Panzer Division who they had confronted at Knightsbridge.

Both Regiments fought on after the Normandy campaign, the 150th being disbanded in November 1944 to give Montgomery more Infantry and 107th fought through to the Battle for the Rhine and Germany being disbanded in early 1946.

Sherwood Foresters Regiment

10 Battalions of the Sherwood Foresters fought in World War 2 and at the time of the Normandy Campaign the 40th Anti-aircraft Battalion landed in France in August 1944, the 42nd Robin Hood Anti-Aircraft Battalion later defended Antwerp against V1 rockets.

The 2nd and 14th Battalions were involved in Italy, with the 14th Battalion at Monte Casino.

The 12th and 13th battalions had training roles in India and members of 1/5th Territorial Battalion which had been involved in the surrender of Singapore were captives of the Japanese on the Burma Railway.

The 1st Battalion had been captured at the fall of Tobruk and the 8th Territorial Battalion had been in the Norway campaign in 1940.

1520 members of the Regiment were killed during the War.

504 (County of Nottingham) Squadron Royal Air Force

In May 1940 the Squadron was one of the many rushed from Britain to France in an attempt to resist the Luftwaffe, but it was soon forced to retreat back to Britain. The Squadron was then sent north to provide fighter cover over the Royal Navy fleet anchorage at Scapa Flow, remaining there until early September.

The Squadron moved back south on 5 September, just at the end of the third (and hardest) phase of the Battle of Britain – the assault on Fighter Command. It was based at Hendon (No.11 Group) from then until 26 September, during the main period of daylight attacks on London. It then moved to Filton (No.10 Group), where it remained for the rest of the battle.

The Squadron moved to Northern Ireland in August 1941 to provide fighter cover for the area. It returned to the south of England in the summer of 1942, and flew a mix of defensive and offensive missions, taking part in the 'rhubarb' sweeps across France.

The Squadron returned to Scotland in September 1943, but only for a few months, and at the start of 1944 it returned south to take part in the build-up to the D-Day landings.

In September 1944, 504 Squadron flew escort duties over Arnhem during Operation Market Garden before spending the rest of 1944 and the first months of 1945 flying a mix of defensive and offensive missions, as well as bomber escort duties.

507th and 508th Parachute Infantry Regiments, US Army

The 508th Regiment arrived at Wollaton Park in March 1944 where they became part of the veteran 82nd All American Airborne Division. A sister unit, 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment (later to become attached to the 17th Airborne Division), were camped less than ten miles away at Tollerton Hall, Nottinghamshire.



Memorial to fallen members of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment in Wollaton Park, Nottingham.

The Regiments parachuted into Normandy at 2:15 a.m. on 6 June 1944, 336 members of the Regiment were killed during the Normandy campaign. The 507th Regiment sustained 200 casualties in the first two days of the campaign.

Industry, Mining and Farming

In addition to Nottinghamshire's extensive and vital coal mining, agriculture, textiles and engineering industries major companies included Rolls Royce, Raleigh, Players, Royal Ordnance and Boots which amongst other things played a significant role in developing and manufacturing penicillin which had a major impact in saving the lives of wounded servicemen.

Tim Richmond OBE TD DL