

10 para bn in somerby 1944/draft #2/by prosper keating/...

text begins/...

THE BEST TIME OF THEIR LIVES

The 10th Parachute Battalion in Somerby 1943-1944

The 10th (Sussex) Parachute Battalion was formed in Egypt in December 1942. As the battalion's official name indicates, the nucleus consisted of around two-hundred men from the 2nd Battalion The Royal Sussex Regiment, most of them survivors of the Second Battle of El-Alamein. The rest of the battalion was recruited from the Infantry Base Depot at Geneifa, to the east of Cairo, roughly halfway to the Suez Canal. These men came from various regiments and corps and were almost all combat veterans recovering from light wounds. The new battalion was assigned to 4th Parachute Brigade.

The Tenth remained proud of its Sussex links and traditions but will always be closely associated with Somerby, although men of the battalion were also billeted in surrounding villages like Thorpe Satchville, Burrough-on-the-Hill and Twyford. The battalion was held in reserve there for nine months from December 1943 to September 1944, to the delight of many Land Girls stationed in the area who had been obliged to make do with Americans because most of the British men worth dating were fighting on various fronts overseas. Surviving veterans of the Tenth often said they had the best time of their lives in and around Somerby during that long, hot summer of 1944.

S Battalion, as it was first called, underwent parachute training at RAF Kabrit, some sixty miles west of Cairo by the shores of the Great Bitter Lake, through which the Suez Canal runs. The would-be paratroopers made their first jumps from a converted barrage balloon 800 feet above the hard, rocky desert, landing like sacks of potatoes and sustaining all manner of bruises, cuts and, if unlucky, broken bones. Those who did not refuse to hurl themselves into the shimmering void from the balloon cage progressed to aircraft and after the required number of parachute descents, were awarded their parachute wings and the new maroon beret of British Airborne Forces.

After field-training in Palestine, the Tenth was moved to Libya in May 1943 with 4th Parachute Brigade, joining 1st Airborne Division to prepare for the invasion of Sicily in July 1943. However, the shortage of transport aircraft saw the battalion left behind cooling its heels in Tripoli, much to the disgust of everyone from the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Smyth, downwards. However, the Tenth did take part in the invasion of Italy, albeit by sea rather than air because of the continuing lack of aeroplanes. The battalion landed at Taranto on September 9th 1943 with 156th Parachute Battalion and other units of 4th Parachute Brigade as well as advance elements of 1st Airborne Division, including Divisional HQ. Fortunately, the Italian defenders had withdrawn from the port in a secret arrangement with the Allies and the landings were unopposed.

The Tenth's primary objective was an airfield outside Gioia del Colle, some thirty miles up the national highway towards the Adriatic port of Bari to the north. That evening, the battalion formed up alongside their comrades from 156th Parachute Battalion, which would also come to know Rutland well whilst stationed in Melton Mowbray, and they set off on foot. Reaching Massafra just after dawn, the Paras were hailed as liberators. A few miles on, however, they ran into rearguard elements of the German 1st Parachute Division defending Mottola. 156th Parachute Battalion attacked. The Fallschirmjaeger delayed them briefly before withdrawing, in line with their orders to mount a fighting retreat.

Approaching the small town of Castellaneta on September 11th, the Paras ran into more Fallschirmjaeger positions. In the ensuing fight, the Tenth cleared the German paratroopers out but Major-General Hopkinson, commanding British 1st Airborne Division, was killed. The Tenth proceeded to Gioia del Colle, secured the airfield, and then marched to Bari and Brindisi, skirmishing with Fallschirmjaeger stragglers along the way. The regimental battle honour for Taranto covers these operations.

Withdrawn from Italy in November, the Tenth arrived in Somerby on December 10th 1943. And there the Tenth would remain for nine months before climbing aboard the lorries taking them to RAF Spanhoe on Sunday, September 17th 1944, and the American transport planes waiting to fly them to Arnhem the following day as part of the Second Wave.

During those nine months in Rutland, the men of the Tenth trained hard to maintain their combat readiness, taking part in exercises on the Yorkshire moors and in bombed-out parts of London, where they honed the urban combat skills they would need when covering the advance to and retreat from the infamous "bridge too far" at Arnhem in September 1944.

Stood to and then stood down for no less than sixteen airborne operations, the men were rather nervy, to say the least. That they played as hard as they worked and sometimes got a bit out of hand was only to be expected but veterans of the Tenth never forgot the kindness and generosity of the local people, who even forgave them for burning down Burrough Court during a raid on the wine cellar that went wrong.

The demolition charges used to blow down the cellar door set the mansion alight. The guilty parties redeemed themselves to some extent by entering the blazing building and saving as much furniture as they could, including the grand piano from the ballroom, which was played with gusto on the lawn as the young paratroopers entertained the Fire Brigade with songs, toasting them with the contents of the wine cellar.

The people of Somerby also forgave them for shooting the weathercock on top of All Saints' Church. Perhaps they were grateful. After all, if the squeaks and groans emitted by this Victorian monstrosity whenever the wind blew grated on the nerves of hardened young paratroopers, keeping them awake at night, it is probably safe to assume that the villagers did not think much of their weathercock either. In fact, following renovations to the church in 1989, they gave it away.

The beneficiary of their generosity was the 10th Battalion The Parachute Regiment. 10

Para, as it was known to all, was always very proud to bear the number of the original Tenth. To honour the shooting skills of Lieutenant Pat Glover, who had managed to put two holes in the weathercock from a distance of sixty yards as it turned and screeched in the wind, the Somerby Weathercock was adopted as 10 Para's Shooting Trophy.

The Somerby Weathercock resided in the Sergeants' Mess at the battalion's White City location until 10 Para was disbanded in 1999. It came back to Somerby in 2013 but shall not be replaced on the tower of All Saints' Church. As visitors and thankful residents reflect on the two holes recalling Pat Glover's marksmanship in that hot July of 1944, and of the terrible battle in which Pat and his comrades would soon find themselves, they might also think of Pat's live-in companion, Myrtle the Para-Chick, whom he liberated from a life of drudgery on a local farm.

Myrtle was not one of the local Land Girls thrilled by the arrival in Rutland of the devil-may-care men of the Tenth. Myrtle was a chicken whose arrival in Pat's life was linked with the weathercock incident in a round-about way, through a booze-fuelled argument about how anything with wings and feathers could fly. It is a well-known fact that chickens cannot fly. Pat proved otherwise, however, exiting an aircraft with Myrtle tucked into his smock and releasing her a few yards above the ground. Myrtle also jumped into action with the Tenth at Arnhem. Unfortunately, she was killed in action but was buried with honorary parachute wings by Pat and his batman.

If this short homage to the time spent in the Somerby area by the Tenth seems a trifle light-hearted, it is perhaps because it is better to remember the men of the Tenth, and of the rest of the 1st Airborne Division, as they were in life, as they were during the nine months most of the surviving veterans recalled as the best time of their lives during the Second World War.

The story of the Battle of Arnhem has been told over and over again and needs no telling here. Of the nearly six-hundred paratroopers of the Tenth seen off by the people of Somerby and the surrounding parishes on that Sunday seventy years ago as they heaved themselves into the lorries for the short drive to RAF Spanhoe, just thirty returned to Somerby after the battle.

As well as the very hard-won Victoria Cross awarded posthumously to Captain Lionel Queripel, one of just five VCs awarded for Arnhem and two to the Parachute Regiment, the men of the Tenth won many decorations for valour during the savage fighting around Oosterbeek and Wolfheze that week, covering the advance to Arnhem Bridge from the Ginkel Heath drop zone and then covering the retreat back across the Rhine.

Commissioned into the Royal Sussex Regiment in 1939, Lionel Queripel had been one of the first officers of S Battalion at Kabrit in 1942. He was from a distinguished military family. By the time the Tenth emplaned for Arnhem, Captain Queripel was in command of A Company. His Victoria Cross citation, published in the London Gazette of February 1st 1945, contains the following passages:

“Captain Queripel at once proceeded to reorganize his force, crossing and recrossing the road whilst doing so, under extremely heavy and accurate fire. During

this period he carried a wounded Sergeant to the Regimental Aid Post under fire and was himself wounded in the face. Having reorganized his force, Captain Queripel personally led a party of men against the strong point holding up the advance. This strong point consisted of a captured British anti-tank gun and two machine-guns. Despite the extremely heavy fire directed at him, Captain Queripel succeeded in killing the crews of the machine guns and recapturing the anti-tank gun. As a result of this, the advance was able to continue.

“Later in the same day, Captain Queripel found himself cut off with a small party of men and took up a position in a ditch. By this time he had received further wounds in both arms. Regardless of his wounds and of the very heavy mortar and Spandau fire, he continued to inspire his men to resist with hand grenades, pistols and the few remaining rifles. As, however, the enemy pressure increased, Captain Queripel decided that it was impossible to hold the position any longer and ordered his men to withdraw. Despite their protests, he insisted on remaining behind to cover their withdrawal with his automatic pistol and a few remaining hand grenades. This is the last occasion on which he was seen.”

As Sergeant Reid of A Company would say after the war: *“He was one of the finest men I was privileged to serve under, always the last officer to return to his mess. His first thought was for his men. One hears of VCs being given for impulsive bravery, but not Capt. Queripel. Anyone who knew him would have expected him to do just what he did.”*

People say that the Tenth was annihilated at Arnhem but that is a simple way of putting it. Ninety-two men were killed in action. The first casualties were sustained during the parachute descent onto Ginkel Heath, as the Germans had by then rallied and were staking out the heather-covered drop zone, much of which was ablaze. German cameramen even filmed what one veteran recalled as the “grouse shoot”.

That two-thirds of the ninety-six men who escaped back across the river Rhine on the night of September 25th and 26th did not return to Somerby bears silent witness today to their condition and provides us with an idea of the state of many of the 404 men who had to be left behind. In fairness, their German captors did the best they could for the wounded but medical supplies were as scarce as other resources for the Germans by that stage of the war and many wounded prisoners died as a result. Those who survived captivity and came home afterwards faced the challenges of disability as bravely as they had faced the enemy.

The original Tenth was never reformed and was formally disbanded in November 1945. However, the battalion number was given to a new London-based Territorial Army unit in 1947: The 10th (City of London) Parachute Battalion. The new Tenth became 10th Battalion The Parachute Regiment in 1967, known simply as 10 Para. 10 Para’s insignia comprised a black square bearing a red Roman X. It was sometimes said that the black honoured the fallen of the original Tenth and the red recalled the blood they shed for their country. Or perhaps the blood they spilled whilst helping to free Europe from Nazi tyranny.

Members of the postwar 10 Para were always very proud to be invited to Somerby to take part in the annual commemoration of the original Tenth’s time there and the

service remembering those who never came back or those who died before their time because of old wounds, both physical and mental. The Tenth lives on today in the British Army in the form of 10 Company 4 Para, many of whose soldiers have seen action with the Parachute Regiment's regular battalions in the more recent wars involving Britain.

Prosper Keating
10 Para 1982 - 1992

text ends/...