

BILL COWLEY

Wendy Burrows



Bill was born in Deddington in 1925. His parents' home was in The Stile. He volunteered for the Royal Marines at the age of 17 and was called up at the end of 1942 and sent to Lympstone Barracks, near Exmouth, in Devon, where he distinguished himself by being the best all-round cadet in the squad and was presented with a red diamond-shaped badge to put on his left shoulder.

He was sent to Deal Barracks on an NCO's course where he was promoted to full Corporal, then to Towyn in North Wales, a holding camp.

Bill was selected into the Commandos and was sent to Achnakerry, near Fort William in Scotland, an estate owned by Lord Lovat, where he went through very rigorous and intensive Commando training. He was trained to look after himself.

He then went to 46 Commando Royal Marines in civilian billets in Ramsgate, then to Sandown in the Isle of Wight, where he trained for the D-Day landings and the capture of six German batteries of coastal guns at Merville, Normandy. On landing, he was up to his neck in the sea, carrying all his heavy equipment, as the landing craft could not get close enough for a dry landing. Even his cigarettes got soaked!

The German guns were captured by the 6th Airborne Division, so the change of plan was to clear the German fortifications at Luc-sur-Mer, attacking houses full of Germans. The flushed-out Germans were then escorted to the beach and sent to England as prisoners-of-war.

Bill's Division was then joined up with the Canadian 3rd Division and were sent to capture the village of Rots. They advanced at 5am and cleared the Rue river valley of Germans, suffering no casualties, fought through a wood and came to a cornfield in front of Rots. The Germans had machine guns along a hedge the far side of the field in front of houses. The order came to fix bayonets and to advance through the cornfield, firing rifles. Twenty-two men died in this action and many were wounded and taken prisoner by the Germans. Those left held the village all night and were 7 miles in front of everyone else. Next morning they were told to retreat, to prevent being cut off. They lost their second-in-command, Major John Lee.

The Canadians buried 122 Germans. Bill took two prisoners: Hitler Youths of 17 or 18 years. They withdrew back to the original front line, not having eaten, washed or slept for days. They were then ordered to join the 6th Airborne Division, holding the left flank of a bridgehead against Germans for two to three weeks. Canadians and Americans were on the right flank. They fought their way down to Trouan, which they held for a few days, being shelled each day and night.

It was at Trouan that Bill's luck ran out and he was badly injured. This was in August 1944. He was put on the top of a jeep on a stretcher and taken to the Trouan Casualty Clearing Station. He had seven pieces of shrapnel in him, one of which lodged in his brain. His right shoulder and right hip were shattered and a knee and forearm were badly wounded. He was taken to a Field Hospital near the beach, a large marquee with a red cross on the roof. He was flown to Benson and taken to the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, but there were no beds, so he was taken in an ambulance train to Bath Royal United Hospital for an operation to remove the shrapnel from his brain. He was in a coma for seven weeks and was invalided out with a pension of £2 per week.

He was on crutches for three years. He worked at Wells and Son (Ticky Wells') draper's shop in the Market Place for 30 years, then in Field's, a draper's shop in Banbury. He was the caretaker at Deddington School for the 15 years up to his retirement.