

Wartime memories of an Army Commando.

1447691 Alfred Frederick Edward Sawyer

Hampshire Regiment and No 2 Commando



Provided to the Commando Veterans Association
courtesy of his son Ian Sawyer.



Dad on the right



Dad with the rifle

I went to Hayling School. I was one of Mr Earney's 'Well caned boys', as I was always getting into trouble. I left when I was 14 and went to work for Mr King in West Town doing a paper round. I also, later, joined the Territorial Army and was attached to the 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment. While I was in training, the war broke out and I was told to report to Havant Town Hall. From there I had to go to the stores at Hilsea Depot to pick up all my gear including kitchen utensils. I then went to the New Forest to a place called Goats Penn Camp which is near Burley village where there are a lot of donkeys. Then I was sent to Torrington, North Devon for manoeuvres, marching drills and rifle practice.

I was too young to be sent to France, so 23 of us Hampshire's were sent to the Orkney Islands to guard against parachutists for the fleet at Scapa Flow. For a while, I was also stationed at Dover as a Machine Gunner. We would go out on patrol boats where the artillery would fire at boats that were towed across the water and we would protect them from low flying aircraft. I then heard they were looking for volunteers to join the Commandos. I put myself forward to go and after an interview, along with 23 hopeful others, only 6 of us got through. We were sent to Achnacarry in Scotland for commando training, and also to Colinton in Edinburgh for further training. We were then sent on leave, before returning to the office where we were told to join Number 2 Commando in Gibraltar.

We were sent off on a Troop Ship to Gibraltar for one last big exercise which took part in front of Lord Louis Mountbatten. We had to blow up a reservoir. He then gave a speech and told us we were going to the Sicily landings. The first operation in Sicily was at a place called Siracusa, and the next was a place called Augusta. We were then pulled back for training and sent off to a place called Scaletta which was behind the enemy lines. Our objective was to cut off the Germans from advancing. We then went back to Italy across the Straits of Messina. When we arrived there, we were mostly fighting Italians, and I remember I was on a bridge looking down at some Italians that we were trying to get to surrender. They were on a bridge between 2 big houses throwing grenades at us and we let them stay there because they were trapped.

Coming back I got caught in some barbed wire with an Officer, and an Italian machine gun opened up and

caught the Officer on the shoulder. I was trying to get out, and my pullover that was hanging out of my pack was caught on the barbed wire, and half of that ended up being left behind. I managed to get hold of an old wheelchair and pushed the officer back to the lines and to a first aid post. There were more of our troops in the streets, and German lorries were coming through there, and we were throwing grenades at them to try and destroy them. Eventually our own tanks caught up with us and we made our way down in to Messina which heralded the end of the Sicily invasion.

We went back to Catania in Sicily to rest. We moved after this to Mussomeli to start more training to prepare for the Salerno landings. While we were here we were training with the American Rangers. We were then taken to the Port of Palermo in Sicily and boarded the Prince Charlie. It was from this boat that our landing craft that was attached to the side of the boat was to be lowered into the water. As we set off everything was O.K. until we approached the Italian coast. As we neared the Island of Capri we were bombed, and 2 or 3 of our craft were hit. They all had petrol on board and all blew up. There were warships behind us bombarding the coast and giving us cover for a beach landing. We got onto the beach, which was very quiet and not a lot of opposition, and climbed some steps to a church. There was a tunnel there full of people and they were asking if we were English. When we said 'Yes' we were mobbed with hugs and kisses. This is where the Germans were and as we left it was getting daylight and they started bombing us. This is when the real fight started. We were very heavily bombed. We stayed for 13 days until the 8th army came up the valley to relieve us. At that time, 600 men had gone in, and only 82 of us came out alive.

We returned to Sicily to regroup and rest and start training for Yugoslavia. We made for the Dalmatian coast of Yugoslavia where all but one of the outlying islands had been taken by the Germans. The island was called Vis and the Germans knew nothing of our occupation of this island. From then on we were doing raids, reconnaissance, took prisoners, sank barges, and food convoys on different islands to enable us to capture the garrison and free the island.

At one time we joined with the Marine Commandos as there was to be a raid on the island of Brac. Our C.O. was Colonel Jack Churchill, and we said it was

bad luck to make a raid with just the Marines and not us 2 Commando, as that was the plan. Anyway, the raid went ahead without us and they got into a lot of difficulties and we got called to help them out. The Partisans reported that a Marine Commando was wounded and was in a hut and would someone help to get him out. I managed to get to the hut where I found him with a stomach wound. I got him onto my shoulder and partly carried and partly walked him along, dodging German patrols. I asked him what his name was and he said Peter Jordan. I asked where he came from and he said Hayling Island. Nothing more was said of this incident until a good friend of ours, Noel Pycroft wrote a book. Peter Jordan had given him all the details and there was my name in print!

We landed on one particular island, Solta, under the cover of darkness and got into the main village. I was leaning on a wall when the church clock struck 4a.m. It frightened me to death! It was on this road that a machine gun opened up so we knew we'd been seen, so we separated up. I didn't realise I was running right into a machine gun post and got hit in my ankle and leg. The German then threw a hand grenade that hit my other leg and the side of my back. My mate also got hit on his legs and we both managed to get behind a rock. Every time we tried to light a cigarette a bullet hit the rock so we had to go without a smoke! Luckily dive bombers came in and the Germans surrendered.

I was carried down to the village where they gave me wine. 2 Germans then picked me up on a stretcher and took me to a house where an American Doctor bandaged me up. I was then taken by 4 Germans down to the beach where a crash launch was to take me back to base.

Once there I was taken to a farmhouse and laid on a table. A Doctor asked me where I came from. I said Portsmouth as no-one usually knew where Hayling Island was. He asked what part of Portsmouth? I said Hayling Island actually. He turned out to be a Dr Ricketts from Havant. While he was saying all this he had been running a scalpel down my leg and I said, 'put me to sleep please Doctor', and he did.

When I came round I was being loaded onto a landing craft back to Italy, to Bari where I had to stay in hospital for 4 months while my wounds healed.

I was then sent to H.Q. who then sent me back to the Dalmatian coast and carried out more raids, but my leg was not healing well so was not able to do too much more of it. I was in Yugoslavia on D. Day. I had come down from the mountains and there was a Post Office type store there and I was shown a letter in English to tell us that D. Day had started. Later I went back to Italy to Mount Vadonia where we done several raids on the coast. By this time the war was coming to an end.

We went to the Albanian border when the war had finished and we became occupying troops instead of fighting troops. I did not encounter so much fighting after that. After regrouping I was told I had to go to Greece as there was more fighting going on with the Partisans in the mountains with their own people. We had to sort them out until Churchill came over and established peace. I then went to Salonika and visited the war graves site where my Dad fought in WW1. He was so pleased when I told that I had been there for him.

I went to North Italy where I was told it was nearly time I went home for a holiday, so home I went in the November for a months leave. While I had been away my sisters had got friendly with Edie and one night when Dad and I came home, we got to the top of the road and there were a lot of sailors hanging about. As Edie had to walk home to her house I offered to walk her home. The next day I was teased that I hadn't kissed her goodnight, so when she came to our house at dinner time I kissed her and then asked her out to the cinema. From then on love blossomed. She was a seamstress when I first met her, then she worked for a while out at Havant in Timothy Whites store.

I had to go back to Italy for 8 months. On arrival I was told I was going to Crete where the German surrender took place and I was part of the guard force for the prisoners until they were shipped off to North Africa. I was then sent back to Greece and then onto Cairo where I was to wait for my release to come home and this is where I spent my last days in the Army.

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Quote from the book - Hayling, An Island of Laughter and Tears - by Noel Pycroft

"I will go back to Alf Sawyer, who, older than I by six years, was stationed in Yugoslavia in 1944. On a raid on, I believe, Brac from Vis, he was told that there was a wounded marine left on Brac - the partisans had him hidden.

Alf, another of Mr Earney's well-caned boys, a little nine stone soldier, went the next night, guided by a partisan, with two others under the cover of darkness and found the marine with a bad abdominal wound, in a hut. On hoisting him onto his shoulder, expecting to dump a corpse in the hidden boat, Alf said: "Where do you come from mate?" and had the reply, "Langstone near Hayling", and "Your name?" "Jordan," he replied. Alf, so surprised said, "Peter?"

Alf, dodging German patrols, soon had Peter Jordan back on Vis and in the care of his home Doctor, then serving in Force 133 as a Surgeon Major RAMC, Dr. Jim Ricketts, also from Havant and Emsworth, and of introducing Alf to bystanders as the mate who saved my life. Alf says, "I never let a mate down." My friend of 63 years, a typical Hayling Islander, it is privilege to know Alf Sawyer"

Alf Sawyer died on the 19th December 2009.