

FLYING SPIRIT

The Official National Newsletter of the SAAF Association

NPO 083-072
PBO: 18/11/13/4374

Contents:

Message from the National President	1
SAAFA Congress	2
Eagle Assistance Fund	4
A précis of my D Day Contribution	4

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Note:

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Message from the National President

It was indeed a great honour to be able to accept the appointment of National President of the SAAF Association. It is so good to see that this well-loved organisation has been able to get through the financial difficulties of the past number of years and now has a very positive future ahead. I would like to congratulate Tom Borrill on his well-deserved appointment as National Vice President. I would also like to congratulate the Country Vice Presidents Bart Hauptfleisch, Wally Vandermeulen, Graham Smith, Arrie de Klerk and Daan Badenhorst on their appointments. These appointments are very special, not only do they recognise exceptional service to SAAFA, as National Executive Committee members they are able to project NEC's presence into the various regions of our country. I am very grateful that the current NEC members are willing to continue their service and I have no doubt that this strong team developed by my predecessors will continue to support the branches and steer national matters in the right direction. A special word of appreciation needs to go to Phillip Weyers for his willingness to step into the breach and serve as National President for this past year. His support and mentorship has been invaluable. Our National Secretary, Sam Geddes has not only found her feet very quickly, but is proving to be a real asset in the national office. I would like to wish the branches well in their endeavours for the coming year and look forward to the ongoing good relations in our efforts to pursue the objectives of SAAFA.

Hugh Paine

National President

South African Air Force Association



SAAFA Congress

Delegates from all over South Africa gathered in the Boeing room, SAAF College for the 69th SAAFA National Annual General Meeting. This year the Congress was successfully hosted by the East Rand branch.



Attendees of the National Annual General Meeting at SAAF College

During the SAAFA Congress the following national office bearers were appointed:

- National President: Hugh Paine
- National Vice President: Tom Borrill

Recipients of Awards. The following members received recognition for their distinguished services rendered to the South African Air Force Association during the 2013:

President Merit Medal with Bar

- Woolfie Tobiansky - Johannesburg
- Glenn Brownrigg - Johannesburg

President Merit Medal

- Irene Labuschagne - Weskus
- Karl Jensen - Johannesburg
- Krystyna Romanowicz - Johannesburg
- Andrzej Romanowicz – Johannesburg
- John Rogers - Port Alfred
- Jennifer Pearson - Port Alfred
- Valerie Human - Port Alfred
- John Brown - Cape Town

OSAAFA - Gold

- Graham Smith – Kimberley

OSAAFA - Silver

- Bart Hauptfleisch - Weskus
- Basil Hersov - Johannesburg
- Lee Hall - Cape Town
- Hugh Paine - Pretoria
- Koos van Rensburg - Pretoria
- Jaap Rossouw - Pretoria

OSAAFA – Bronze

- Ian Lellyett - Johannesburg
- Robert Urry - Johannesburg
- Terence Daly – Cape Town

Certificate of Merit

- William Prevett – Johannesburg

Special thanks was given to Leonie Bredell, the owner of Oasis Moreleta Park. During the week of the congress, this Oasis branch supplied all the fresh water to the congress attendees at SAAF College. A gesture that was acknowledged and greatly appreciated by all.

Eagle Assistanes Funds

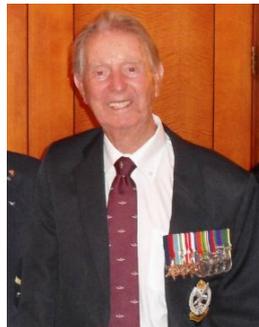
This announcement is by the Chairman of Eagle Assistance Fund, Don Johnston. All branch chairpersons and the SAAFA President is requested to communicate the following to SAAFA members. The Eagle Assistance Fund has been established to provide assistance to branch beneficiaries who are in temporary emergency need.

Remember that assistance afforded by the Fund is not linked to a geographical area or Branch affiliation.

A précis of my small segment of WW 2 (Staff Sergeant Reith)

A précis of my small segment of World War 2

On the 1st of May 2014 Alex Reith - at the age of 93 - departed to the United Kingdom for the 70th anniversary of D Day. On the 6th June 1944, Alex landed at Normandy in France as part of the largest air and seaborne invasion in history. He piloted an engineless glider with precious cargo over the channel.



Staff Sergeant Alex Reith

Ken Bannister and Dennis Wepener from the Lower South Coast SAAF Association have been the driving force behind Alex's return trip to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy in France. Alex was joined by Dennis Wepener, who was a brigadier general in the South African Air Force for almost 40 years. Here, in his own words, is a story of a life time, never told before but shared with SAAFA.

"It was no surprise when my mother heard I had joined the army at the age of seventeen, exaggerating my age by a measly one year, to hear her threatening to blow the whistle. She was not at all impressed with the thought of her son going off to war but soon relented, so on September 1st 1939 I became Sapper A. M. Reith in the Royal Engineers (RE). The RE's were sometimes known as the army's builders and destroyers. Order them to build a bridge and it would be done, ask them to blow up a bridge and it would be instantly turned into rubble with the same efficiency. Initial training apart from the usual military disciplines meant learning how to use small arms, playing a part in the construction of roads, buildings and anything else within the range of the regiments expertise. We were made familiar with the use of explosives, gun cotton, dynamite, Nobel 88 and with all the fuses and connections needed to link them together ready for blasting. After several months of practice, amongst other skills we could throw a

pontoon bridge across a river in record time, install an explosive charge, or play a part in building Nissan huts, air raid shelters or any other construction needed.

Up to the time of the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940 the war seemed to be on hold but then it changed dramatically when the German forces moved rapidly forward in an unstoppable blitzkrieg, sweeping through Belgium, France and Holland in a matter of days, only stopping when their armies reached the coast. From then on the majority of Europe was under German occupation with Italy as an ally, Spain, Portugal, Denmark and Switzerland neutral, and only the United Kingdom across the Channel, free and unoccupied, to offer any resistance. As an alternative to invasion, or perhaps as a prelude, Hitler decided to bomb the British into submission. The British nation had other ideas and so began the Battle of Britain inspired to some extent by Winston Churchill's historic speech 'We will fight them on the beaches...we will never surrender

From then on the full might of Herman Goering's Luftwaffe was focused on bombing England, primarily London but other towns spread over the country, suffered from a prolonged and devastating blitz. Day and night without respite, wave after wave of bombers rained down death and destruction indiscriminately on the population below, even their dive bombers were brought into action. The Junkers 88 emitted a terrifying scream as it dived on the target to unload its cargo of death. The skill and courage of the RAF Hurricane and Spitfire pilots in dog fights against the Luftwaffe has been well recorded but they could not prevent the constant pounding from the air. One of 'The Few' as the fighter pilots came to be known was "Sailor" Malan, a South African who had joined the RAF and became legendary in his time for his exploits in the air battles and the number of hits he recorded.

Several times a day and often through the night the air raid sirens shrieked out their mournful message air raid imminent....move into a shelter or somewhere safe.... Life for the civilian population was sheer hell, countless casualties and tremendous damage to property. London was a chaotic tangle of shattered buildings, streets piled with rubble and pitted with craters, burst water pipes and broken electricity cables, smoke and fires caused by the incendiary bombs. Thousands of people abandoned their homes at night time, took shelter in the nearest underground tube station, temporarily safe from bombardments but worrying, hoping there would be a home to go back to the next morning.

Amongst the many thousands of missiles hurtling down there were many that failed to detonate. These unexploded bombs could and did kill, injure and cause tremendous damage to property without exploding, and were often very difficult to locate when they came to rest after burrowing into the ground. Special Bomb Disposal Squads were formed to deal with this ongoing hazard. We members of the 25th Bomb Disposal Squad worked mainly in S.E London which was heavily targeted from the air. Even one of the smaller unexploded bomb, weighing perhaps 50 kilos, released from upwards of 1000 feet, created havoc and destruction on the way down, particularly amongst the old two storey terraced houses prevalent in this part of London, killing or maiming any occupants. After crashing through the roof and first floor, spinning on impact, the 50 kilos of metal, often finished up several feet underground, and still had to be found amongst the rubble before it could be made safe. Simply stated when the bomb was found it was rendered harmless by removing the fuse, without a detonating device there can be no explosion. As time went by there was an ingenious variety of fuses inserted in the missiles by the bomb makers across the Channel, to cause damage and confusion when the bombs were being made safe. Some fuses were fitted with a timing device designed to delay the activation

of the fuse, others were booby trapped to explode when the fuse, was extracted. Long after the air raids had peaked out, unexploded bombs were still being discovered and made safe, where ever the bombers had dropped their ravaging cargo. There are probably many more unexploded missiles still in the ground today, undetected, and the many hundreds that fell into the River Thames are still there slowly corroding. Just a few years back a 1000kg bomb was found when the Olympic site was under development in London, to be defused and hauled out.

A particular bomb I remember was meant to destroy Tower Bridge but the bomb aimer missed target, and carelessly dropped the missile into St Johns Church Yard just south of the bridge, without it exploding. The vicar who eventually reported the find, claimed that since the bomb had been lying near the church, the attendance at his sermons had dwindled and could we please take it away. It had fallen against the crypt and right between two graves and we were asked by the vicar not to disturb the mortal remains. As careful as we tried to be this was just not possible and we were in further trouble when the tibias, fibulas, jaw bones, skulls and other pieces that came up were reverently placed in one tidy heap, not separately so they could be returned to their original owners. The 250 pound bomb was removed, contents of the graves somewhat haphazardly and we never had a single complaint.

In the meantime I had applied to become a glider pilot and when the authorisation was granted I was transferred to the newly formed Glider Pilot Regiment. It began when, with about two hundred other hopefuls from many different regiments in the British Army, I was sent to a dismal, remote army camp in the middle of Salisbury Plains, not a hangar or a plane in sight. We were accommodated in Nissan huts which reminded me of the many I had helped to build in earlier days in the RE's. The next day in case we were getting too uppity stranded in the remoteness of Salisbury Plains we were given a welcoming speech.

"If you have any ideas about becoming lords of the air, forget about them. You are soldiers and will remain soldiers, a new breed of soldiers who will become fitter, more highly trained than any before you. For the next two months you will drill to a new high, very high standard....you will go through tough assault courses, you will climb and crawl, you will march long distances carrying heavy loads... you will be trained for unarmed combat, the use of every weapon in our and the Nazi armoury will become familiar to you, even small field guns and anti- tank weapons....the course will be hard, a test of endurance and before it is finished there will be drop outs who will return to their units. Only those who make the grade will be sent to flying schools...and remember this, if you are successful and awarded wings, you will still be soldiers".

It was a hard gruelling, punishing two months; we were bruised, blistered, stretched and worn to a frazzle. Those of us who were still there when it was over just had time to breathe a sigh of relief when the news came through that there was some delay at the RAF flying school and the hard slog training would go on until they were ready for us. Please, let it be soon.

A group of us eventually arrived at one of the many Elementary Flying Training Schools operated by the RAF. We were informed that the training would be in two main parts - daily sessions in the link trainer, classes including navigation, meteorology, aircraft recognition and of course daily flying instruction. The latter to be given in a Tiger Moth, an open cockpit biplane, with an in line engine which could only be started by swinging the propeller manually, a rather frightening experience until we got used to it.



Tiger Moth

After a maximum of ten hours flying with the instructor we would be expected to go solo, or face rejection and sent back to our units. Most of us made it, some well within the limit and my time came when after a few trial circuits and bumps my instructor clambered out of the front cockpit and said "You are as ready as you ever will be - go and kill yourself". After this encouraging invitation what could I say? The first solo for any one is an exhilarating experience, easing the plane off the ground, gaining height, turning cross wind still climbing, turning down wind, cross wind and into wind ready for the landing. The landing was a bit bumpy and the instructor looked quite relieved when I taxied over to the edge of the airfield to pick him up from where he had sweated out my first solo. Another hurdle over now but the flying training had yet to be completed and our brains had to absorb enough detail in the classrooms to pass the written examinations before moving on to the next phase, glider training.

When the time came it was to an airfield on the border of Wales where we were introduced to the Hotspur, a small glider holding two pilots in tandem with seating for five troops at the back. In common with all military gliders it was towed off the ground connected by a rope to a powered aircraft, known as a tug, in this instance a Miles Master. The normal procedure is for the tug in front to move slowly forward to take up the slack in the rope and to gain speed as the glider moves forward. As the combination picks up sufficient speed the glider becomes airborne first, flying above the slip stream of the tug as it takes off. The old hemp ropes, 50 yards in length were prone to break on take offs or on tow but the nylon ropes which replaced them were more durable. Embedded in the rope there was a wire allowing communication to be made between tug and glider.



Horsa Glider with a Tug

It might be useful to give a brief description of military gliders and why they were used. All those flown by the British forces were made, often in furniture factories, of plywood and glue with a small amount of metal. The Hotspur was used only for training. The Horsa was the most commonly used operational glider, a wing span of 80 feet and a pay load more than 7000lbs. The Hamilcar, a monster glider with a wing span greater than the Halifax and a cockpit 25 feet

off the ground was used for transporting heavier loads. There are few photographs of the gliders attached to this article which may be of interest.

The purpose of the gliders was to land as an integrated fighting force in a chosen part of enemy territory. Para-troops were restricted by the limited amount of equipment they were capable of carrying and by the fact that their landings could be scattered over a wide area. On the other hand glider borne troops, up to thirty of them in a Horsa, together with the weapons they needed, alternately a field gun, jeep and five troopers, could be landed together as a fighting force. The enormous Hamilcar carried a tank and its crew or a heavy duty lorry.



Horsa with a Jeep, Gun and Troopers

To get back to the preliminary glider training, the big difference to flying powered aircraft was to feel comfortable flying, taking off and landing without the help of an engine. Soon we became familiar with the changes and began to enjoy the relative lack of noise except for the quiet hiss of wind as we glided through the air. The usual mix of day and night flying, Link training and daily classes were crammed into six weeks after which we were ready to move on to fly Horsa Gliders at the Heavy Glider Conversion Unit in Brize Norton.

The main difference between the Hotspur and Horsa was one of size, soon overcome with a minimum of flying practice. The panoramic cockpit of the Horsa gave the two pilots a 180 degree view, as they sat side by side facing the simple instruments, air speed indicator, altimeter and compass. There was a brake and a lever to operate the flaps at 45 degrees or 90 degrees the only two settings available. Subsequently another instrument was added which became known as "The Angle of Dangle". Its use will be explained further on.

There was a variety of the tugs used for towing Whitleys, Albemarles, Dakotas, Halifaxes, Stirlings and others. Tug pilots needed special skills to keep their plane under control whilst towing another aircraft bucking and heaving on a rope 50 yards behind them. Another problem was that the difference between what was shown on their air speed indicator and stalling point was frequently a narrow one.

Our training with the RAF instructors included cross country flights and all the normal training procedures but the emphasis was on take offs and landings, a pattern we needed to follow because the success of any future glider operation depended on the pilots ability to land accurately on the specified landing strip. We were not looking to build up the flying hours but to maximise the number of 'lifts', to hone our landing skills. As a very useful aid to developing these landing skills, a transparent cover was marked out with narrow strips and placed on a map of the landing ground, showing precisely where we had been briefed to land. These were

a great aid even when we were practising mass landings on other airfields or even our home base.

HGCU training behind us we were awarded our wings, posted to 'A' Squadron, an established squadron almost up to full strength. Our intake of new pilots was all teamed up with existing pilots in the squadron, myself with "Masher" Miles. Now we could go ahead for day to day training to continue ready for the big day, the mass invasion of Europe which was beginning to become universally known as D Day. We had a sequence of 'lifts', day and night flying, flying through dense cloud, when the tug plane could all but disappear from sight with strange and disturbing results. When this happened the best option was for the glider to fly below the slip stream allowing the bifurcation in the tow rope to act as a guide to the glider pilot for the ideal position behind the tug. It was uncomfortable breaking through the slip stream from the up or below position, jolting and buffeting the glider in shuddering and swaying motions, but like everything else one became accustomed to it. The 'angle of dangle' instrument previously referred to made flying in thick cloud a little more manageable but it was far from perfect.

Rightly so around this time, General Eisenhower was appointed the Supreme Commander of the Combined Forces, responsible for organizing and co-ordinating all the efforts of the joint allied forces towards the minute preparations essential to uphold their role in the most massive invasion the world had ever known. There would be one chance only for the invasion to get a foothold in Europe. When the day came every army, navy and air force making up the combined forces must be in place, ready and determined to move forward.

If anything the training of tug and glider combination became more intensive, we were getting dizzy from the frequency of "lifts". We were all very fit, D Day was on all our minds and we were anxious to get going, like everyone else likely to be involved. When we were confined to barracks it was obvious something was about to happen, Jeeps, field guns and extra ammunition were beginning to pile up ready for the arrival of the Air Landing Brigade, confirming that the big day was close. On June 4th "Operation Mallard" was fully explained to us. We were fully briefed to make a landing in a field in Normandy, somewhere near Ranville, on June 6th 1944, carrying a 6lb field gun, with a Jeep and its crew. Warning was given that the Germans, anticipating a mass glider landing, had spaced out a lot of poles on the likely landing grounds, similar to telegraph poles, with the intention of causing damage to the gliders as they landed. We were expecting to take off in the afternoon, fly at the height of 3000 feet over the coast making a few turns to create confusion about our destination, and then a final leg to our landing point.

We were all wound up to go and it seemed like some sort of let down when the op was postponed until the following day. The cloud was nearly down to the ground, visibility nil, there was heavy rain and realistically it was the only decision that could be taken. This rather frustrating delay brought no real relief to us, but whatever, we all decided to go into the mess and drink it dry. It was a good try, many of us with such a heavy hangover the next day, we could have been found guilty of flying a glider under the influence.

Next day we were re-briefed for the landing to be made on June 5th, but there was little change in the weather and it was no surprise to hear the operation postponed again. Back to the mess again but my stamina was running out. It was Eisenhower's decision to make and I often think of the terrific strain he must have been under. Years of planning, countless numbers of personnel, aircraft, ships, tanks, big guns, all sorts of heavy equipment on hold, waiting for the

weather to clear and to be given the signal to start this historic, gigantic invasion. The weather did not look so promising the following day, June 6th, but word came through. We are ready to go.

The gliders with their loads were on the runway and the tugs beginning to assemble ready for the ropes to be inserted for taking off. In total on D day some 500 gliders were lifted off from various airfields in the area, the earlier ones in pitch darkness to make landings on strategic targets in Normandy. Small wonder that people on the ground as we passed above, claimed the skies were black with aircraft, literally hundreds of them. The weather improved slightly as we flew over the coast, and there in the sea below us and the air around us was a once to be seen, never to be forgotten sight, the vast liberation armada moving resolutely towards the beaches of Normandy. A multitude of ships, boats and sea craft of every description, assault boats, landing craft all heading for the same objective, the air around us swirling with the sheer number and variety of aircraft in flight.

Flak and tracer bullets floated up around us as we approached the coast of France, but soon all our attention was focused on spotting our landing ground which was getting close. On receiving guidance from the tug pilot we cast off the rope and to help Masher identify our landing strip I flew the Horsa in line for our landing strip, down to 1000 feet. The landing strip was plainly identified, level and free from invasion poles. Masher took over, guided the Horsa down, put on full flap and landed on the spot running only a short distance, without incident. Soon after coming to a halt the troopers in the back gathered all their equipment together and we helped them to manoeuvre the Jeep and gun out of the glider.

We wished them luck and as they sped off we spotted some German soldiers heading our way but they were already prisoners captured by the Ox and Bucks troopers, being escorted to a compound. It was beginning to get dark and in the company of some other glider pilots we knew, it was decided to make camp for the night. Guard duty for the night was agreed between us and after feasting on emergency rations we made the best of it for the night to try to snatch some sleep. The instructions given to us were very clear - as soon as all resistance in your immediate area has been cleared you will make your way back to base. In fact we all carried a document the gist of which was "The holder of this document is required for further duties and every assistance is to be given for him to return to his home base for another operation."

Together as a group we took the best bearing we could for the few miles walk to the beach we had crossed only the previous day. Evidence of the fierce fighting that had raged was all around, dead German soldiers, abandoned rifles, field guns, vehicles, automatic weapons all the casualties of war. Obviously the RAMC had been around to treat the wounded and to carry away any of our forces killed in action. The chatter of an automatic weapon was heard close by and as we moved in that direction to investigate, a group of our people were to be seen surrounding a small church. A German sniper was trapped in the church steeple, firing spasmodically through the slit, apparently making a last stand, a final sacrifice. Any requests for him to surrender were answered with another spray from the automatic. When a couple more appeals for him to give in were ignored, a small shell was fired into the slit, terminating the life of a stubborn but courageous foe, one who had chosen to go his own way. After we reached the shore we were directed by a beach marshal to board a small naval ship which was soon due to return to England. We saw three Messerschmitt's swoop in to strafe the ships in

the harbour but in no time Spitfires engaged them and shot them out of the sky, demonstrating the superiority of our air power.

Within about five days from the time we flew out we were back, disembarking at one of the southern ports of England and from then on to our home base. Flying training began almost immediately for an operation which never happened. But there was a big one, a very significant one for the GPR, under plan for September.

We were training again but there were gaps in our ranks, some familiar faces were missing. Some with broken tow ropes, after ditching in the sea were ultimately rescued, others not seen again. Not all the gliders that landed in the Caen area were without incident and moreover they met fierce determined resistance that continued for days causing heavy casualties. But the real tough assignments for glider pilots were those carried out in total darkness on selected strategic targets which had to be held at all costs. Three teams of glider pilots were detailed to crash land at night onto a battery of six inch guns likely to cause havoc with the D Day landings. Only two arrived at the target but they completed their mission. Six other gliders were given the task of landing near the bridge crossing the River Orne and the Caen canal, to capture it and hold it, a formidable task. Another glider night assault was made to capture a bridge crossing the River Dives which had to be taken and held intact to be used later for the army to advance. Miraculously it was a success and the bridge came known as Pegasus Bridge. Several glider pilots who were set these formidable tasks were awarded decorations for their part in completing the missions. A high ranking RAF officer described this operation as one of the supreme flying feats of the entire war.

We all knew that another operation was already in the advanced planning stage and all sorts of rumours were being speculated about where and when. We were not yet to know but it was a massive Operation involving the British 1st Airborne Division and the 101st and 82nd American Airborne Divisions with the objective to capture Arnhem and Nijmegen. Some 10,000 men, including parachutists and 1,200 glider pilots were to make up the task force. At the briefing we were told of the anti-aircraft positions that were known to be en route to our landing zones, particularly strong ones protecting an airfield close to Arnhem. Masher Miles and I were crewed together again.

Sunday, September 17th, a bright and sunny day was the date for the first lift. Incredibly there was almost a gala atmosphere at Harwell Airfield as we assembled to take off. Nearly all the admin staff, the ladies of the WAAF's together with the few aircrew who were not on the Operation were there to cheer us off and wish us safe return, it was all very touching. The tugs were lining up, the tow ropes connected, revving up and moving together up the runway. In the air from our wide view cockpits, there was the fantastic sight of what seemed like thousands of tugs and gliders at slightly different levels, all moving in the same direction. Way below us in free flight we saw a Horsa preparing to land somewhere safe, probably caused by a loose rope connection. After we moved over the Dutch coast from time to time there was ack-ack fire from emplacements either side and later I heard that several troopers and one glider pilot had been killed or wounded by stray bullets. We were scheduled to make our landing close to one of the forests around Nijmegen. The tug pilot warned we were getting close and soon we were able to identify our strip, pull the rope release lever and prepare to land. The landing strip was level and with a full flap landing we touched down, ran only a few yards, and unloaded the Jeep and

field gun. We patted the Horsa goodbye and prepared to move to our assembly point but it was not quite so straight forward.

There were shells falling not so far away from us and a little bit further distant there was rifle and automatic fire and at a distance enemy soldiers could be seen. Some of the troops around returned the fire but the distance was too far for any sort of accuracy. Our instructions were only to engage in defensive action and as we started to move into the nearby forest, there was a great roar as a mass of Dakotas came in sight each towing two American Waco Gliders. By this time the field guns we had carried were in action shelling the enemy forces and the Americans were very quick to unload their heavier guns and create some havoc. We were directed into the forest and surprisingly we linked up with our CO, Major Griffiths and Brigadier General Browning, the expedition leader. We were ordered to provide the defence for Head Quarters and directed to where it was to be. On the way to the HQ site a Messerschmitt came over very low fire spitting fire out of the cannons in the wings. Just as we started to crawl out of the ditch where we had hurled ourselves for cover, the fighter swooped down again for another go. Miraculously no one was even injured.

It was a different story for the contingent that had landed at Arnhem. Most of the gliders had landed there without much difficulty and safely unloaded their cargo of men and equipment. What they did not know was that a division of SS Panzer Grenadiers were operationally alert in the area, equipped with trench mortars, flame throwers, heavy mortars and nearly 400 highly trained officers and men commanded by General Model. On September 18th one day after our landing this powerful, well trained force swung into action completely trapping our forces against the Rhine. The battle between them raged on for more than three weeks inflicting horrific casualties on our forces. Glider pilots filled in by manning mortars, firing machine guns, caring for the wounded, filling in where ever help was needed most. It was a hopeless position with horrific levels of casualties.

In October orders came through for our forces to withdraw. The plan was, under cover of darkness, for everyone to make their way to the river and get across as best they could. It was a wise decision saving many lives though some perished attempting the crossing. The few boats available were sent to help those who could not swim but many non-swimmers were helped across the river by their mates. As it became daylight the SS Forces swiftly advanced, opened fire on the troops still trying to cross the river and rounded up the stragglers as prisoners of war. The German advance was only temporary, as within a few days as our forces moved strongly towards Germany, they were pushed further and further back.

Back at our Divisional Head Quarters a jeep and caravan arrived without notice bringing the instantly recognizable Field Marshall Montgomery. We were invited to gather round for him to tell us what splendid chaps we were, the valuable contribution we had made to our advancing forces and to be given a fifty tin of Players cigarettes. Very welcome from some of the vile stuff we had to smoke during the tobacco shortage.

A few days later we were back at our base in England to count the cost of Operation Market. There were terrific losses and our ranks were vastly depleted. Out of a total of a little more than 3000 pilots we had lost 551 killed, 200 wounded and 550 prisoners of war. Another massive operation was at the advanced planning stage, a smaller one to take place in Italy, and there simply were not enough pilots to fly the gliders needed for the operation, and no time to train them. Our Commandant had the brilliant idea of using spare RAF pilots and when the horrified

resistance of the RAF top brass was over-come, about a thousand of RAF pilots in the pool were seconded to the GPR. Most of them were aspiring to be fighter pilots and the thought of flying gliders filled them with disappointment and dismay, but they soon responded to the training they were given as glider pilots and soldiers, and became warm, even enthusiastic to the idea. The operation still under planning came to be named the Rhine Crossing, involving 480 Horsa or Hamilcar gliders and two brigades of paratroopers. Later reports indicated that the landing conditions were very difficult with many gliders and passengers hit by flak and thick smoke blanketing the landing area.

The Rhine Crossing was not until March 24th 1945 by which time I had been posted to Italy as part of a replacement contingent for the 1st "Independent Glider Pilot Squadron". Twenty glider pilots were flown out close to Christmas 1944 as a matter of urgency in an Avro York, landing in Naples after a six hour flight. The Independents had served in North Africa suffering heavy losses on the Sicily operation when many gliders were cast off by the tugs short of their landing grounds, forcing the pilots to ditch. Those who made it to Sicily were not much better off trying to land on rocky terrain.

From Naples we were transported to our billets in requisitioned houses just outside Rome. It was Christmas time and there appeared to be a distinct lack of urgency about anything and certainly no mention of an operation. We had been whisked from a cold wintry England into the balmy Italian sunshine, accommodated in style on the coast south of Rome, making new friends. Guaranteed to spoil the perfection there was a beer shortage, but plentiful supplies of vermouth, which we were learning to drink. What the hell, we were used to hardships.

Things became a little more realistic in January when training re-started. We flew Horsas and Wacos between Tarquinia, Guidonia and Campino airfield and I think initially the flying ability of the recently arrived contingent was being vetted, after all we were new boys. A few mass precision landings were practised on different airfields, something was in the offing. It turned out to be an operation involving 40 gliders to land in the Po Valley with the objective of taking and holding a strategic bridge, which if not captured whole could impede the progress of the advancing allied forces. Briefing as usual was clear and precise and the date set for February. The op was due to start in the early afternoon and on time the gliders were loaded and getting ready to take off when an urgent message was received calling off the operation. An American Lightning on a photo reconnaissance flight had brought back pictures of heavy armour and German troops massing round our landing ground. Anxious not to repeat the mistakes of Arnhem the operation was cancelled.

From then on there were a few desultory practise flights but when the whole of Italy was back under allied control it seemed certain that after more than four long years the war in Europe would soon be over. When Victory in Europe (VE Day) was declared in May there was a huge collective sigh of relief and it seemed the huge joyous, untrammelled celebrations would never stop. Crowds in the streets hugging and kissing, singing, dancing went on for days but eventually ran out of steam. Still in Italy our celebrations were perhaps a bit more subdued, joined by the Italian people who never really had their hearts in the war.

We arrived back in England in June 1945 and almost immediately were sent on a refresher course flying Hotspur and Hadrian gliders (previously called Wacos) Tiger Moths and Magister powered aircraft. Enjoyable as the course was I could never see the purpose of it for almost immediately it ended, we were transferred back to A Squadron. Victory in Japan was celebrated

in September 1945 Japan, not with quite the wild enthusiasm of VE day. Not much later we were posted out to Egypt. For four months there was no flying at all, only camels and vast expanses of sand. Next we were in Palestine, ostensibly to control the murderous activities of the Irgun Zvai Lumi, the Israeli revolutionary army fighting for complete possession of Palestine. How gliders could help in this struggle was far from clear but we started flying Horsas again for a few months. Eventually the Israelis were given the Promised Land and we returned to Egypt. Back to flying Horsas but very little training of any sort until returning to England for demobilisation in April 1946.

Even then it was becoming obvious that the GPR had outlived its usefulness but it limped on for a few more years. I was given a suit, a gratuity of 150 pounds with no idea how I was going to earn a living. It was a hard struggle but gradually things fell into place and I began to feel comfortable wearing a suit.

The pilots still with time to serve were dispersed in useful capacities, some sent to India on a liaison exercise, others seconded to the Royal Artillery flying the Austers used for artillery spotting, another group were sent out to Korea but all this was just delaying the day. In 1957 the pilots not already on flying duties in other military spheres were absorbed in to The Army Air Corps to begin training on helicopters. It was a time of sadness for all of us who had helped to form and develop the Regiment during the few short years of activity. We were a very closely bonded group from similar backgrounds, bound together by specialised training and experiences, leading to friendships which in many instances have lasted until this day. The Glider Pilot Regiment Association was well supported when it was formed after the war, regional and annual meetings maintained contact between us, cementing our many friendships. Our magazine known as "The Eagle" published in full colour and distributed three times a year, keeps expats all over the world in touch with events, although it cannot completely compensate for lack of personal contact. Living contentedly in South Africa for more than 44 years, as an associate member of the South African Air Force Association, enjoying the companionship of their monthly meetings and lunches keeps me in contact with people of the same interests.

Visiting England in 1992 I made a particular point of visiting Salisbury Cathedral to see the two twenty foot Memorial Windows dedicated to those named in The Roll of Honour who made the supreme sacrifice serving in the Royal Air Force, The Army Air Corps and The Glider Pilot Regiment. Beneath the window these words are inscribed:

“See that ye hold fast the heritage that we leave you. Yea and teach your children that never in the coming centuries may their hearts fail or their hands grow weak”.

