

# The Military Career of Norman David Lane



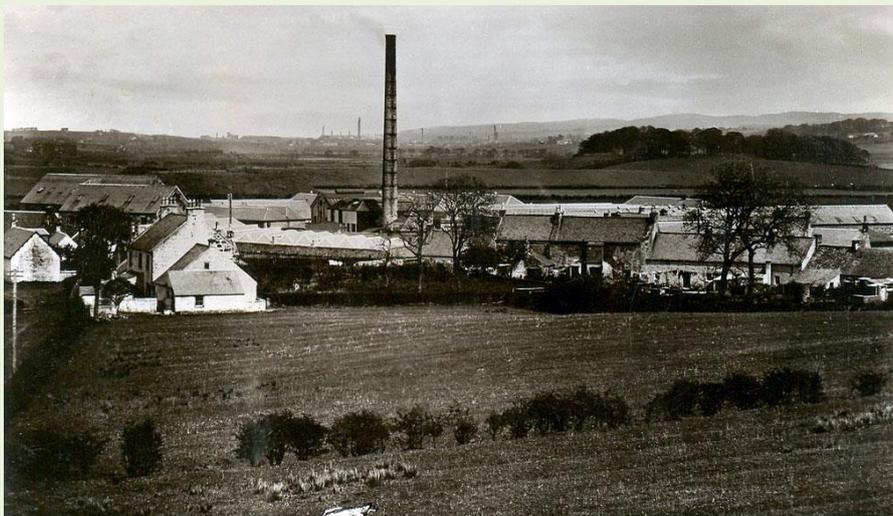
Norman, who was born on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1924 was caught, like all the other young people of his age, by the outbreak of WW2. In the spring of 1939 war with Germany seemed possible if not probable and so plans for a limited conscription of men between the ages of 20 and 22 was approved by parliament. With the declaration of war on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 parliament brought in a much broader conscription with the passing of The National Service (Armed Service) Act which widened that conscription to all males aged between 18 and 41 years. Exemptions were made for those who were not medically fit or engaged in certain industries like farming, medicine and engineering. In December 1941, a second National Service Act was passed which widened the conscription further to include all unmarried women and childless widows aged between 20 and 30 years. Men up to the age of 60 were now required to do some form of National Service, which included military service for those under 51, but was really introduced to make up for the lack of volunteers for police and civil defence while the women were mainly engaged on auxiliary units of the armed forces.

Norman attained the age of 18 years on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1942 and was duly called up for National Service and on 3<sup>rd</sup> December "Taken on strength" when he was posted to the armies No 26 Primary Training Centre at Northampton. As indicated by the name primary training centres provided the initial basic military training for the life the soldiers were about to lead in a 6 to 8-week course. On completion of that course, on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1943 Norman was posted to 76 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery for further training and on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1943 was shown as posted to "Home Details" with the additional note that he was under 19 years of age. The exemption to posting those under 20 abroad had been lifted by 1942 but clearly some effects remained.

With effect from 14<sup>th</sup> April 1943 Norman was posted to 6<sup>th</sup> Field Training Regiment Royal Artillery located at [Longniddry](#) and [Dalry](#), Scotland. This was one of several training regiments formed to cater for the rapid expansion brought about by National Service and was functional between 1939 and 1944. Just as large numbers of new training units were required so to were places to accommodate them. In the case of Longniddry, as in many other instances throughout the UK, a rather splendid country house and estate was commandeered for the duration, in this case the [Gosford Estate](#).



But at Dalry, again as in many other instances it was a large industrial complex that was commandeered, the [Ryefield Mills](#).

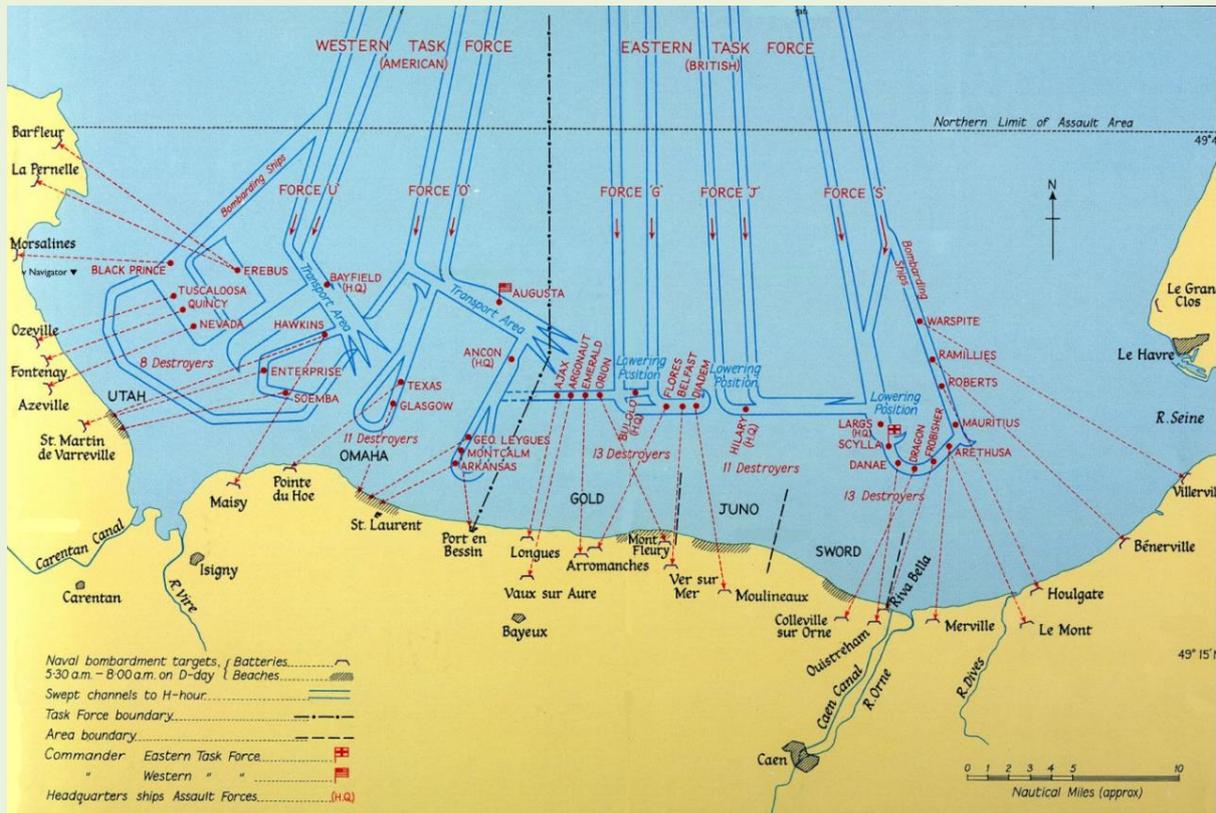


After one month of training Norman was finally posted to his active service unit 147 Field Regiment R.A. (Essex Yeomanry) on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1943 but remained at Dalry. The Essex Yeomanry had been formed in 1797, recruited from Essex and the east of England and it retained an Essex connection throughout the years and various transformations. In 1921 the regiment was converted from cavalry to artillery and in 1938 was renamed 104<sup>th</sup> (Essex Yeomanry) Regiment RHA. On the outbreak of war in 1939 a duplicate regiment was formed as part of the increased manpower and designated 147<sup>th</sup> (Essex Yeomanry) Regiment RHA, or as variously recorded 147 Field Regiment R.A. The established 104<sup>th</sup> Regiment was posted to the Middle East in 1940 and served in most of the western desert battles while the new 147<sup>th</sup> Regiment was destined to land on the Normandy beaches on D-Day, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944 as part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade.

The conversion from cavalry to artillery at one time might have meant a changing role for the horse but in this more modern age horses had been replaced by varying mechanical devices to transport the large, heavy and very powerful artillery weapons. The 147<sup>th</sup> Regiment were equipped with the primary artillery field gun of the time, [25-pounder Howitzer](#) mounted on a Sexton based tank body. The [Sexton](#) tank was of American design but over 2,150 were manufactured in Canada at the Montreal Locomotive Works for the British Army, of two slight variants the Ram and Grizzly, in order to provide mobile artillery.



D-Day was an enormous operation of such scale and complexity that it is difficult to imagine, this [Video](#) may give some idea. Below you can see spread across 50 miles or more of coastline the lines of the main invasion forces divided into the Western and Eastern Task Force's. The 147<sup>th</sup> Regiment were to support the assault on Gold beach at [Arromanches](#), and a main part of their task was to lay down fire upon the beach and beyond from the sea as they approached.



[Image from.](#)

Some indication of the scale can be taken from the memories of a small boy living in Dalry at the time who witnessed the movement of those training in the area, which may well have been or included the 147<sup>th</sup> Regiment, on their way to take part in the landings.

*"One of my most vivid memories was just before D-Day. I remember being out in the street and seeing hundreds of tanks rumbling down the main road of Dalry. There must have been hundreds of them, one after another. And this convoy went on for hours, if not days. They must have been travelling down to the coast to be shipped down to be part of the D-Day invasion force."*

This just one of the many training areas spread about the UK.

Norman was not part of the actual D-Day landing force although his regiment was. Such an invasion would include many elements and while of course a vast force was required to make the initial assault many others would be required to follow at various intervals for various reasons. As the attack pushed forward other troops would need to follow to occupy the land and secure bases both against counter attack and to provide protection for supply lines essential to the continued viability of forward troops. As we shall come to see another vital element of this support were medical units to deal with the inevitable casualties. Further troops, across the whole range, would also be required to make up losses and add to the overall number so that relief routines could be established to alleviate the stress and strain on all units.

The story of the 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade, of which 147<sup>th</sup> Regiment formed a part, is set out in some detail [HERE](#). After the D-Day landings and four weeks' action it records:

*"The 25 pounders of the Essex Yeomanry were never out of action: the seeds of a great mutual co-operation were being sown. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, the Brigade moved out of line to Chouain to rest and maintain,"*

Normans Service Records show that he "Embarked" on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1944. He no doubt went to Chouain to re-join his regiment and the 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade, as part of that "maintenance", because on the following day they returned to the line in support of the 50<sup>th</sup>(Northumbrian) Division in the continuing attack on [Hottot-les-Bagues](#).



The village of  
Hottot-les-Bagues  
near Tilly-sur-Seulles

July 1944

The battle for this tiny village was of course only part of a much broader battle through Normandy being fought by both the American troops of the Western Task Force and the UK and Canadian troops of the Eastern Task Force. While these were two distinct and separate Task Forces there was, as one would hope, considerable co-operation and at times exchange. For instance some few days after the attack on Hottot-les-Bagues the 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade relieved the 2<sup>nd</sup> United States Armoured Division of a Sector of their line to the Northeast of [Caumont](#) where they remained static for the remainder of the month.

The battle through Normandy met some restriction from the nature of the landscape or "The Bocage" to the extent that it came to be known as the Bocage War. Bocage derives from an old Norman word and refers to a terrain of mixed pasture and woodland. Normandy at this time was a mass of small pastures divided by hedges and woodland which offered cover from view for foot soldiers, as demonstrated in the above photograph, but exposed tank commanders, who needed to see over the hedges, to sniper fire. It also made rapid and large scale movement difficult and played into the hands of the defending German troops who were determined to hold their ground.



Lower Normandy

Action continued across a broad front against a very determined and resilient German force. The 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade were now to support the 43<sup>rd</sup> (Wessex) Division who mounted an attack on 30<sup>th</sup> July, part of a wider advance, finally bringing them before the physical feature of [Mont Pincon](#) which at 1200 feet dominated the whole sector from the River Vire to Odon and provided the Germans with a clear field of vision to bring down artillery and mortar fire on any movement. It was not until 7<sup>th</sup> August that the feature was finally taken.

Operation "Black-water" and the drive South to [Condé](#) followed on 9<sup>th</sup> August and the start of another hard, slow struggle. Providing support alternatively to two divisions had a serious effect on the 8th Armoured Brigade, casualties were heavy and the men very tired. Resulting from this another armoured unit came under command and from then each unit was given 48 hours out of the line. This period allowed the Brigade workshops to repair damaged tanks and proved very successful. Proussy was captured on 14<sup>th</sup> August laying open the way to Condé. By now the American armour had made great gains breaking out from Caen towards Falaise and with the taking of Mont Pincon and Condé sur Noireau the Germans were in full retreat.

The pace of the allied advance moved more quickly now although individual battles remained as ferocious as ever. An indication of this is given in a sentence from the above mentioned story as the 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division moved off on the road past Falaise and the photograph below:

*"For miles on either side of Chambois the roads and fields were littered with dead soldiers, dead horses and smashed equipment; the scenes of chaos belie description, as also does the stench."*

**A battery of Essex Yeomanry passing through Ecouche in August 1944**





The advance continued through France and into Belgium and after lending support to the Guards Armoured Division at Beringden the Essex Yeomanry/ 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade celebrated their first four day stand down since D-Day. It was no doubt during these four days towards mid-September that Norman, pictured on the right of his comrade, went back into Brussels. They had to take what opportunities arose for relaxation where and when they became available because they were soon back into action.

At the end of their four days rest the Brigade moved off following the Guards Armoured Division to join up with various Airborne troops who had dropped at Eindhoven, Grave, Nijmegen and Arnhem as part of operation "Market Garden", one of the largest airborne operations ever mounted. The plan of Field Marshall Montgomery, "Monty", was to punch a narrow hole in the German defences and then push through to the Ruhr Valley and the heart of German manufacturing and so destroy their ability to support the war machine. The overall plan failed not least because of the landscape and weather. A large amount of Holland has been re-claimed from the sea or marshland and only continues to exist because of the vast network of often quite large drainage ditches and rivers. All vehicle traffic is therefore limited to the network of roads and bridges which are very often built above land level forming part of the drainage system and flood defences. Consequently roads and bridges were essential to any advance

or re-supply line making bridges especially primary defensive positions and/or targets for attack while anything traveling on the roads was exposed to both view and fire.

The 8th Armoured Brigade moved to the area of Nijmegen where the bridges over the River Waal had already been captured by 82<sup>nd</sup> USA Airborne Division supported by the Guards Armoured. Ahead of them though, in the Arnhem area battle still raged. Shortly after arriving in the area rations ran very short due to the cutting of a supply route. You cannot fight without rations and supplies, emphasising the importance of supporting troops. Because the situation was so bad and as it was known that there was a German Army food dump at Oss, 555 Company Royal Army Service Corps were ordered to go and relieve them of their store. This they did but not without a serious struggle in which they were assisted by the Guards Armoured Division. As they were leaving with the supplies they were asked by the German Officer in charge to sign for what they were taking, they did this with pleasure.



**Nijmegen and the bridge in late September, after the battle.**

October was very much a month on the defensive and while there was some slight movement and re-organisation they remained in the same general area. This period provided an opportunity for a certain amount of sport and entertainment which included a football competition won by the Essex Yeomanry who beat 13<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> Hussars by 2 goals to 1 in the final.

Then things changed, as described in the Short History of the 8th Armoured Brigade.

*"As the first snow began to fall the 8th Armoured Brigade was ordered South to Maastricht. Between 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> November all Regiments moved down to the area of Brunssum, except the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion The King's Royal Rifle Corps, who remained guarding the Western Approaches until 25<sup>th</sup>."*

The obstacle that lay before them now was a re-enforced relic from WW1 the Siegfried Line, almost 400 miles of concrete bunkers over-looking open land beset with so called "Dragons Teeth", concrete blocks set within mine fields. The Dragons Teeth made any advance by man or machine difficult while exposing them to fire from the relative safety of the bunkers. If any advance was to be made they had to be overcome.



USA forces were to attack South of Geilenkirchen with the intention of drawing off the enemy reserves and then 48 hours later a combined USA and British assault was to be made on either side of the town in order to push through this important part of the Siegfried Line, the Essex Yeomanry were to cover both these assaults. The assaults began at first light on 18<sup>th</sup> November and involved several days hard fighting against both a resistant enemy and deep mud. Heavy rain through these days added to the difficulties turning the ground into a sea of liquid brown mud through which no wheeled vehicle could move. Geilenkirchen was finally taken but at some stage in this battle Norman sustained shrapnel injuries to his back and had to be hospitalised. It is not at all clear how he sustained the injuries or what the injuries actually were as all that is shown on his record is:

*Wounded (Shrap wds back) Posted to X(11) list 129 Fd Amb 21/11/44*

The reference "*Posted to X(11) list*" indicates his injuries were serious enough for him to be evacuated beyond the Regimental Aid Post and therefore beyond an immediate return to the unit and so he was taken off strength while "*129 Fd Amb*" was the RAMC ambulance team that carried out his evacuation. Shrapnel originally referred to a shell containing bullets designed by Henry Shrapnel an English Artillery Officer but subsequently came to refer to any fragment of shell or bomb and in a battle such as this the full range of enemy fire from artillery shells to minefields provided shrapnel a plenty.

Having been wounded Norman would have received his initial treatment and assessment from a first aid unit attached to or located close to his unit. It would have been clear to them that he required more sophisticated treatment than they could provide. There was then an established assessment and evacuation route to take wounded back to a place that could provide the treatment they needed. Local to each unit would have been a Field Hospital. Field Hospitals moved around with the Army staying only about 30 miles behind the front. Mobility was a main requirement, everything capable of being packed and moved within a short space of time. Generally they used canvas tents although at times, when suitable and available various types of building were commandeered. The primary purpose was to provide a close back up to the fighting units with quick treatment to the less seriously wounded in order to return them quickly to the front. Norman was more seriously wounded and so was sent further back to a General Hospital.

General Hospitals consisting of a thousand or so beds were set further back from the front in a safer area but remained within the theatre of war, again to make it easier to return soldiers to duty. General Hospitals did still move on occasion as the war developed and circumstances required but mobility was not a main function. Norman was sent to General Hospital No 110 which occupied the Elisabeth Sanatorium in Sijsele, Belgium from 27 November 1944 until 27<sup>th</sup> November 1945. This hospital had been built in 1924-1927 and used primarily as a sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis in women and girls in West Flanders. Further building took place during 1937 – 1939.



**Early Radiation department.**



**Good for recovery when the weather is fine but not so good in November perhaps.**

The Elisabeth Sanatorium, now the [AZ Alma Hospital](#) part of the Alma Hospitals in both Sijsele and Eeklo, has been both expanded and modernised. I am most grateful to members of the Hospital Staff who traced a document from 1948 that stated, in the absence of any other positive information, that the Elisabeth Sanatorium was occupied by the English Army during the period stated above which confirms it was General Hospital 110 at that time.

Norman was discharged from General Hospital 110 on 23rd March 1945 and while clear of treatment he was not of course yet fit to return to a fighting unit. He was therefore posted to 35 RHU and placed on the X(1V) list, a list of those who for various reasons were not fit to join active units. Then, on 7<sup>th</sup> May 1945 Germany signed the document of surrender and so any further active service was over.



**Norman looking well and recovered in Germany in 1946.**

Norman was taken back on to the strength of 147 Field Regiment on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1945. While the fighting was over troops were required to oversee the occupation of captured territories. This task did not require the entire fighting force and so troops and whole units were discharged while others were re-assembled for the job in hand. Norman remained a soldier for a further two years and in this time served in 86<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment R.A. and 5 R.H.A. until he was finally demobbed on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1947 and transferred to the Reserve.

For his service he was awarded:

1939-1945 France and Germany Star

War Medal 1939-1945.

