

**James Holland (ed.), *An Englishman at War. The Wartime Diaries of Stanley Christopherson, DSO, MC, TD. 1939-1945.* London: Bantam Press, 2014. 551 pp. ISBN 978-0593068373 (Hardback). Price £25.00.**

I cannot remember when I have so enjoyed reading a diary, possibly Chips Channon, or maybe Harold Nicholson, and certainly not a military one, not even Alan Brook's. Here is the wartime story of a young officer who starts the war in the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry as part of 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, on horseback, loses his horse to mechanisation, but starts as a gunner in the siege of Tobruk, and eventually commands a sabre squadron at Alamein and through to Tunis. In Normandy he takes command after two commanding officers are killed, and remains in command through to VE Day.

Stanley Christopherson was educated at Winchester, which provides one of the *leitmotifs* that run through the book. He is forever meeting Old Wykehamists! One particular member of the BCMH will not be surprised to hear that my grandfather was his housemaster at Winchester. From there he went to South Africa, where the family had business interests and then returned to London as a stockbroker, joining the Inns of Court Yeomanry in 1936. He thus started the war as a Lance Corporal, being swiftly commissioned into the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, who must be one of the most written about regiments in the war. Aside from these diaries there is Hermione Ranfurly's *To War With Whitaker* (1994), Miles Hildyard's *It's Bliss Here and Stuart Hills' By Tank To Normandy*, (2002). There is also Keith Douglas' *From Alamein to Zem Zem*, published posthumously in 1946. So we already know quite a lot about the regiment.

What the diaries describe is how a collection of amateur weekend soldiers became professional soldiers. There weren't just professional, but were very good professionals. It has always been recognised that the German Army was very good tactically; but here is a ringing endorsement of the British Army's search for tactical success. In North Africa the regiment took their time to adapt to their new role as a tank regiment, after spending a long time as coastal gunners at Tobruk. They were in danger of being split up and used as reinforcements and it is entirely due to their commanding officer, Flash Kellett, that they survived as a regiment, being finally mechanised in the spring of 1942, taking part at Alamein and then at Zem Zem and Medinine, before the final battles in Tunis at Enfidaville. During this period they were often learning their trade, usually the hard way. Christopherson commanded a squadron of Crusader tanks throughout this period and learned how to cooperate with infantry, particularly the New Zealanders, and artillery. There was still an innocence about the war, fought in the desert, with few civilians and an easy to identify enemy.

All of that changed with the move of the Sherwood Rangers back to England in December 1943. They remained part of 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade, an independent brigade. As such they worked very closely with their infantry regiment, 12<sup>th</sup> KRRC, and their gunner regiment, the Essex Yeomanry. They supported every Infantry Division in 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, and became experts in helping the infantry forward. Indeed such was their expertise that reading the diaries is rather like listening to the debates of the 1970s about the structure of Armoured Division and Brigades all over again. Whenever infantry divisions attacked they needed armoured support and usually it

seems it was 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade who was chosen. This was as opposed to the Armoured Divisions, such as Guards Armoured or 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured, who were used for the offensive operations such as Epsom or Goodwood. Throughout the Normandy campaign Christopherson was remarkably well informed as to what was going on, commenting on, for example on 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured's difficulties at Villers Bocage. He took over command on 15<sup>th</sup> June after the death of two other COs. In his first operation as CO, Operation Epsom, SRY knocked out 13 enemy tanks, nearly as many as 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division had lost at Villers Bocage, but this success is rarely commented on, compared to the mythologised episode of Wittmann's attack at Villers Bocage. The key effect of Epsom, brought out by Christopherson, was that there was now little likelihood of a future significant German counter offensive as their armour had been seriously written down. However, the cost to the British was appalling. In an armoured regiment there were about 700 men, with about 220 in the sabre squadrons in 50 tanks. Within 6 weeks of landing on D Day, the SRY had lost 80% of their tank commanders. While they could collect new tanks from the repair and resupply depots, new trained commanders were a different matter. In the August fighting the SRY suffered further casualties but inflicted heavy losses on the Germans, including 3 Panthers, 1 Tiger and a JagdTiger, a massive beast of 72 tons, but their casualties meant that since D Day they had now suffered 100% of their tank commanders. Overall, this is amongst the best accounts of the Normandy campaign from the tactical level.

8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade was now part of XXX Corps and in the rapid advance from Normandy to Belgium had to alter their tactics. This time tanks led, with both 12<sup>th</sup> KRRC and the Essex Yeomanry gunners divided between the 3 armoured regiments, so forming 3 regimental groups and the Brigade acting for much of the time as flank guard for Guards Armoured. Again, the much vaunted German *Kampfgruppe* is often mentioned. However, here is the British Army doing exactly the same, and very successfully, but it is rarely commented upon.

During Operation Market Garden Christopherson and SRY supporting the US 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division and were the first British troops to enter German territory. They also supported 43<sup>rd</sup> Division, whose commander, Thomas, Christopherson usually referred to as "Von Thoma", and then 52<sup>nd</sup> Division in the clearing of the ground west of the Rhine. This was nasty, cold and muddy fighting and the drain on manpower was significant. Typically Christopherson makes no mention of being awarded the American Silver Star for his performance in cooperating with the American Army throughout November. During the crossing of the Rhine 8<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade as usual were used to break through the German defences, but then Guards Armoured Division had the more appealing, and easy, job of swanning through and exploiting their success. They had become victims of their own success. They advanced as far as Bremerhaven before the Germans surrendered.

The overriding impression throughout this account of the NW Europe campaign is of the growing professionalism of the SRY (and by implication, the whole of the British Army). But the cost was high. Christopherson spends much time accounting for the tank commanders, and squadron officers who are lost, so that by the end of the war "the only shoulders he has to cry on are the doctor's and the padre's" both of whom were clearly outstanding men, Hilda Young and Leslie Skinner. The SRY gained more battle honours between 1939 and 1945 (30) than any other single unit

in the British Army; 16 of them were under Christopherson. They supported every British infantry division in NW Europe as well as 3 US divisions, and were the “fire brigade” always asked for and usually sent. This is a wonderful volume, and will, I suspect, become a standard text for those studying the NW Europe campaign.

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