



Remembering Normandy 1944

MILITARY SERVICE RECOGNITION BOOK

Volume XIX, 2024

In the Service of Canada

AIRBORNE WAR STORIES WITH GRANDAD



By Anthony Hadfield

Many of the stories my Grandad, Joel Hadfield, shared with me about his experiences during the war were divulged late at night over a glass of whisky, whisky and milk in his case. I learned additional details of these events through the things he told members of my family.

His wartime experience was a huge and lasting part of his life. Having been born in 1920, he experienced the war as a young man barely more than a boy. He enjoyed many parts of the

experience, particularly the comradery with his mates and the hi-jinks he got up to when not in the heat of battle. In fact, during one of my last visits with him, he told me that he would have seriously considered staying in the army had he not already been married with a young child, my Dad.

Joel enjoyed sport. Being a good cricketer, footballer and swimmer helped him to adapt to the physical demands of the airborne forces in which

he served. He was born and raised in a north Derbyshire village, attended grammar school and was an apprentice joiner when the Second World War began.

Keen to serve and do his bit like his mates, he attempted to join all three arms of the His Majesty's armed services in 1939, but was told he could not join until he turned twenty-one and had finished his apprenticeship. Eventually, Joel's call up papers arrived, coincidentally on the day he married my Nan, Clara Mello, on November 29, 1941. Soon after, he started his infantry training in early December 1941 at Formby near Liverpool.

Joel joined the Royal Signal in February 1942 and applied to join the airborne forces along with two of his best friends. They had a tough medical, in London, but all were successful. He passed his trades test as a wireless operator and was assigned to Airborne Division Signals on February 8, 1942. He told me one of the reasons he picked the airborne forces was that they were paid an extra shilling a day.

As a member of the signals, Joel was given the rank of Signalmen and was assigned to one of the glider regiments attached to the airborne forces. During the war, Allied airborne forces used both paratroopers and gliders. Gliders were

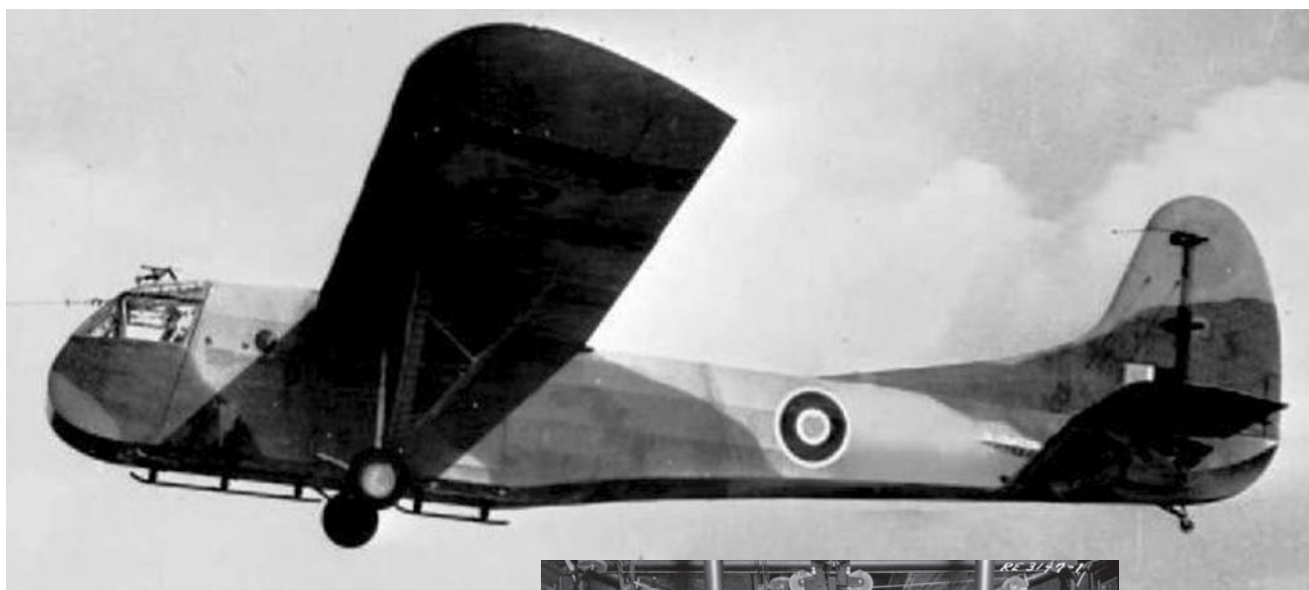


Joel Hadfield

flimsy wooden aircraft that could carry men and equipment, such as a jeep. As non-powered aircraft, gliders were towed by other aircraft. On his first day of glider training, Joel was as sick as a dog due to motion sickness, but he got used to it. He also completed three parachute jumps while in Tunisia, but never jumped in combat.

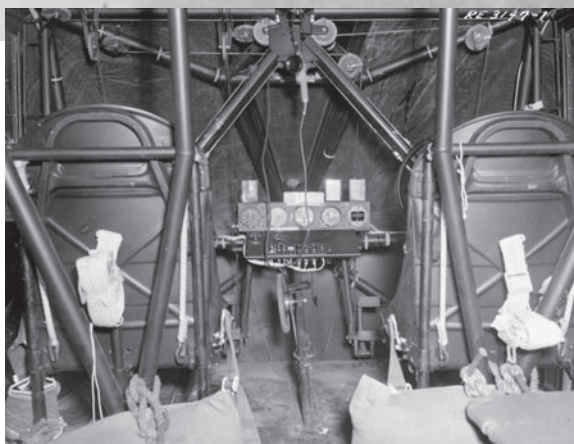
Joel's first experience of combat came during Operation Husky, the Allied invasion of Sicily in July 1943. His jumping off point for this was Tunisia in North Africa. He left the United Kingdom on May 16, and arrived in Africa on May 26. Joel was attached as a signalman to the 2nd Battalion of the South Staffordshire Regiment, part of the 1st Airlanding Brigade. This was the glider brigade of the 1st Airborne Division. The brigade was tasked with landing near Syracuse on Sicily to capture key bridges. This part of Operation Husky was called Operation Ladbroke, which began on the evening of July 9, 1943.

The 1st Airborne operation used both American Waco, nicknamed the 'Whacker', and British Horsa gliders and involved over 2,000 men. The gliders were towed at night to Sicily. Joel was one of sixteen men in one of the Waco's. He told me that as soon as they neared the Sicilian coast flak started coming up, so his glider's tow ropes were cut prematurely. This led to his glider crashing into the sea two miles from the shore. On that night, sixty-five gliders experienced the same fate of crashing into the Mediterranean Sea and tragically over 200 men were drowned.



Waco Glider.

Waco Glider. Interior, Library
and Archives Canada Photo,
MIKAN No. 358392



Joel was the first to get out of his glider after hitting the water, cutting a hole in the roof with his Sten gun. He dropped much of his kit including the heavy wireless set he had been assigned. He tied his boots around his neck and swam for the shore. Looking behind him, he saw others from his unit standing on his glider's wings, so he returned to the sinking aircraft to help them.

that he was with a Regimental Sergeant Major and four others.

The Sergeant Major took the rations from him as he was the only one who still had any. As well as rations, Joel was the only one of them to still have his boots. Sometime later, they heard other voices and realized that they were Italian. They armed themselves with rocks as they waited. Before



A Glider Ditched in the Sea off Sicily.

Having returned to the glider, Joel was asked by his commanding officer where the radio set was, he said he had left it inside the aircraft. Realizing they would have to swim to the shore, Joel went back into the glider and retrieved a pack which he knew contained a water bottle and a 24-hour ration pack. He swam for shore, using a mess tin to help as a paddle.

Joel was cold and shivering as he climbed the rocks to get out of the water once he had reached the shore. He became aware there were other people nearby and was challenged when asked to provide the password verifying whether he was British or Italian. Answering correctly, he found

reaching their positions and discovering them, the Italians turned and walked away.

At daybreak, Joel and the others could see the Allied seaborne landing craft coming into the Sicilian shore. They headed toward them, hoping they would meet the British forces once they landed. As they walked, they came to a farmhouse. It was not clear who was in the house, was it a farmer or Italian troops?

Joel was selected by the Sergeant Major, since he was the only one with boots, and armed with only a stick was told to do some reconnaissance of the building. He cautiously approached the building

“Two Italian soldiers came out of the house holding their rifles above their heads. They surrendered to Joel and his stick.”



Newspaper clip
Sicily.

and as he opened the gate, the door to the house opened in front of him. Two Italian soldiers came out of the house holding their rifles above their heads. They surrendered to Joel and his stick.

Joel found out, after meeting the British land forces, that he was one of only seven of the sixteen men in his glider to have survived, the others having drowned.

Joel was then put on a troopship, with double rations and taken to Port Said in Egypt. He later went back to Italy, just before the Italians surrendered to the Allies in September 1943. He then returned to the UK where he spent some time in hospital.

Joel trained for the second front and the Normandy invasion, after his return to the UK. The invasion, D-Day, eventually came in June 1944 but the 1st Airborne Division did not take part in the invasion, for the British that was left to the 6th Airborne. Joel trained for fifteen other operations after D-Day but they were all cancelled.

of Joel's death. During his visits, Joel would retrace his steps and relive moments from the battle, specifically the house he was positioned in.

I vaguely recall him saying he was nervous the first time he returned to the city. Many of the veterans were concerned that they would not be welcomed back as after the battle the Germans had flattened



L Section Before Arnhem (Joel is middle row 7th from the left).

Of the many conversations I had with Joel about his experiences during the war, the one he discussed the most was undoubtedly his involvement in the Battle of Arnhem. In later years he returned to the city in the eastern Netherlands to mark and remember the battle, first with my Nan and then with my parents and aunts and uncles. I was fortunate to visit there myself in the summer of 2014, which was the year

Arnhem, possibly as retribution for the Dutch population assisting the Allies during the battle.

As it turned out, he need not have worried. Joel and his comrades were treated as true heroes by the Dutch people, almost like royalty. His car was waved through by immigration when they saw the Pegasus badge, indicating he had been a member of the British airborne forces. Joel was a modest

man but my Dad told me that Dutch schoolchildren would come up to him and ask for his autograph.

the bridges from Allied ground forces. The American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions were also involved in the operation, designated to capture key bridges around Nijmegen and



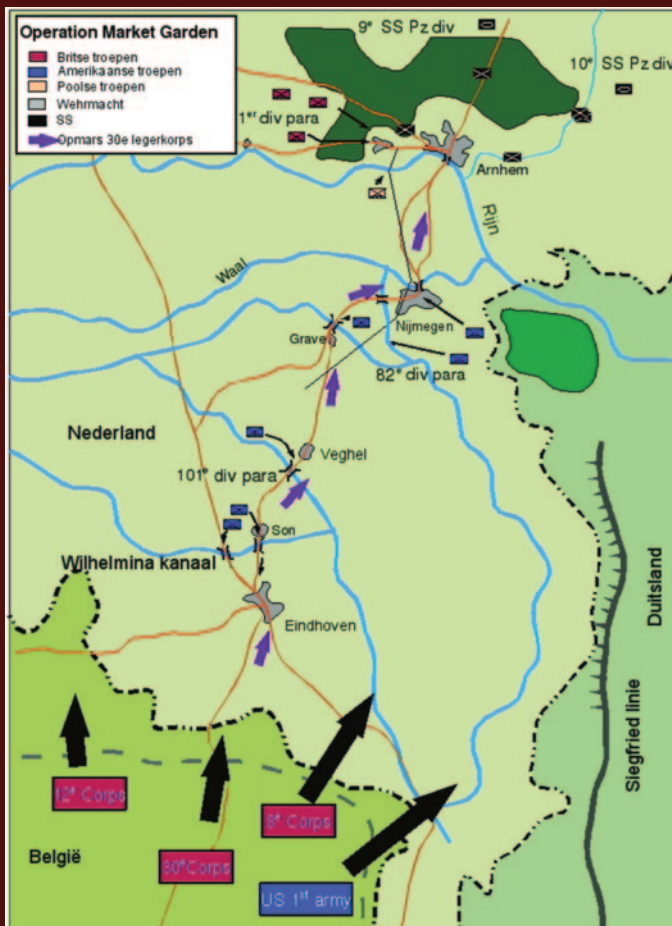
Parade Arnhem 2004.

Joel's Arnhem story began in the fall of 1944, four decades before his first visit as a civilian. The British 1st Airborne Division along with the Polish Parachute Brigade was selected to spearhead the landings at Arnhem as part of Operation Market Garden. The brainchild of Field Marshal Montgomery, the plan was to surprise the Germans, who were occupying the Netherlands, by capturing a series of key bridges that crossed the Rhine and its tributaries and wheel around into Germany.

Arnhem was the British component, the farthest of

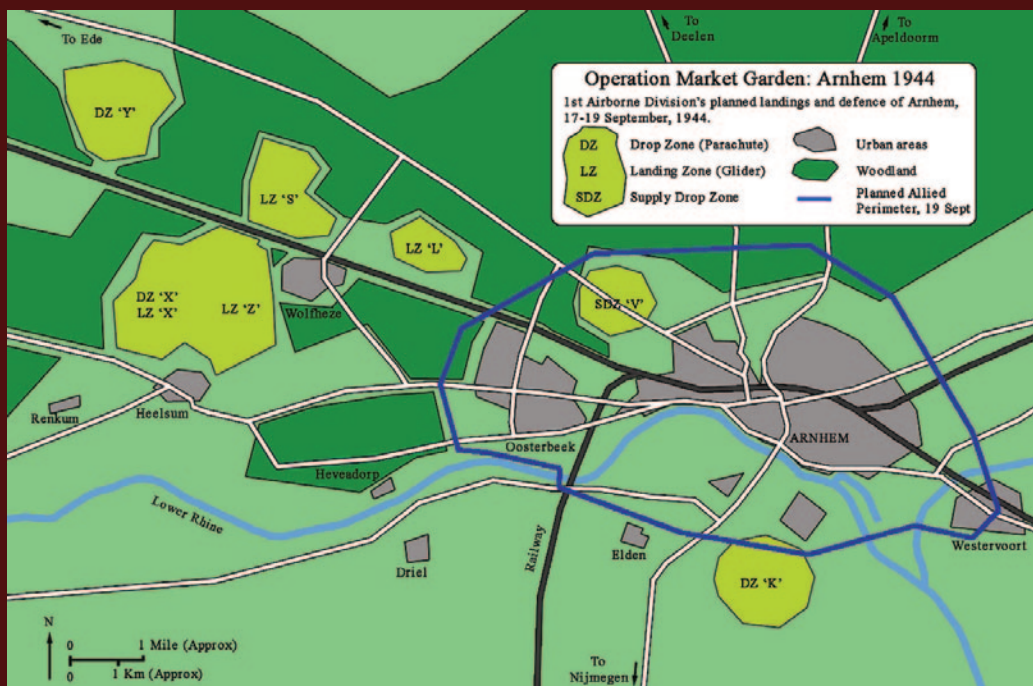
Eindhoven respectively. The plan was to have the ground forces of British XXX Corps, stationed on the Dutch-Belgian border, drive along a single lane highway and cross each captured bridge in turn with the intention of reaching Arnhem within two days.

In the end, the 1st Airborne Division held positions in Arnhem and then Oosterbeek, a village to the west of the city, for nine days. Relief from XXX Corps never came as they were unable to break through by road to Arnhem Bridge, in time to relieve the isolated airborne division.



Operation Market Garden.

Battle of Arnhem.



Joel's journey to the Netherlands started on Monday, September 18. This was the second day of airlifts into Arnhem, the first being on September 17. Three days of lifts were planned, dropping both paratroopers and gliders into the Netherlands. Due to a shortage of aircraft, the airlift could not be completed in one day.

Joel was attached as a signalman to the 1st Battalion of the Border Regiment, again part of the 1st Airlanding Brigade for Operation Market Garden. Flying in a British Horsa glider to the Netherlands, his journey began at Brize Norton airfield in Oxfordshire. After taking off, the towin aircraft soon flew into thick cloud and had to cut Joel's glider loose for safety.

After landing close to Oxford, Joel thought that he had missed the opportunity to join the operation.

However, the soldiers from his glider were loaded onto a three-ton truck and driven the short distance back to Brize Norton. There they were loaded onto another glider. Joel's glider landed at Landing Zone-Z (LZ 'Z') sometime between three and seven pm on September 18. They came under fire from German MG34's as they unloaded. By the time the regiment moved away from LZ 'Z' to phase II of the operation many of the gliders were in flames.

One issue with the Arnhem operation was that in some cases the designated landing zones to the northwest of the city were as far as eight or nine miles from the bridge. The various parachute units involved in the operation were designated to capture the bridge. The other regiments such as the Borders, South Staffordshire's, and Kings Own Scottish Borders, were to secure the landing





Border Regiment Memorial.

zones. As the battle developed, they ended up in Oosterbeek village a couple of miles to the west of Arnhem. The 1st Airborne Division Headquarters was established at the Hartenstein Hotel, which is now a museum of the battle.

Joel was stationed in a house near Headquarters that was extremely close to what soon became the perimeter of the battlefield, with Germans close by. I did ask Joel whether he had faced German soldiers up close. He said yes; he had been in the same house as the enemy in what was effectively

hand to hand combat.

The battle that developed in Arnhem and Oosterbeek was intense and bloody. The lightly armed British airborne troops were only able to hold one end of Arnhem Bridge for a few days. Without relief from XXX Corps, they were eventually overrun by the Germans. The bulk of the 10,000 men who had gone into Arnhem remained close to Oosterbeek.

Here, the British held a small perimeter. I had not realized how small this was until visiting in 2014.



Hartenstein Hotel, Division HQ During the Battle.

During that visit, I was lucky enough to stay in the Hotel Dreyeroord, a Swiss Chalet style building at the north end of the perimeter, it was called the 'White House' during the battle, when it had served as the headquarters of the Kings Own Scottish Borders. This was just a short walk from the Hartenstein Hotel.

After nine days in the field, it was decided by senior Allied officers that ground forces were not going to be able to break through to the bridge. On September 25 the decision was made to pull the troops out. Operation Berlin was the codename given to the evacuation of the 1st Airborne Division. This meant crossing the Neder Rijn as the 1st Airborne Division were on the north side of the river, with XXX Corps to the south of it.

Joel, like others who were still able to walk, left his position inside the perimeter on the night of September 25 and under cover of darkness made his way down through a wooded area toward the river. Between the woods and river were some fields and a couple of polders, flatlands, as well as what is reputed to be the oldest church in the Netherlands. Some of the troops waited there for their turn to attempt to cross the river. One of Joel's comrades described "the terrifically long queue...it stretched from the road down".

The Royal Canadian Engineers and British Royal Engineers and their boats were brought up to the river with the intention of crossing and picking up the evacuating troops. Joel waited his turn in line for a boat. By this time, the Germans were aware that something was afoot and were shooting with



Hotel Dreyeroord.



Joel Hadfield at the Canadian Memorial, Arnhem 2004.



Memorial to the Engineers,
Driel.

MGs and mortars toward the river from the high ground to the west at Westerbouwing. Joel said the river was covered in smoke, but he could hear boats coming across it. At this time, he decided not to wait for the returning boat to reach the shore but instead to swim in the river and meet the boat in the middle of the channel. This he did with his best friend. Joel was a good swimmer, however, tragically during this swim his friend was shot next to him and was washed down the river.

Several decades later Joel was able to locate and visit the grave of his friend. Joel was picked up by one of the Canadian boats and eventually returned to the relative safety of the south

bank. Joel talked warmly of the Canadians who rescued him. Today, there is a memorial to the engineers on the south bank of the river close to Driel where the rescue was launched. Joel always attended the Canadian ceremony held at the memorial in his later visits to Arnhem.

As in Sicily, Joel had had great fortune as only 2,400 of the approximate 10,000 soldiers dropped into Arnhem were able to escape, the remainder were killed or captured. Specifically, the 1st Battalion of the Border Regiment had gone into the Arnhem operation with 41 officers and 757 other ranks. Of these just 9 officers and 241 other ranks escaped to the south of the river.

IN AIRBORNE DIVISION.
Anxiety was relieved on Saturday concerning Signman Joel Hadfield, a member of the First Airborne Division, which put up so magnificent a fight in Holland and had to be withdrawn. He sent a telegram to his wife to say that he was safely back in this country. Signman Hadfield is the only son of Mr. and Mrs. E. M. Hadfield, of Steeple End Fold, and a wireless operator in the Army. He took part in the landings in Sicily, but his machine was brought down over the water. He was rescued and later took part in the landings in Italy. He has thus had a big share in the great adventures of the Airborne Division. Before he joined up he was well known in both cricket and football circles in Hayfield and Birch Vale and he is also an old boy of New Mills County Secondary School.



Sign. J. Hadfield

ARNHEM HERO HOME.
Most flags and streamers in various parts of the village announced to Hayfield people on Friday that something very pleasing had happened. It was the arrival home of the village Arnhem hero, Signman Joel Hadfield, by the last train on the previous night. It was known that Signman Hadfield was in the Airborne Division which had given so magnificent an account of itself but it was not until he arrived home that it was ascertained he had been at Arnhem where the outstanding battles had been fought. It was a case there of every man fighting for the Germans were only about 100 yards away from the British and all were in the combat. The British were unable to get supplies through and they had little food and no water except what they could catch in cans when rain fell. The story of how many men got back has been told by those on the spot and Signman Hadfield's experiences were like those of others. He came through unscathed. Signman Hadfield received a warm welcome home and the village was proud that it was represented in the fight which will be talked about while the island lasts as one of the finest feats ever performed by British arms. Signman Hadfield is the only son of Mr. and Mrs. E. M. Hadfield, of Steeple End Fold.

Newspaper clip, Arnhem.

Historians have long argued about the merits of Operation Market Garden. Was it doomed to failure or could it have succeeded? Should 35,000 men have been sent behind enemy lines based on a plan that was hatched in barely a week? What is not in doubt, is the immense skill and courage of all those involved in the battle. The Airborne units that took part in it were a highly trained elite force of men who wanted to get involved in the fight before the war ended.

Joel was repatriated to the UK by air on September 29 1944 and spent the remainder of the war at Horncastle in Lincolnshire. On May 11 1945, three days after Victory in Europe (VE) Day, Joel was sent with the 1st Airborne Division to Norway as part of Operation Doodson. This was the Allied operation designed to accept and deal with the surrender of the occupying German forces. German forces in Norway numbered more than 300,000 men. It had taken until May 1945 for the 1st Airborne Division to be brought back up to full strength after Arnhem.



Arnhem after the Battle.

One of the stories I was told was that the night before flying to Norway, Joel and his mates were enjoying a last night out. It must have got late and in order to get back to base in time for his flight he had to 'borrow' a bicycle that he had found. Joel remained in Norway until the end of August 1945 and then returned to the UK.

Following his return, Joel was attached to the 1st Brigade Airborne Corps Signals and then on December 21 1945, was taken on strength for the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (MEF) and sent to Alexandria in Egypt. He travelled by ship and arrived at the end of December. Joel was struck off strength from MEF and returned to the UK in August 1946.

Upon leaving the army, Joel returned to north Derbyshire where he worked as a joiner and he and my Nan, had two more sons. They lived briefly in the Manchester area before returning to Derbyshire. Joel retired to North Wales in the 1980's. He went on to have six grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren.

I was fortunate to be able to hear my Grandad's war stories firsthand while enjoying our whiskies. He was part of a magnificent generation that was involved in huge world changing events that have left an important legacy for those generations that have followed.



Horncastle After Arnhem (Joel front row 4th from left).