

NORMANDY LANDINGS

D-DAY 6TH JUNE 1944

THE MEMORIES OF A VETERAN



William (Bill) J Gladden

Trooper, Royal Armoured Corps
Wounded 18th June 1944

Bill Gladden was born on 13th January 1924 in Woolwich.

Called up at 18, he completed training with The Royal West Kents at Maidstone, then was posted to the 154 RAC at Livermere camp just outside of Bury St Edmunds. He then went to Fornham Park as 2nd Dispatch Rider to "Hobarts Funnies" at Orfordness Development Unit on the east coast. As a 20 year old dispatch rider with the 6th Airborne Reconnaissance Regiment he took part in the Normandy landings. The unit was part of an operation charged with securing bridges over the River Orne and Caen Canal so they could be used by Allied forces moving inland from the Normandy beaches.

On 6 June 1944, Bill flew into Normandy from an airfield in Dorset on a wooden Hamilcar glider which also carried a Tetrarch tank and six motorbikes.

Keen artist Bill painted this picture of Hamilcar gliders, a tank and the motorbikes used for renaissance.



On June 16, he carried two injured soldiers into a barn that was being used as a makeshift field hospital. Two days later, he found himself at the same barn, his right ankle shattered by machine gun fire from an intruding Tiger tank while brewing up a dixie of tea. Lying on the grass outside the hospital, Bill read the treatment label pinned to his tunic: "Amputation considered. Large deep wound in right ankle. Compound fracture of both tibia and fibula. All extension tendons destroyed. Evacuate."

Bill made it back to Portsmouth on 21 June. The injuries to his leg were so severe he spent three years in hospital recovering and learning to walk again.



Bill has been travelling back to Normandy with the 'Taxi Charity for Military Veterans' for many years. After tracking down the barn used as the makeshift field hospital they made a detour to take Bill there. (see photo left) He recently created a watercolour painting of the Chateau in Ranville where the barn is housed and presented it to the current owner.



Bill remembers the flight which landed at about 9pm clearly. It was something of an unorthodox landing. The gliders were towed into the air and taken to their destination by transport planes. The tow was released after the pilots found a safe place to land. In Bill's own words he recalls:

On the way over, I had the inside of the glider up my back and just about a couple of feet away from my chest was the side of the tank. When I climbed up there, on the top of the tank to have a look at what's going on, I couldn't see down. All I could see [outside the glider] was aeroplanes and gliders going in the same direction as we were. And then suddenly it's as if you hit a brick wall...In gliders, whenever the tow drops you have to freeze or else the weight goes towards the glider pilot. So, now I was spread eagled on the top of the tank and had to freeze until we landed. That's how I landed... spread eagled on the top of the tank.



From a base in an orchard outside Ranville and near to Pegasus Bridge, Bill spent the next 12 days riding a Matchless G3L 350 cc motorcycle checking out reports of enemy activity in the surrounding countryside. He recalls seeing the French countryside glittering with strips of silver foil that had been dropped by the RAF to disrupt the enemy's radar.

After the war, Bill married Marie Warne, an army driver he met in 1943. They had a daughter, Linda. He spent 40 years working for Siemens and Pearl Insurance.



Bill has sold his paintings to raise money for The Taxi Charity for Military Veterans.



Bill was awarded France's highest distinction, the National Order of the Legion of Honour.