the reverend Geoffrey harding

Geoffrey Harding, a parish priest who, having suffered work related stress during the early years of his ministry nevertheless became a chaplain in 1943. On 6th June 1944, Geoffrey, age 35, travelled to Normandy with an RAF Mobile Radar Unit. They were due to land on Omaha Beach at 1100hrs, but due to continued intense fighting were landed much later on. They descended some distance from the beach, with water up to the shoulders of some service men. Their possessions, including Geoffrey's prayer book and communion kit, even though wrapped in waterproof coverings, were lost in the process.

Geoffrey's citation for the MC he was awarded after the war recalls that for 36 hours he traversed the beach tending to the wounded and dying and burying the dead. He went, under fire, into the enemy held village at nightfall on 6th June, to request water for wounded troops.

He was the first RAF chaplain into Normandy, the first to land on D-Day, though Stanley Betts also landed in France that day. Geoffrey left the RAF after the war, and developed a Healing Centre in Dorset, and then worked for the Archbishop of Canterbury in the area of spiritual healing and mental health.

**Padre G C Harding’s reminiscences (transcribed from a tape-recording):**

I put this uniform on with some apprehension.  Padres in the RAF had no preliminary training.  I had to make my way to Cranwell, the old training centre of RAF Aircrew, and I wondered what I should do if anyone attempted to salute me on the way because I had no idea how to respond.  I needn’t have worried; nobody did.

Cranwell was an enormous camp of 15,000 people and I gradually got used to local ways.  The first night I sat down in the mess and thought I was treated rather rudely because nobody attempted to talk to me.  It wasn’t till later that I realised they were all junior officers who were not allowed to address me unless I first addressed them.  When I did they were all extremely friendly.  But all these things came gradually.  I somehow stumbled my way onto a parade and took Morning Prayers and nearly fell over stumbling off again much to the innocent merriment of the troops concerned.  But one lives and learns.

I was not allowed to stay there long.  After a fortnight I was whisked away to Whitley Bay on the mouth of the Tyne which was an Aircrew reception station.  The Aircrew had been sent to train in Canada, then they came back in batches and then we had a feverish 10 days activity sending them off to their appropriate destinations.  In between there was very little to do except to fill in all the forms saying that there was a nil return.  But we had our moments.  We took an organised expedition to Swann Hunter’s shipyard on the Tyne which was quite a revelation; and another to the famous Newcastle Brewery.  I’d not realised till then how extremely clean and aseptic beer has to be.  It is a very reassuring kind of realisation.  I shared an office there with a very charming Dominican colleague in the Roman Catholic Church, and I was always amused that when we met in the office together, I had called at the sick bay to find out if any of my friends had fallen ill, while he as regularly went to the guardroom to find out how many of his flock had been confined for the night.

I was not allowed to remain long at Whitley Bay.  I only distinguished myself there, I think, by inadvertently charging into a WAAF medical inspection and rushing out again as fast as possible.  I’d never seen before or since such a number of little white bottoms on view.

I was next posted down to Calshott on the tip of Southampton water.  It was one of the most delightful places I have ever come across.  A delightful situation, Henry VIII’s old castle on Calshott Spit, a nice little railway to take one down there, manned by a driver who earned his full wages as railway driver because the little light railway crossed the main road.  And down on the spit there was a hive of activity; the Royal Garrison Artillery defending the fort, the Navy training some of its personnel to use light landing craft, and the RAF was busy fitting out Air Sea Rescue launches, which left us regularly for other destinations.  The story went that one commander ran his craft ashore at Bournemouth because he couldn’t find the way to Poole harbour.  That may be apocryphal.

Just once in a while we had to land the flying boat which was in difficulties and this meant clearing most of the estuary of all its other activities and this was not popular.

I had a charming Senior Officer Administration, who made great friends and found me a tiny cottage on the edge of the perimeter, where I had a happy time living with my wife for a few months on the edge of the Solent.  Every now and then one of my people got into the guardroom and I went down to him and told him what a rogue the young fellow was and how he really ought to be drummed out of the service etc etc., to receive the gratifying reply, “Oh Padre, you don’t understand these things at all!  Now give him a really heavy ticking off and then let him go.  That’ll be quite enough.”

So the offender got a good deal less than, I suspect, he deserved.

The CO was rather more formidable.  He was the oldest Group Captain in the service.  He’d been a Cambridge mathematician of repute.  In his retirement he’d acquired a hotel in the Scilly Isles and was reputed to be a fairly wealthy man.  He should have risen much higher in the service but his temperament was against him.  The best story told about him was when he was a Squadron Leader commanding the flying boat base at Calshott at the end of the war and received a message from the C-in-C Portsmouth to say that he was coming to inspect the station on such and such a date.  Whereupon the Squadron Leader sent back a message to say he was coming to inspect the 1st Light Cruiser Sqn on the following day.  I think this rather blighted his career.  There was certainly, by all accounts, an unholy row.  He was reputed also to be an expert on organs and acquired a decidedly ramshackle affair which he played with gusto in our chapel.  When I finally took leave of him he was busily making sails for his model yacht.  A man of parts who was somehow or other under used.

Life at Calshott was very pleasant and I did what I could with my duties in the chapel.  On my way down from the north to Calshott, I got the train at Waterloo with no less a person than C B Fry whom I recognised from his photographs who was dressed as a Commander RNR.  He was a compulsive talker and I had a fascinating conversation about Sussex cricket, his life with Ranjit Singi, his work for young males on the Hamble and so on.  Unfortunately he also expressed extremely nasty views which shocked the remaining members of the compartment.  One lady begged him to stop, saying he was giving her a headache.  Unfortunately the train chose to break down.  It was a Saturday Bank Holiday afternoon, somewhere between Micheldever and Winchester and this prolonged the journey by about an hour and a half before we were finally shunted into Southampton.

Later on I asked him over to preach not entirely to the pleasure of the Group Captain.  He didn’t talk in public as well as he talked in private but at least his coming was an event.  Unfortunately so many of our young congregation had never really heard of C B Fry and Sussex cricket.

I also had, talking of cricket, an entertaining visit from A E R Gilligan, who was some sort of welfare officer, who descended on me one day and we had wonderful reminiscences of the days when I used to sit on the edge of the Hove county ground.  He also told me a lot about the other side of C B Fry who was, to put it mildly, at times mentally extremely unwell.

I was next attached away from this relatively idyllic existence to be told that I was going to join the invasion of France.  I was summoned to a meeting at Uxbridge with my immediate superior old Bill Wilkie, who died not so long ago, and he said he’d chosen me to go with a small RAF Radar unit which had been lent to the Americans because the American unit had not been able to get over from America.  I was to go with them, land on Omaha beach on D Day itself at 11 o’clock in the morning by which time the beach would have been completely cleared, and our instructions were to drive 11 miles inland, set up all our apparatus – things called half cheeses which were located on the backs of trucks – and got ready to cover the beach after nightfall from the attacks of German bombers.

Well, it didn’t happen to work out quite like that.  In the meantime I joined my unit which was lost in a field somewhere in Hampshire not far from Christchurch and got to know them as well as I could – a very likeable crowd indeed.  And we were then hastily sent to a very secret American camp in a wood on an estate not very far away.

That also was a very interesting experience.  We were living with the American 1st Division and the Texas Rangers who were due to make the 1st assault on the beach, about seven o’clock in the morning.  And they were frankly apprehensive because they knew perfectly well that a German division had been moved into the area and was likely to oppose the landing.

We never quite got used to the American way of life.  They breakfasted earlier than we ever used to and their last meal was about half past six in the evening after which we felt a little hungry until we went round to the cooking porters, made friends as everybody else did with the black cooks, and got supplies more or less as we required.

But it was my first introduction to the American way of thinking and this is not at all easy.  For example, one afternoon we had an ENSA concert, or the equivalent on the American side, and a friend and I decided we would go and listen to this thing.  To our horror we sat for two hours in our stalls watching the entertainments.  Everybody around us was convulsed with laughter and falling over themselves with amusement, and we laughed twice in two hours.  We simply could not see anything else to laugh at.  American humour depends on overstatement, English humour on understatement and I doubt if the twain will ever meet, but it was an instructive experience.

We also had a certain amount of messages given out early in the morning on the tannoy.  We made friends with the American officer who did this thing.  We imitated him a little, pulled his leg in a way that no Englishman would have resented for one half minute.  The poor man at the end of two or three minutes of this he was almost in tears and begging us to stop.  He couldn’t understand that we were merely joking with him.  He thought we were seriously criticising what he was doing.  Again it was an interesting experience.

By far the most moving experience was the joint service in one of their little halls at Whitsuntide, where not for the first time I was very glad to throw overboard any problems of bringing together the churches.  One of the American officers brought his violin with him and played some simple tunes, and we had a short service followed by a communion service in which almost everybody joined.

A few days later we were packed up again in our lorries making our way to Portland Harbour where we had to embark on landing craft.  It was interesting to see the racial diversity of the Americans.  The crew of the landing craft were nearly all solid Swedes, the more volatile Italians were not considered suitable for this kind of work.  We packed our way in and started to make our way for France.  We set off on the Saturday and I was lucky in finding a bunk and being able to retire to bed.  When I got up early the next morning, on a sea which I suppose was to be considered slight, but which was upsetting me, I noticed to my surprise we were heading westwards back past the Isle of Wight on our return to Portland Harbour.  Apparently the invasion had been cancelled and we were told later it had, we hoped only been postponed.  Back in harbour it happened to be Trinity Sunday, our ships were all together so I had an impromptu service on one of them and told my congregation that we should undoubtedly feel extremely frightened, this was entirely normal and nothing to be ashamed about, that we just had to keep our heads.  I hoped that what I was saying was the truth.  I had, of course, no means of knowing at all but my remarks went down quite well and next evening we sailed again.

This time next morning the sea was still unpleasantly high and I’ve never woken up to a stranger spectacle: here we were, I should guess about two miles or three miles off Omaha beach in the weirdest and strangest collection of ships that I’ve ever hoped to see.  A few regular warships, the rest were every conceivable kind of auxiliary vessel, large landing craft, small landing craft, the lot: sitting there completely unmolested from the air apparently out of range of the guns on the French coast just waiting for our change to go in and land.  It was certainly a sight which I shall never forget.  It was of course a miracle of a naval operation that everyone arrived apparently at the right place at the right time.  And so we sat down to wait.

The RAF officer commanding my unit had suffered very, very badly indeed from seasickness and asked me if I would mind taking his place on the first truck out while he would retire to the fourth or fifth.  I was quite prepared to do this, but of course it was long past 11 o’clock.  As we were to know later, the American forces had an appalling time on Omaha Beach.  The first wave of Americans 1st Division lost something like 90% casualties, and the ones that came after did not do very much better.  The Texas Rangers performed prodigies of valour scaling the cliffs over on our right to silence the heavy guns only to find later that they were not actually manned.  That was why we had not been molested at sea.

We were finally landed, I suppose, about half past six in the evening.  We were fully prepared for this.  One of the minor incidents which amused me and my fellows was we’d all been issue with American condoms, or French letters in order to preserve our watches and other valuables and I took the opportunity to seal a box of communion wafers in one of these things which served me well later on.  It caused enormous amusement to my officer friends.  So we went in.

We were landed a fairly long way from the short in fairly deep water.  We touched down and went ahead.  The exhaust pipe protruded through the roof and somehow the engine kept going.  Suddenly we went down into a deep hole – a covered shell hole – and had to get out as fast as we could.  I got out and found I could stand on the bottom with the water just up to my chin, while my driver who was rather shorter than myself took my hand and he swam and I waded ashore together.  I never think the English Channel is a good place to bathe in the best of time but early in June it is still extremely cold and I felt extraordinarily cross.

The reason why the Americans had had such a bad time was almost immediately apparent.  The under water defences had been pierced in only two places on our stretch of the beach.  We landed opposite the cliff which now contains the enormous American cemetery.  We made our way through these gaps in the wire – the wires were still very much in evidence – and collected on the beach wondering what we were supposed to do next.  We certainly had no opportunity of proceeding eight miles inland.  I managed to change my clothes and put on something dry before we were then picked up by an 88 millimetre firing from somewhere over the cliffs, guided I presume by some spotter in a hole in the cliff face.  In quarter of an hour we had lost all of our extremely valuable radar equipment and were not left with even a radio set to communicate our troubles to the people still at sea.  So we then had to do our best.  Just along the high water line was a long line of American wounded who managed to creep up above the high water line.  Those who had not been able to do so had presumably been washed away by the tide.

We had with us a young very capable MO who had been plucked away from his honeymoon 3 days after his marriage to come and join us, and a very hard working medical orderly, and they gave me one or two things to play with like a tourniquet and one or two little tubes of morphine to inject.  Well, we were plagued by that 88 millimetre.  In fact, in the end,we had 25% casualties.  We rushed up and down the beach one way or the other but we couldn’t get out of the range of the beastly thing.  I thought we really had had it, I was giving myself up to an early grave and I must admit that most of my remarks on the previous Sunday to the congregation now felt rather thin.  But it came to me very strongly indeed, almost as though a voice spoke in my ear that we must off that beach at all costs and take refuge under the shadow of the cliffs.  So I went forward, found a suitable site in the 3rd house up on the left, where there was an open courtyard.  The few Germans ran away and apparently hid themselves in the house next door.  This proved to be no trouble to us.

And I then waved forward everybody I knew to get off that blasted beach – I use the word in its proper sense – as fast as we could.  Technically I think I committed mutiny, though technically I think I made the proper choice.  But somehow we got off the beach, and got our wounded off too.  And our Medical Officer and his orderly worked right on through the night, tirelessly patching up our wounded and American wounded.  I simply don’t know how they did it.  I was of extremely little use.  There were a number of people obviously in pain and making a great deal of fuss on the beach.  I went to them and comforted them and then found that they were the people who survived whereas the people who were actually dying around me were the people who were not making any sound at all.  A second time round I’d have known better what to do, but with no previous experience I don’t think I can be blamed for doing the wrong thing.

Somehow or other we got off the beach – an American bomber did come over us overnight and drop a few bombs and fortunately didn’t succeed in hitting anybody.  And then rather like St Paul on a famous occasion we prayed for the dawn.  Well, when dawn came there wasn’t much relief; the night before an American Colonel and his Aide had come past our post complimenting us on what we were doing.  I asked him whether we had much chance of surviving the night.  He said he thought we would be alright as they were holding the enemy a quarter of a mile up, at the crossroads.  It did not sound extremely reassuring but it was at any rate the best news we had.

Luckily we found a small American truck full of medical supplies that had got stranded in a ditch and we got a lot of valuable stuff for the use of our doctor.  But it wasn’t until about 11 o’clock the next morning that a full medical team arrived and took over.  Unfortunately, through lack of communication, the people at sea had no idea what was really going on at our end of the beach.  It was a short experience, my own short experience of real warfare.  I’ve no desire whatever to repeat it.  In our recent Falklands battle I shared to the full the emotions of the people who went ashore.  The night before we landed I must admit I spent a few hours of extraordinary disquiet and dismay and I wasn’t so afraid of being killed or even dangerously wounded.  I was afraid of showing fear.  What would have happened if my nerve had broken and I tried to run away?  Of course in practice I needn’t have worried because there was nowhere to run to.  I certainly had no intention of dashing back into the English Channel, and as I said before the only thing to do on an invasion beach is to go forward and get as close to the enemy as you possibly can.  I say that with the benefit of hindsight.

We then moved next to a convenient field at the top of the cliff.  We had of course lost all our possessions; this was my first experience of lying on the hard, hard ground – a situation which I never really got used to.  At least you’re not interfered with.  And as American and British forces had now joined up on the American left, the doctor decided to borrow a motorbike and give me a lift on the back.  So we went over to the British sector to try and find a few essentials like a prayer book for me and some badly needed medical supplies for him.  It wasn’t a very good motorcycle.  The roads were full of nasty holes and I must admit it was something of a nightmare ride in which I hung on for dear life.  But we were warmly welcomed by our British friends.  I found I was the first RAF padre to get onto the shore of France beating my colleague Bishop Stanley Betts, as he later became, by half a day.  He very kindly supplied me with what I needed and somehow we managed to get back again.  And our radar equipment was still of course of no use but we too got another section of our unit to join us and life began in earnest.

I never ceased to be surprised by the skill of people who watch a small radar screen in the middle of the night and steer an English night fighter to a German bomber.  It was rather illuminating to find that by far the best people at it were the people who’d been trained on the stock exchange because they never look back, they cut their losses immediately. If the German bombers got past they didn’t worry about it, that was the task of the man behind them. They forgot all about it and concentrated entirely on watching for the next arrival. I’ve often found something of a parable in that. It is silly to look over your shoulder or to look back. Gradually as time went on we took up positions round the American sector. The Americans charged up toward Cherbourg attempting to take the port as quickly as possible and we followed them there. Finally, as the only English C of E padre in the Cherbourg peninsula, I found I had 17 little outposts to visit, most of which had bathing facilities and it was enormous fun to take a bed roll with me, have a nice hot… *(End of Side One of a tape-recording)*

*(Side Two)* …had a very moving quality of their own.  It taught me several lessons.  It took me right out of the ordinary parish situation where most of the time one is dealing with very kind good natured women and so very rarely has much of an encounter with a man.  Now I was dealing, apart from the occasional nurse, almost extremely with men and it was an extremely liberating, extremely interesting experience.  I revised my values considerably.  I never worried about what form a church service would take.  If I erected a table in the middle of the field and laid out the wafers on the paten and the wind blew the wafers away, what did it matter?  I just went to gather them up and continued as before.  The small units welcomed a church service.  There was no compulsion, of course, about church parades in these circumstances and I don’t know what one was giving, but one was certainly receiving a lot.

Apart from that, life now became fairly uneventful as the war swept on and left us behind.  We made one spirited attempt to be included.  Our advance party rushed to Paris and set up its unit somewhere.  They claimed afterwards they’d been kissed by these 300 French women.  They were sorry that I missed that particular episode.  We followed them up later but we had disaster on the way as the oil had entirely leaked out of some vital part of the mechanism of our truck.  We had to be rescued and towed to a small roadside American repair unit where we walked up to the first white people we saw, only to discover that they were in fact German prisoners.  The entire unit was black and I’ve never had a warmer welcome or a more refreshing reception.  There was no trouble that they would not take for us.  I realised for the first time the quite extraordinary outstanding qualities of some of the inhabitants of the southern states of America.

Then with something else to travel by, we made our way to Paris and I did one thing which I suppose I shouldn’t have done. I persuaded our Signals Officer and his car to make a small journey to the south of Paris to find an old friend of my wife’s who was married to a French Avocat at Melun.  We tracked them to 3 separate addresses in the town only to find they’d been dispossessed on each occasion by the occupying Germans, and discovered they’d finally taken refuge at the famous chateau of Vaux Le Vicomte. So we turned up there and knocked lightly at the front door in our rather stained travel clothes, only to be told by the butler that they were in fact living in an outbuilding on the edge of a main building. They were of course very glad to see us and said they’d had a very trying and difficult time but somehow they’d managed to survive. We had more of their eggs than we should have done but as I brought 400 cigarettes with me I felt that we had at least done something for them.

After that we were recalled to England and disbanded as we were no further use to anybody. And our base defence had no BDS – which most people imagined stood for Bomb Disposal Squad and were inclined to enquire rather acidly why we were not disposing of bombs – was finally forgotten and given up and I was posted temporarily to the home base of our overseas Air Force at Thorney Island from which I made periodical trips to Brussels on the beer run to help out our colleagues in Belgium and Holland. I thought myself that they were extraordinarily well supplied on the cellars which the Germans had already taken over particularly in Brussels but it was nice to fraternise.

I was soon summoned out of this retirement to go to another radar unit which was in Holland in a tiny place called Erp where we were settled in a small village. My particular billet was with two very old and very charming Dutch farm labourer and his wife with whom of course I had no real way of communicating except by signs although I persuaded my wife to send over the Dutch English dictionary from home. But at least when Christmas came we could sing O Come all ye Faithful in our respective languages and this at least they enjoyed. I don’t think I distinguished myself much there. I went to visit our Army liaison unit which was co-operating with the Army – which thought the time had come to have a sort of battle. Unfortunately when I got there fog had descended and there was nothing much to do except enjoy a pleasant game of battleships. Then on my way home my car ran into the back of a British tank which was retiring, slightly maimed, from this non battle. I then had to travel to the top of the tank feeling decidedly chilly into the neighbouring town of Helmond, knocked up the town mayor at 2am and demand a bed and was nearly arrested as a spy the next morning as I made my way to the telephone exchange and asked to be put through to my unit and rescued. It was one of the coldest winters that Holland has ever had.

Erp was in fact 4 feet, I believe, above sea level and I must admit that the cold was, I suppose, a bit too much to me. I went down with cystitis, a bug in my bladder. I had to be taken to hospital to Brussels and flew ignominiously home to an RAF hospital outside Swindon, where I was treated with the new wonder drug penicillin which meant a series of 6 injections a day for 18 days. I would have endured this more happily if a medical friend in the next bed had not assured me that to his knowledge it had been proved that penicillin had no effect whatsoever on the bug I from which I was suffering.

In the end they took pity on me and set me off on a week’s sick leave with my wife. When I got back, thank God, the bug had gone. But they would not post me overseas again just yet. So I found myself at Fighter Command Bentley priory ?above? Stanmore from which the Battle of Britain had been more or less fought, although I think the chief credit goes to the Operations HQ at Uxbridge of number 11 Group. I enjoyed my time there although, once again, one seemed to be very remote from war. But I arrived there in time for the war in Europe to come to an end and one of my happiest recollections is taking my part in the victory parade of something like 4000 personnel which also coincided with the farewell to the AOC in C. I used the service for victory at sea to which I’d added land and air from the formal thanksgiving in the back of the old prayer book, a few suitable prayers and other prayers from that. I’m rather afraid that modern theologians who don’t like thanksgiving services would not have approved entirely, but we all felt such utter relief and thankfulness it wouldn’t have mattered very much what anybody would have said. But in its way it was a really great occasion.

As the war in the Far East came to an end not very long after, I was not shifted again and left to play out time till my own turn came to be demobbed. Life frankly became rather boring because so many people came and went there was no continuity of ministry that really mattered.

Life of course was full of small pastoral opportunities, from counselling the bereaved to trying to do something about personnel who had misbehaved themselves or started a baby at the wrong moment. It was pathetic to see that the girls that got caught were so often innocent, nice girls who badly needed companionship while the hard baked little so-and-sos who knew what precautions to take got away with it again and again. That’s just life all over.

And so that was my goodbye to the RAF. I often wondered afterwards whether my very short experience of war, for which I was surprisingly awarded a military cross, I’m still not certain whether it  was given for what I did not do in the air or failed to achieve on land. I felt that my wading in the English Channel really deserved a naval decoration rather that a military one. I did my best to refuse the gift for which I got very angry remonstrances. But I still maintain it is utterly foolish to award anybody an award for courage when he only does it just once. How was I to know that I should ever have proved to have shown the slightest courage again? Somebody told me at the time I walked up and down the beach as calmly as if I were walking up and down an aisle in a church, but that was simply due to the fact that I’m constitutionally lazy and entirely refuse to be hurried, least of all by the enemy. I don’t think it was right and I still don’t think so. I got my beautiful cross in the end by post because the poor King was now a great many months behind in his awards and I was very disappointed that I never actually went to Buck House.

I wondered sometimes whether I should feel any later repercussions for this very short episode in my life which seemed so extremely odd – it really didn’t seem to belong to me. A little bit of something curious which had been slipped in without my really appreciating that it happened. It only had one repercussion on one occasion about  years later when I watched some film of the landings on the French coast and I found to my relief that I could watch it without stirring up any particular feelings at all. Now when I went to bed and was just dozing off to sleep in my old fashioned rectory which had a chimney and a fireplace, just as I was dozing off a shell came down the chimney, exploded in the fireplace. I jumped 2 inches and then had to laugh out loud for nearly five minutes because it was all so funny. But it wasn’t at the time.

*Source: Royal Air Force Chaplaincy Services February 2007*