

TRIBUTE TO COLONEL JOHN TILLET

by General Sir Robert Pascoe KCB MBE

Delivered at the Memorial Service in the Church of St Mary The Virgin, Micheldever on Friday 16 January 2015.

It's 1953. The scene is a training exercise in a wooded area on a dark night in West Germany where Letter 'A' Company of the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry are digging in to defend a railway crossing. A young platoon commander (and it wasn't me), mindful of lessons learned as a cadet, is walking his company commander around the platoon positions. To his dismay his boss is not happy with what he sees and the Major criticises the layout of trenches for being far too close together. The platoon commander defends his position saying it was done by the book as taught at Eaton Hall. The company commander, Major Tillet, leaving no doubt that what he says goes, replied, "Forget the so and so book, this is how it's done for real".

That incident took place just over a decade after Captain John Tillet first saw active service in WWII when he crash-landed in a Horsa glider near Benouville in Normandy. His first action was to capture a startled German soldier who happened to be near the glider's resting place. John saw much fighting and tough soldiering between 6th June and 30th September when the 52nd came back to their barracks in Bulford with the rest of the 6th Airborne Division.

As the Adjutant he had been fully involved with Colonel Mike Roberts in the detailed planning of the Battalion's part in the airborne assault on D-Day. It was also as Adjutant that he frequently commandeered the Battalion's newly acquired and only motor cycle in order to visit Joan, his young wife, whom he had married in 1943. Once married Joan had made a swift exit from the Wrens, possibly illegally, and she was staying in Enford to be nearer to Bulford. But there were no motorbike trips in December 1944 and January '45 as John found himself in the Ardennes commanding his company through the unexpected winter campaign, and no more motor biking after March '45 when the 52nd made another crash landing in gliders to seize the bridgehead across the River Rhine during Operation Varsity, which proved much more costly than the airborne assault on D-Day.

John and Joan were not to meet until after the war ended, by which time the 52nd had reached the Baltic to the east of Hamburg, having marched and fought their way past Osnabruck where John was to serve some years later. As John said, he was very lucky to be ordered to bypass a sinister area which was shortly to be revealed to a shocked world as the Belsen concentration camp.

So, with all that experience behind him by the age of 26, what Major Tillet said years later about most things military was taken as gospel. He was widely recognised by us young subalterns as a fully professional soldier, a tough disciplinarian when necessary, but his discipline came out of respect rather than fear.

It was John's experience as a 17 year-old schoolboy that led him into the Army at the earliest possible age. He went to Germany with his school hockey team where they met members of the Hitler Youth organisation, and he was made an honorary member of this organisation. Although this may not have been too alarming it was the sight of German military manoeuvres in the Harz mountains that led John to conclude that war with Germany was not far off. As this was 1936 it was indeed a prescient deduction by a schoolboy.

By 1938 John was a Lance Corporal in the 4th Bn The Suffolk Regiment, his family living in Ipswich where John was brought up. When war came he went off to officer training and in August 1940 he emerged as a second lieutenant and was posted to the 2nd Battalion The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, known to all as the 52nd. He recalled that he was more than surprised to find much of the conversation of officers and soldiers was carried out in Urdu, following the Battalion's long stay in India prior to their recall to England at the outbreak of war.

The 52nd had expected to be landed in France but the speed of the German advance to the coast changed all that and they disembarked at Liverpool to be assigned to home defence and began to prepare for the impending German invasion. When British airborne forces were established and expanded in 1942 the 52nd became a glider-borne battalion in the 6th Airborne Division. John was put in charge of weapon training, he was always a good rifle shot, and later he became Second in Command of the Battalion's Support Company. Clearly he stood out among his peers for, in early 1944, and not yet 25 years old, he was appointed Adjutant.

He played a key role in the planning and preparation for the Battalion's important role in the D-Day landings which followed in June that year. The staff work, dividing men to gliders, allocation of heavy loads and command and control arrangements, all would have been the task of the Adjutant, working closely with his commanding officer and company commanders. Much realistic training was carried out, on the ground and in the air, and on one occasion, having taken off from Harwell, the tug pulling the Horsa glider with Captain Tillet aboard was heading out over the sea when the tow rope parted and the glider pilot turned back for the coast. Being too far out to make landfall it

eventually crashed into the sea outside Poole Harbour. John found himself squashed against the bulkhead by a jeep and trailer loaded with live ammunition. Eventually getting free and floating among the wreckage in the sea he grabbed a motor cycle tyre to use as a lifebelt to await rescue. One soldier died in the crash, others were injured and John broke a small bone in his neck.

After many months of rigorous training and preparation for operations the time came for action in June 1944. Adjutant Tillet and his Colonel Mike Roberts saw off the first wave from Tarrant Rushton in Dorset late at night on 5th June. The six platoons known as the *coup de main* force, commanded by Major John Howard, seized the first objectives of the invasion, the vital bridges over the River Orne and the Caen Canal, later renamed by the French Government as Horsa and Pegasus Bridges.

John flew into France with the remainder of the 52nd later on D-Day, the pilots crash-landing their gliders in the fields of Normandy around 9 pm. The 70 gliders needed to carry the Battalion were just a part of a force of about 400 gliders carrying the 6th Airlanding Brigade to France, all making for small designated areas near Benouville and the town of Ranville. Many years later, when looking at an aerial photograph showing crashed and smashed gliders facing in all directions I asked John how they decided exactly where to land. He replied, "Anywhere there was room!"

In the intense fighting that followed D-Day, particularly in the breakout phase, the 52nd had several hard engagements with the enemy and suffered many casualties before reaching the River Seine. They were all glad to be pulled back to England with the rest of 6th Airborne Division at the end of September 1944. It was in Normandy that John was given a nickname by some of his more cheeky subordinates. Men of the Airborne Forces used to wear a toggle rope around their parachute smock, partly to reduce its bagginess but also because you never knew when a piece of rope with toggles might come in useful. John, as we all later learned, believed in doing things thoroughly, and so he insisted that his slit trench was dug really deep. This meant that it was difficult to get himself out and so his men would use the toggle rope to help pull him out. Hence his nickname was 'Toggle Tillet'.

Back in Bulford in the autumn of 1944 the battalion refitted and retrained. When John Howard was seriously injured in a vehicle accident John Tillet was promoted to Major and took over 'D' Company which he was to command for the rest of the war. His first test came during the emergency deployment by sea and vehicles to join the defensive battle in the snow-covered Ardennes and then in March 1945 the 52nd flew across the Rhine in daylight right into heavily defended German positions. John recalled that the sky seemed to be full of aircraft as the British Airborne Division made its approach to the landing zone well behind the German frontline. Many gliders were hit as they came into land, others landed among German gun areas and were badly shot up as a result. John's company was reduced to just 58 men during this action. But, renewed with reinforcements, they were soon required to push on north east, taking their turn as advance guard of the Division, and, dealing with some determined opposition from time to time, they kept on the move until in May 1945, came the end of the war, which found the 52nd on the shores of the Baltic and meeting the Russians there. The 52nd had travelled many miles since the Rhine crossing, much of the way on foot. They were battle hardened, tough, but tired young men. John was still only 26 years old and he earned a well deserved mention in despatches for the campaign in Europe.

After the war and ordered to the Far East, 6th Airborne Division was saved from further fighting by the surrender of the Japanese. Instead the Division, including the 52nd, was sent to the Middle East intended to be a national strategic reserve based in Palestine. But they soon found themselves dealing with problems of illegal Jewish immigrants and the increasing number of attacks by the Irgun Zvai Leumi terrorist organisation, including the blowing up of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

John and Joan now tried to meet one another in the eastern Mediterranean. First-born David claims he was abandoned by his mother, as Joan set off from England, in company with a few other wives, on a ship bound for Haifa to join their husbands. En route they heard on the wireless that the degree of unrest in Palestine had increased and all British families were being evacuated. Joan therefore was landed in Port Said but soon blagged her way into a hotel in Cairo, and John managed to catch up with her there for a week's leave, he having flown in from Palestine.

Planning to move to Cyprus, Joan contracted typhoid and had a miserable time in a military hospital there before returning on her own to England.

In 1948 the 52nd was disbanded and amalgamated once again with the 43rd and in 1953 John went back to this battalion stationed in Osnabruck where they carried out routine and somewhat repetitive training as a lorried infantry battalion. John, in command of Letter 'A' Company, was a good trainer, and his wartime practical experience shone through. The Tilletts were generous and charming hosts to many in their quarter on the 'Regimental Patch'. John resumed his interest in rifle shooting. Using his skill and experience, he not only set the basis for the successful Battalion shooting team but achieved personal success in becoming runner up in the Army Small Bore Non-Central Championship.

In 1955, John left the Battalion once more to become an instructor in the Nuclear Weapons Tactical Wing of the School of Infantry at Warminster. As a result of being in this post he was selected to be a witness at the British Atomic Weapons Tests which were held at Maralinga in Western Australia. This meant another 6 months of separation from the family. John recalled that they were given dark glasses and told to face away from the explosion until the word was given. Then they turned around to see the awesome spectacle of the rising mushroom cloud and were assailed by the shock wave as the blast reached them in their unprotected positions some 5 miles from ground zero. The first test was of a 1 kiloton bomb, the same size as that which obliterated Hiroshima. A second test some days later was of 5 kilotons and after the explosion the military witnesses from UK, Australia and New Zealand were driven to Ground Zero to see the effects of the bomb at close quarters. Four years after these tests John developed asthma and had problems with his lungs for the rest of his life, for which he took a daily dose of cortisone steroid and received a disability pension.

In 1956 John spent another 6 months away from Joan when he was sent on the Infantry Command and Staff course at Fort Benning, USA, returning to complete his tour as an instructor at Warminster until the end of 1957. But they had an enjoyable posting together when he went to Plymouth to be Brigade Major of 2nd Infantry Brigade and then in 1959 they returned to regimental soldiering as John became Second in Command of the battalion then styled 1st Green Jackets (43rd and 52nd), soon to be retitled 1st Battalion The Royal Green Jackets. Based at Knook Camp near Warminster, John got to work again with the Battalion shooting teams and gained personal success by winning the Army Individual Non Central Championship. As a result of his Battalion team being runners-up at Bisley that year he became captain of the prestigious Green Jackets Shooting Team in the Methuen Cup Competition.

Next came promotion to Lt Colonel and two happy and sunny years on the NATO staff in Naples before he went to Uganda as the CO of 1st Ugandan Rifles, that had formerly been 4th Battalion The King's African Rifles. One member of this Battalion was a certain Idi Amin who had been commissioned from RSM and who later commanded the battalion, before going on to his more notorious political career. John was moved up to command the whole of the Ugandan Army in the rank of local Brigadier but, facing increasing dissent among African officers and soldiers over pay and conditions as well as intractable difficulties with his political masters and growing demands to increase the size of the Army rapidly while British officers were being phased out at the request of Ugandan ministers, he decided it was time for him to leave.

By way of complete change John and Joan went to Canada where, in Ottawa, John was Assistant Military Attache in charge of the British Defence Liaison Staff. Returning to UK in late 1966 he spent two years at HQ SHAPE near Mons, running the Establishments Inspection Team until he retired from active service in February 1969.

Then began his second career for which many officers had reason to be grateful. Working at Light Division Headquarters in Winchester, he personally set up and then managed for the next eleven years, what came to be widely recognised throughout the Army as the most efficient and successful system for the selection and recruitment of high quality potential officers for his Regiment. There was nothing particularly revolutionary about his system. Its success came from his caring personality, his wide regimental and active service experience, his energy and his determination to encourage the best young men to risk failing to get into the most sought-after regiment in the British Army. But he also took great trouble to guide and assist applicants whom he felt may not achieve their ambition against the competition for higher command within the Green Jackets. He didn't just drop such young men but he guided and helped them to find another regiment more suited to their personality and capabilities.

He was soon invited to fill the same role for the Light Infantry and, travelling to schools from Truro to Gordonstoun, he became well known to many people over the years during which time he established and maintained close personal relationships with parents of potential candidates and headmasters and other staff in a large number of schools as well as with many former officers of the regiment, then making their way in civilian life. When the Army eventually set up a system of Schools Liaison Officers, banning direct contact with schools unless approved by the SLO, it was the headmasters and careers masters who ignored the order and continued to deal directly with Colonel John Tillet. When he retired no fewer than 30 of his schools clubbed together to give him a generous farewell gift and a splendid engraved scroll citing his 'PR par excellence'.

Another of John's consuming interests lay in the Oxford-based Museum which, displaying the usual array of pictures, medals and artefacts of his old county Regiment, was housed for many years in two small rooms in the TA Centre at Slade Park Barracks. Here, week in and week out John, as Honorary Curator, personally carried out many improvements following the forced move of the Museum from the former Regimental Depot in Cowley Barracks. He was the fount of all knowledge about our regiment's history and he edited and had published a small booklet setting out clearly the intertwined history of the 43rd and 52nd from the coincidence of them both being raised as the 54th Regiment of Foot - one in 1741 and the other in 1755 - to the formation of the Royal Green Jackets in 1966.

With his knowledge of museum artefacts and his usual dedication to yet another task, he was able to play a key part, working with Giles Mills and John Baker, in the planning and setting up of the new museum in Winchester, created by the amalgamation of the museums of the three regiments that came together to form the Royal Green Jackets.

For many years he was a member of the Army Sports Control Board during which time he wrote the official Army rule books for the then 'new' Army sports of canoeing and free fall parachuting.

He became the first 'Administrator' of the Darrell-Brown Memorial Trust, a large fund set up to assist members of the old Regiment who had fallen on hard times. John continued to be involved in running the fund until the end of 2012 when his increasing physical problems made it impossible for him to attend the meetings.

Throughout many years John Tillett organised and was a regular visitor to the site of the two big operational events of his wartime days with the 52nd - Benouville in Normandy and Hamminkeln in Germany. Right up to 2011 he continued to arrange for wreaths to be laid at both places, and during his visit to Normandy in June 2010, he still managed to speak in moving words, and in fluent French, of his memories of former comrades and the generosity of the French citizens who have continued to give a warm welcome to him and other veterans on their annual pilgrimage.

In his last few years John endured recurring troubles with skin cancer, pneumonia and increasing immobility problems. Confined to home not far from here, he nevertheless maintained his keen interest in all things regimental. He was always pleased to hear about regimental activities and reports of our annual visit to Normandy and he always checked with me to make sure that all the usual details had been attended to properly.

He was able to attend the annual lunch of the 52nd families and friends in the cricket pavilion at St Cross in July 2012 when he proposed the toast to the Regiment. By late 2014 he was suffering from increasing problems with his breathing and a bout of pneumonia. But still he managed a lengthy interview when his wartime experiences were recorded on tape for the archives of the Imperial War Museum. Sadly a follow-up interview for the same purpose, though planned, was not possible, and John died in the County Hospital, Winchester at the age of 95, which, coincidentally, is the number you get if you add 43 to 52. John would find that appropriate.

We meet today on the 16th January, the date that John's great regimental hero, General Sir John Moore, Colonel of the 52nd, was killed during the battle of Corunna in 1809. I know John would think that appropriate too.

Today we have all come together to remember John with affection and pride, to give thanks for his fine example as a regimental officer, having given over seventy years of dedicated service, and we take this opportunity to ensure that Joan, David, Sally and Anthony know just how much John meant to so many of us for so long.

Like them, we loved him and we shall miss him.