

CHARITY ULTRA-MARATHON FOR 65TH ANNIVERSARY OF CAPTURE PEGASUS BRIDGE ON D-DAY

Firstly I will set the scene. On 23:00 5/6/44 six Horsa gliders, towed by Halifax bombers from 644 and 298 squadron took off from Tarrant Rushton airfield. Their cargo was the “coup de main” force consisting of 180 men from the 2nd Oxford and Buckinghamshire light infantry under the command of Major John Howard. The task they had been assigned was the capture and holding of two strategically vital bridges over the Caen canal and the River Orne. The success of this mission meant that German armour would be unable to attack the eastern flank of Sword Beach, part of the D Day landings. 5 of the 6 gliders landed at 00:16 D-Day within meters of the target. This feat of precision flying was later described in glowing terms by no less than Winston Churchill. 10 minutes later it was all over, both bridges (Benouville and Ranville) had been captured intact though 2 of the “coup de main” force died in the assault. The assault, code named Operation Tonga, achieved a number of other firsts: the first troops landed on D-Day, the first part of France liberated and sadly the first fatalities of D-Day. The 6th glider landed off target but its occupants made their way to the bridges successfully. The force later beat off a German counter-attack at around 02:00. Finally reinforcements arrived via parachute regiment dropped ½ hour after the main D-Day landings. A final link up with ground troops from the D Day landings occurred with the arrival of Lord Lovat and his commandos. The moment was immortalised in the film “Longest Day” when he was “piped” across the bridge under heavy fire at 12:00 hours. Finally a number of years later the Benouville Bridge was renamed Pegasus Bridge in memory of the assaulting force (The winged horse Pegasus is the insignia of the “coup de main” force)

Having set the historical context it will be apparent that 6/6/2009 will be the 65th anniversary of the D-day landings and as part of this event Project 65 was set up (www.project65.net) to raise funds for a number of charities: Royal British Legion, RAF Benevolent Fund, Army Benevolent Fund, British Limbless Ex Servicemen Association (BLE SMA) and St Dunstons a charity for blinded ex servicemen (currently home, amongst others to the oldest living WW1 veteran) One of the events that is planned by this charity in this special year is a recreation of the original Operation Tonga. This will be no mean feat as the only advantage we will have is the prospect of friendly opposition when we arrive! Starting on 4/6/09 at 1400 from Tarrant Rushton airfield the 180 fundraisers will embark on a mere 62 mile run to Portsmouth to catch a ferry. Having had no break, rest or sleep except for a bit of relaxation on the ferry the 180 persons will then disembark, put on a t-shirt to commemorate each of the individuals who took part and run the final 3 miles to Pegasus Bridge arriving at the exact moment of the assault i.e. 00:16 on 6/6/09. To put the distance in perspective it equates to 2 and ½ marathons or running from Grimsby to Hull and back non-stop. It is also apparent from timings that a % of this run will be competed in the dark. There are also the other minor problems of nutrition, hydration and no doubt blisters and chaffing.

I have no personal involvement with the forces as despite being a doctor I had a brain tumour that precludes me for enlisting, however I have a family member who has served in Iraq and Afghanistan and another family member who served for many years with the RAMC. I hope you can feel that this is a worthy charity appeal and thank you in advance of any donation you can give to me for undertaking this truly exceptional challenge. To securely donate on line, with the tax benefits, please use www.justgiving.com/iaindschalmers or alternatively I work in Grimsby at Weelsby View Health Centre and can be found there in person unless out training. Thank you once again.