

## **Memories of the Hamburg flood tragedy 1962.**

I enlisted in the British Army and on the 13th of January 1959 I was sent to Aldershot, in the south of England, to join my regiment, the Royal Engineers, for my basic training as a soldier!

After 6 months of training as a soldier in the British Army, I was ready to serve my country in any part of the world. Then I began my craft training. I was trained as a driver and also as a radio operator. I then became an Instructor of Driving and taught other recruits how to drive.

The following year I was posted to my Regiment in Paderborn, Germany. Then I was posted to Bergen-Belsen. From there I was stationed in Nienburg Weser.

An Engineer Regiment is responsible for many tasks. Among the tasks were bridge building, road building, and bomb disposal and associated tasks.

Germany was still recuperating from the World War II and it was a time of much reconstruction. Some of our tasks involved us in helping the local communities to build bridges or roads. These were tasks which gave me much more pleasure than destructive tasks!

On the night of February 16th 1962 I went to bed as normal. The weather was usual for North Germany, cold, but in the barracks it was warm and comfortable. Sometime around 1 in the morning, we were awakened and told to prepare ourselves to move out of the barracks. We were to prepare our equipment and our vehicles. We thought that it was another exercise to prepare for a Russian nuclear attack. We prepared and waited. At 3 A.M., we moved out of the barracks and took the autobahn north towards Hamburg. Our progress was slow and it was several hours until we reached the outskirts of Hamburg. We stopped on the autobahn for a while and waited further instructions. We still did not know the reason for our journey. Eventually we were told that there had been a terrible disaster which had caused damage in Hamburg. We were a part of an International Rescue effort and we were waiting for Diplomatic clearance from the British and German governments to provide aid to the city.

Finally we began to move into the city. Our area of responsibility was to be Hamburg-Harburg. I don't remember much about what happened day by day. I have certain memories which I value very much, because I was helping to save lives.

It is important to remember that this happened 17 years after the end of the war. Germany was split into two halves. One half was administered by the western powers, and the other half was administered by the soviet

nations. Many people fled from the soviet side and from Poland to be in the West. They lived in temporary housing which were merely wooden shacks at ground floor level. The water which invaded Hamburg was at a level of 1 meter and as a result of it being nighttime, the homes of these refugees were inundated rapidly. The old people and infants were among the majority who died that night.

The autobahn was constructed of large blocks of reinforced concrete. This was to support the tanks of the German Army during the war. As we approached Hamburg on the Autobahn we were presented with the problem of negotiating these concrete blocks which had been moved and displaced by the force of the water. It was like Hamburg had been the target of bombs once more.

We eventually arrived at our location in Harburg. We were to be stationed in a school which had been missed by the flood.

We spent the day surveying the extent of the flooding to evaluate the engineering needs to restore the city to normal. I was the driver of an armored scout car. This was a hunk of metal on four wheels with a turret for the commander. Inside was space for the driver, me, and another person and the radio. The turret was where the commander sat and observed.

I remember that I drove up the side of a dyke on to the top and then I drove along the dyke. We were observing the damage from high. We arrived at a place where the dyke had been broken by the water and then returned to our starting point. I had to reverse along the dyke, as there wasn't enough space to turn the vehicle.

On another occasion we traveled along a road and arrived at a point where the road was flooded. The officer in my vehicle wanted us to go to the other side of the flood water. So he kindly got out of the vehicle and told me to drive to the other side! He would follow if I got across safely! The lorries of the German Army were very large and had no problem crossing. My dear officer got hold of a radio and told me he would guide me by radio to the other side. The television companies from England and Germany were filming the scene I remember. I never got to see the final film! So I started to drive along the road and the water rose up the sides of my vehicle. When it reached the level of my window, which was no bigger than the screen of a portable computer, I asked the officer to guide me. I just drove the vehicle, and as he said "Left" or "Right" I followed his instructions. The water eventually started entering via the top of the turret which was 2 meters above the road! Then I started to climb and the water receded. I reached the other side safely!

There are also some personal memories of the time. I remember it was very cold. -20 C at night. To keep warm we built a large bonfire in the

schoolyard. The bonfire was about 4 meters in diameter and 3 meters high. It was a welcome warm place and also gave us light at night as the electricity had been disrupted. I have a vivid memory of walking up to the fire and I poured a mug of tea for myself. It was very warm facing the fire and freezing behind me. I was drinking my tea and I turned around so that I could warm my back and within 1 minute my tea had frozen!

Remember that we had been up to our waists in the water all day long, and our clothing was wet. The fire helped us to dry our clothing, and to keep ourselves warm!

I can not remember how long we were in Harburg, but I think it was about 1 week. During that time we had a rest day so we could relax and one of my fondest memories was on the day that I was free to relax. This was the first time during the disaster that I had some contact with the people of Hamburg. Some of my friends and I, we went to a local bierstube to drink a few beers, and to eat some decent food. We had been eating when we were able to. The food was Army rations from tins, survival food.

I remember that we went into the bierstube and ordered our beers and our food. Probably chicken and chips or potato salad! We sat there for some time drinking and relaxing and generally enjoying ourselves. Finally, it was time for us to leave. We asked for the bill and were refused. I asked why and was told that the others in the bierstube had paid for us to thank us for helping them.

Some months later we received our medals, certificates and books from the city of Hamburg. It is one medal that I wear with great pride whenever I am able to do.

23697798 Sapper Michael Peter Yarnold. Aged 68 (2008)