

Light me a Candle

Written by Hon Assistant Curate of Sprowston Parish, the late Revd Raymond Winter who was a captain in the Royal Marines, he landed in Juno Beach on 6 June 1944 with his troop and this is an account of his first day on French soil.

Kindly submitted by his wife Mrs Barbara K Winter

The hideous cacophony of battle was muffled by the closing of the tanks hatches above us. A merciful relief, until the claustrophobia of being “battened down”, anticipation of the dreaded entry into the water, and the task ahead, rekindled that eerie “overdrive” that our training had taught us to cultivate in times of stress.

Three tanks lumbered into the sea from the gaping ramp of an LCT now impaled as its stern by a mine which had exploded as we washed over it.

The bluff, father figure of the Naval beach officer beckoned us to press on: his white arm band, the white tape marking a safe passage across open beach, to say nothing of his short-haired terrier, obediently ‘to heel’, gave us familiar assurance as we slowly made an uneventful passage to the top of it. We turned right of the road that led to the village, which we followed, keeping a high stone wall on our left. After a hundred yards the wall ended and a line of houses began. We stopped here to wait for contact with the rest of the Troop, and gingerly opened the heavy armour plated hatch covers to get a “look-see”.

What we had been led to expect of the village was a line of solid, holiday homes with large windows and long balconies giving uninterrupted views of the sea. Behind them, on the other side of the street, several shops, cafes and a wall, exactly 10 feet high, a boundary of a large apple orchard. Over the last six months our mind had been crammed with details of this place. Helped by large-scale maps, accurate models, aerial photographs and graphic accounts from incognito visitors, this scenario had ruled our waking hours, and not a few sleepless nights as we became acquainted with this, as yet, unidentified spot in France.

Now, as we gazed, the shadow of itself, laid a smoking ruin at our feet. Where we had stopped along the wall this barrier of stone still stood all of ten feet high, except for a gaping gap where a section of Canadian infantry had taken cover; all dead, save one. He, the “tail end Charlie” was separated a little from the rest, lay moaning gently, the barrel of his Bren-gun, twisted into an obscene question mark, torn from his grasp, now lay fifteen feet from him, in the road.

Running to him I found that, foolishly, I had broken off a chunk from a chocolate block, and was now trying to thrust it into his mouth. This lay agape, yet closed for even a gulp of water, for at the back of his throat was blood, bubbling like a simmering pot, as he choked with every breath he took. Ripping open my field dressing not to bind any wound, but to gently staunch the choking flow, and to wipe

what was left of his face clean. This prompted him to open his eyes, and something I said prompted him to try and speak: "Light a candle for me sir," he said before he died. I gently closed his eyes, retrieved his Identity Disc from under his battle-dress, and I laid it conspicuously on his chest.

Just then the dry crackle of the W/T set in the tank meant that wireless silence had been broken, and after brief words into the set, the operator leant over and shouted that we were to move. At once we became the automata, the robots we had been drilled to be.

In the moments between snatched sleep and drowsy waking that night it was the Canadian's words that were recalled most often. The rare courtesy of rank acknowledged, he applied, amused but puzzled me – used by a robust volunteer from a Dominion, known for their veiled contempt for authority seemed a contradiction!

Long since I convinced myself that it was no mistake; he had not been talking to me, but to his God, and like all good Catholic prayers, it is addressed through an intermediary – Sir – For chrissake perhaps.

I will certainly light a candle for him and as ever many others on Monday.