

14555173 Sapper Norman Linklater



Norman was born in Kirkwall on 22nd December 1924, a son of Charlotte Mary Keldie. When Lottie married on 3rd March 1927 James Linklater, a widower and well known local Merchant Navy seaman, young Norman and his year older brother Gordon took on their stepfather's surname. Another son joined the family in March 1937, when Brian was born.

Norman was only fourteen when World War 2 started. His stepfather was drowned in a tragic accident on 14th December 1939 while serving as mate on board the tug Imperious, owned by Metal Industries and working for the Royal Navy in Scapa Flow. Norman was employed as a dock labourer in Kirkwall harbour, where a great deal of war material and provisions had to be unloaded daily for the many service units based in and around the town, as well as for the local population.

Norman was called up under provisions of the National Service Acts, 1939 to 1941 after his eighteenth birthday. He joined the Territorial Army on 4th March 1943, was classified as A1 grade fit next day in his enlistment medical examination and started basic infantry training. A month later he had passed the gas chamber, rifle and light machine gun courses. The Army took advantage of the dock labour skills Norman had acquired and that summer he passed stevedore tests at Grade III and II, to qualify for a tradesman pay rate in the Royal Engineers.

Norman worked and trained for a year in various ports in the UK. He joined 1029 Docks Operating Company on 5th June, 1032 Docks Op Coy on 7th August and 1026 Docks Op Coy on 8th October. On 28th October Norman joined 1045 Docks Operating Company RE, which had a total strength of about 370 personnel.

1045 Docks Op Coy left its training in Bromborough on 12th February 1944 for Blackheath in London, to work there until the 20th strike breaking. It moved to Barrow-in-Furness on 1st March for intensive training, including a week's Inland Water Transport course at Ryde on the Isle of Wight in April. On 8th May 1045 Coy left Barrow to proceed to its preliminary Concentration Area for "Operation Overlord", better known as the D-Day landings.

The landings on Normandy were successful, because of strategic surprise and overwhelming sea and air support. By nightfall on D-Day 6th June, all five beach-heads were secure and troops were pushing inland. The invasion of France then became a race between the Allies and the Germans to build up forces in Normandy, to expand or destroy the lodgement. On average every front line soldier needed a ton of vital supplies every month and these had to be offloaded from ships onto the beaches by the logistic 2nd Echelon troops. Most supplies were landed onto the open beaches, but the Allies also built two artificial harbours in Normandy.

On 5th June 1045 Docks Op Coy boarded seven motor transport ships, which landed in Normandy on the 8th. It took Norman's company two days to unload these ships, but then it unloaded four ships a day until a great storm hit on 20th June that prevented it discharging ships for three days. The storm also effectively destroyed the artificial harbour Mulberry A that the Americans had built on Omaha Beach, but luckily the British Mulberry B Harbour on Gold Beach was only damaged and actually continued unloading ships during the storm. German air and sea attacks on the beaches were rare, but James Chalmers of Stronsay was killed when a German human torpedo sank HMS *Gairsay* there on 3rd August.

Unloading the continuous shuttle of cargo ships in all weathers had other hazards. 1045 Coy evacuated to the UK three personnel injured in different accidents while discharging ships in a week during July. The Company took two Germans prisoner on 10th June, but must have been surprised to return to a POW camp two escaped Germans found hiding in a strongpoint on 21st September.

By then the Allies had broken through the German defences and those who escaped from that fighting had fallen back through northern France in disorder towards the German frontier. However, they left strong garrisons in all the Channel ports, which had to be stormed in set piece attacks by British and Canadian troops who then found the harbour facilities sabotaged.

British 11th Armoured Division had swept into the large Belgian port of Antwerp to capture the docks intact on 4th September, but in “The Great Mistake” failed to secure its approaches in the Scheldt estuary. After difficult and costly fighting, including amphibious operations, they were cleared in November and the harbour opened for use to improve the supply chain.

1045 Coy left Normandy on 17th November, arrived in Antwerp the following evening. After securing billets and training in weapons handling (including of Bren Guns and PIAT), it was discharging ships in Antwerp docks by the end of the month. German air attacks injured two personnel on 27th November, while a man was killed by a German missile on 16th December. After a surprise German offensive (the Battle of the Bulge) started that day with Antwerp as its target, 1045 Coy alternated working round-the-clock ship discharging ships with regular weapons training. By the end of January 1945 the German offensive had completely failed.

Norman was transferred on 3rd February 1945 to 1049 Docks Operating Company RE, then working in Ostend docks. Routine there also alternated between discharging ships and continuing military training, but Belgian civilians provided useful labour to assist in the landing and distribution of vital supplies.

When 1049 Coy left Ostend to return to the UK on 4th April, the war in Europe was effectively over. Most of its personnel returned to their homes to enjoy 14 days of leave, but Norman did not. He had been feeling unwell for some time, so reported sick. After various tests in hospital, he was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis. Norman was posted on the Y List as “Permanently unfit for any form of Military Service” on 24th May, but was not discharged and he remained in the Army under the B102 Long Term Scheme. On 24th August an Army Medical Board in Aberdeen downgraded Norman’s medical grade from A1 to E.

Norman travelled home to Kirkwall and was admitted to the TB isolation unit in Eastbank Hospital. He endured the slow and cruel decline in health tuberculosis inflicts on its victims, until died of its effects and exhaustion on 15th June 1947.

Norman’s mother had married again in 1944 to James Walter, a butcher. She declined the offer of a military funeral and erected a private headstone on her son’s grave in St Olaf’s Cemetery. Sapper Norman Linklater is, however, listed by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in the Cemetery Register and on its website as an official casualty of World War 2. The Walter family, including Brian Linklater then 11 years old, left Orkney for the London area in 1948. Gordon Linklater, a customs officer who returned to Orkney after he retired, joined his brother Norman in his grave in 1999.

