

RONALD MERVYN SHEEHAN.
4/7th ROYAL DRAGOON GUARDS.
Service number 323519.

Ronald “Ronnie” Mervyn Sheehan was the youngest son of Hoxne’s Doctor, William Joseph and his wife Mary Bridget Sheehan. In 1934 the Sheehan’s moved to Hoxne when William took over the medical practice from Doctor J Gardner. In keeping with local tradition the family moved into “The Firs”, Green Street which had been the residence of the village Doctors and location of surgery for some time.

Both William and Mary were born in Limerick on the west coast of what is now Eire. William studied medicine at the Royal University of Ireland in Dublin and was first registered as Doctor in 1905. At some point after qualifying William left Ireland for Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) where he served as a Doctor in the expanding sugar cane industry. By 1913 he had moved to Kansanshi in the copper belt of North West Rhodesia (Zambia). On the out break of the First World War William became a Temporary Captain in the Northern Rhodesian Medical Corps which, although not formally named until October 1917, had been established to deal with the medical issues of campaigning against German East Africa. During this period William was mentioned in dispatches twice.

William returned to Ireland and in early 1920 married Mary Bridget O’Brien at St Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church in Limerick at the height of the Irish War of Independence. They did not remain in Ireland for any length of time and returned to Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) where it is likely their first son, Desmond, was born. At some point the family moved south to the Union of South Africa (The Republic of South Africa) as this is where Ronald was born in 1925. We do not know where the family lived in South Africa but presumably William, with many contacts in the country, would not have found it hard to continue to practice as a Doctor.

In 1934 the family returned to the United Kingdom as William took over the medical practice in Hoxne. We do not know where Desmond went to school but Ronnie attended St Augustine’s College and Abbey School in Ramsgate which was a Roman Catholic educational establishment. In July 1937 the Thanet Advertiser reported that Ronald Sheehan had won the Bishop of Southwark’s prize for Religious Knowledge and the schools shooting challenge cup. In 1939 the school was evacuated from Ramsgate the older students going to Douai Abbey near Reading and the younger ones to Madeley Court near St Ives. Ronnie, now 14, would have gone to Douai Abbey.

When Ronnie returned to Hoxne during school holidays we do know that his interest lay in music, he was quite an accomplished pianist, and sport especially tennis. With other teenagers he played the local circuit of private courts and was considered to be a good player. During the summer break of 1940 Ronnie helped the Hoxne Home Guard when he was detailed to take over a tour of the Church Tower which was used as an observation post. Clearly this was an “unofficial” tour as he was still only 15.

Ronnie would have been called up on his eighteenth birthday in 1943. We do not know whether the Abbey School operated a branch of the Army Cadet Force which

was only re-established by the Government in 1942 but Ronnie, with his family background would have been ideal officer material. In any event having been called up Ronnie would have gone before a War Office Selection Board where officer candidates were interviewed and underwent sessions with both a psychiatrist and psychologist. Having successfully passed his interview with the Board Ronnie would have been sent for basic training, this could have been an Officer Cadet Training Unit but as Ronnie served in the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC) he could have been posted to one of the many RAC Training Regiments.

The RAC had come into being in April 1939 to amalgamate the mechanised cavalry regiments of the army and the Royal Tank Corps (renamed The Royal Tank Regiment) under one service arm. The London Gazette records Ronnie being commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant into the RAC on the 18 June 1944 and then posted to the 4/7 Royal Dragoon Guards (RDG). Ronnie may have received embarkation leave before joining his Regiment.

The 4/7 RDG formed part of the 8th Armoured Brigade. On the 6 June 1944 the Regiment landed on Gold Beach and was involved in the closing of the Falaise Pocket in August. Once the Allies had broken out of the Normandy Bridgehead the Regiment was in the thick of advance through Belgium and into Holland. By December the Allies were close to the German border but the cost had been significant. On the 14 December the 4/7 RDG War Diary records that the Regiment had lost 33 Officers and 254 Other Ranks killed, wounded or missing but that the Regiment was up to strength. Unusually the 4/7 RDG War Diary rarely states when new officers were sent to the Regiment as replacements, so we do not know when Ronnie joined them. The first time he is mentioned is on 3 March 1945 when he was noted as the Liaison Officer with the 158 Brigade and had brought orders for the 4/7 to support an operation.

At the end of March 1945, the British were moving into Northern Germany. Resistance was stiff and there was a reluctance, given that the end of the wars was in sight, to take risks. Using their predominance of airpower and artillery German defences, real or imagined, were smashed as a matter of course. Operation "Forward On" was one of the numerous operations linked to the increasing Rhine bridgehead to a point when a serious breakout could be contemplated. On the 30 March the operation began involving most of the 8 Brigade. The 4/7 RDG's objectives, with infantry support, the towns of Sinderen and Vareseveld.

The War Diary records that Ronnie Sheehan's light reconnaissance tank, an M5 Honey, was knocked out and that he was killed and three troopers taken prisoner. In his book "Monty's Marauders" Patrick Delaforce offers a more detailed version of the events.

"During the attack on Sinderen two Recce tanks (Honeys) led, followed by two Kangaroo's carrying a platoon of Somersets and next came Trooper Bakers Sherman "Shaggy Dog". In a few minutes Bill Riley came over the air with his report to the CO, 'situation as follows-leading baby bazooka and commander (Lt Sheehan) killed"

It appears that Ronnie had followed the first "Honey" which was under the command of Corporal Kendrick into the village at speed. Kendricks's "Honey" was knocked out and the crew captured and shortly after Ronnies tank suffered the same fate. The

attack on Sinderen and Vareseveld were ultimately successful and both towns captured.

Ronnie Sheehan is buried in Jonkerboss War Cemetery in the Dutch town of Nijmegen.