

"Monty - The Pompey Connection"

This month sees the 60th anniversary of Field Marshal Montgomery's victory at the Battle of El Alamein. As Winston Churchill famously wrote, "Before Alamein, we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat." We all have our heroes and Monty is one of mine. In 1994, Monty's son David came to Portsmouth to unveil a plaque at Raveline House. I was invited by the Portsmouth City Council to attend the event, with Joy, and to present him with a copy of my book about his father. Lord Montgomery was a plumper version of Monty but with the same piecing blue eyes. We chatted and he told us about his mixed feelings in returning to the house where, as a young boy, he was living when his mother died. We are now in advance of our tale, so may I take you back to wartime Portsmouth.

On the evening of D-Day, General Bernard Montgomery left his Headquarters in Broomfield House at Southwick and travelled in his armoured staff car through the darkened streets of wartime Portsmouth on his way to the Dockyard where he was to embark in the destroyer H M S Faulkner bound for the D Day coast of Normandy. Ahead of him was a victory of staggering proportions for which he as the land commander and architect of the invasion plan must take the major credit. Before his Normandy campaign was over the Germans were to lose virtually 43 divisions, with a quarter of a million men killed or wounded and a similar number captured, and 1500 tanks and 3500 pieces of artillery captured or destroyed. But that was in the future.

As he settled into his bunk at 9.30 that evening no doubt his thoughts must have strayed to the events of his earlier years in Portsmouth, to his first senior command and to the greatest tragedy in his life. Monty first came to Pompey in May 1937 on promotion to Brigadier. This was his first senior command and one intended to test his ability to make General. As Brigade Commander Portsmouth of the 9th Infantry Brigade in the 3rd Infantry Division, he was the senior military officer in the area and as Commandant had certain privileges including holding the keys of the City. As Brigade Commander Portsmouth, Monty and his wife Betty, who was the widow of a soldier, were to occupy Raveline House, a very large residence befitting a Commandant and now part of the estate of the University of Portsmouth. After many years abroad, this was to be their first real home in England.

Raveline House needed decorating. Monty was due to go to summer training camp on Salisbury Plain with his brigade and so he sent Betty and their son David to Burnham-on-Sea, near Weston-Super-Mare in Somerset. David was on his summer holidays from his preparatory school at Haslemere. While on the beach one day, Betty was stung by an insect. The bite proved poisonous, septicaemia spread and, despite all the efforts of the doctors, she died. As Monty said in his memoirs, "Betty died on the 19 October 1937 in my arms. The big house at Portsmouth would never see its intended mistress; David would be motherless. Betty Montgomery was dead."

The funeral of Betty Montgomery was at Burnham-on-Sea. Monty would not allow David or his two stepsons by her previous marriage to attend, nor would he invite any relatives. There was just his Brigade-Major, Staff-Captain and the driver of his staff car present. Despite their entreaties, Monty returned alone to Portsmouth. He wandered around the big house, seeing no one and overwhelmed by his grief. His Brigade-Major at Portsmouth was F.E.W.Simpson, destined to be a famous soldier in his own right. Monty telephoned him at 1 o'clock in the morning to tell him that he was rejoining the unit on Salisbury Plain. "Forgive these human failings of mine. I have been away two whole days. Now let's get down to training!" His dedication to his profession was now complete.

Monty took a great interest in Portsmouth and its citizens. He was instrumental in having the old City ramparts opened to the public. He also made strenuous efforts with the War Office to have the

ancient ceremony of the Evening Gun restored. It had been the custom from ancient times to fire a gun from the eastern fortifications while lowering the Union Jack. Simultaneously, every ship in the harbour lowered the White Ensign accompanied by a bugle call. Shore establishments also took part; in the last century with volleys of musket shots, accompanied by drums and trumpets. In this century the ceremony had been scaled down until it ceased altogether on 30 September 1931. Monty's efforts with the War Office were to no avail and he had to accept defeat. To this day the Evening Gun has never been heard again in Portsmouth.

While in Portsmouth Monty got into serious trouble with the War Office. He needed money for his Garrison funds to provide welfare for his unit's married families. He therefore decided to let the Clarence football field on Southsea Common, which belonged to the War Department, to a fair promoter for the August Bank Holiday week for £1500, after refusing an initial offer of £1000! Unfortunately, when they heard about the venture the Portsmouth City Council refused permission for the fair to be held. Monty personally saw the Lord Mayor and offered him £500 of the promoter's money for one of the Mayor's favourite charities if the Council allowed the fair to go ahead. This did the trick; Monty's married families got their £1000 and the charity its £500.

However it did not end there. The War Department found out about Monty's scheme and told him he had broken Army Regulations in letting their land. They were prepared to ignore the matter if he gave them the £1500. This was impossible - the money had been spent. A file was set up and correspondence ensued between the War Department, Monty and his Army Commander, General Wavell, at Salisbury. To protect Monty, Wavell delayed matters all he could and bureaucracy did the rest. Monty was promoted Major-General in 1938 and sent to Palestine - nothing further was heard of the file!

Monty returned to Portsmouth in 1944 but more about that next month.

We left our account last month with Monty off to Palestine. He returned to Portsmouth in April 1944 in preparation for D Day. In his absence his furniture and virtually all his possessions, stored in a depository in the City, were destroyed in an air raid in January 1941. His Headquarters was at Southwick and he was quartered in Broomfield House. He remained there for two months, receiving in this short period many distinguished guests including King George VI and Winston Churchill.

As the war in Europe drew to a close, on 19 May 1945 the Portsmouth City Council passed a unanimous resolution that Monty should receive an Honorary Freedom "in recognition of the eminent services rendered by him to the nation and the British Empire and of the great interest displayed by him in the welfare of Portsmouth and its citizens during the tenure of the office of Commander of the 9th Infantry Brigade, Portsmouth 1937\38."

On Friday, 26 July 1946, Monty came to the City to receive the Honorary Freedom. Met by the Chief Constable, Mr A C West, at the City boundary on Portsdown Hill, Monty was escorted through the streets lined with cheering citizens to Southsea, scene of the historic embarkation of his troops for D Day. At South Parade Pier he was met by the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress and by the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir Geoffrey Layton, and Lady Layton.

A huge crowd had assembled along the promenade, cheering Monty with great fervour as he inspected a naval guard of honour. Monty was dressed in his familiar battledress and wearing his famous beret with the two badges. Inside the South Parade Pier, which was used because the Guildhall was too bomb damaged, the pavilion was crowded with aldermen, councillors, dignitaries and ordinary citizens witnessing an historic event fit to rank with any in the city's long history.

The Town Clerk, Mr V Blanchard, read the resolution of the City Council which the Lord Mayor then presented to Monty in a silver casket surmounted with the city crest and motto in blue enamel. Monty's day in Portsmouth was not finished. Next followed lunch at the Savoy - opposite the South Parade Pier - now the night club "Time". He then went on to address a national savings movement meeting on Southsea Common and finally presented prizes at the Portsmouth Grammar School speech day.

There was a sad sequel to this happy day. On 17 November 1967, Monty was given an eightieth birthday dinner by General Sir Frank Simpson - his former Brigade Major at Portsmouth - who was the Governor of the Royal Hospital Chelsea. Monty stayed the night. On his return to his home at Isington Mill, near Alton, the following morning he found that it had been burgled in his absence. Almost all the gifts from Heads of State and civic authorities were stolen including the silver casket presented to him on the great day in Portsmouth. Nothing was ever recovered.

Monty came to Portsmouth again for a civic occasion on 6 June 1948 to unveil a memorial four years after D-Day. Crowds packed every vantage point to see the ceremony performed opposite the South Parade Pier. It was a stirring occasion which was broadcast around the world by the BBC. American, French and British troops marched in the Guard of Honour, with the Royal Navy and Royal Marines providing local contingents. Three bands were in the colourful procession, brought up at the rear by an open car with Monty standing to acknowledge the cheers as he did on so many occasions in towns and cities liberated by his victorious troops.

In his address to the huge crowd Monty said:

"Here in Portsmouth your battle scars are visible for all to see. When I look at them to-day I remember with pride that I am a Freeman of your city and can share those scars with you. And I do share them because it was in Portsmouth that I lost everything I possessed by enemy bombing in January 1941."

Monty was to be seen by another large crowd in Portsmouth later that year when on 27 November Pompey played the Arsenal in their golden jubilee match. I was present at the match and still have the programme in my collection. Monty had consented on 21 March 1944 to become the first President of the Portsmouth Football Club. The Board of Directors did this in recognition that Monty had been a keen supporter of the club during his period as Commandant in the City. He had attended Fratton Park several times and no doubt the Board were influenced by the fact that Monty had never seen them lose! Before the Arsenal match, I saw Monty introduced to the crowd and to the two teams. He and Reg Flewin, Pompey's captain, cut a large birthday cake on the pitch. Pompey won the match 4-1 and went on to win the First Division Championship for the first time in their history.

Monty, a very good footballer in his youth, took a keen interest in the club. Always dressed in uniform, he was a regular spectator at Fratton Park in the post-war seasons. Pompey's championship was secured by victory at Bolton on 23 April 1949. The following Saturday I was in a big crowd at Fratton Park when Pompey beat Huddersfield 2-0. On behalf of the League Management Committee, Mr W J Cearns presented the championship trophy to the Club President, Monty, who immediately handed it to Reg Flewin to hold aloft to the crowd.

Monty was a very Christian man, born in a vicarage at Kennington, London, and the son of the future Bishop of Tasmania. He never liked to say the word "death", preferring to say "when I cross the Jordan". A few months before he died, Monty said to his publisher and personal friend Sir Dennis Hamilton. "When I cross the Jordan and meet all my soldiers who died in battle, what will they say to me?" Hamilton replied, "Field Marshal, they will say you did your best for them." (Monty was aged 88 but still addressed as Field Marshal).

Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G., G.C.B.,and D.S.O.,finally died peacefully in his Hampshire home on 24 March 1976 at the age of 88. After a service at St George's Chapel, Windsor, his coffin was taken to the churchyard of Holy Cross, Binstead, not far from his home. As Monty's coffin was being lowered into the ground by Guardsmen, the Vicar said, "Now he has passed over Jordan".

Roger Bryant