

# Major Jeffrey Fraser Noble MBE NOM (Fr.)

Fought at the ill-fated Battle of Arnhem in September 1944 and nicknamed 'The Boy' by Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard des Voeux



Major Jeffrey Noble (who died on 4th June 2020, aged 96) was a lieutenant in the 156 Parachute Battalion (1st Airborne Division) that fought at Arnhem as part of Operation Market Garden.

At the age of 20, Jeffrey was the Officer Commanding the Medium Machine Gun Platoon that took off in two Dakota aircraft from Saltby Airfield near Grantham on Monday, 18th September 1944, part of an Allied air armada of around 36,000 men consisting of one British and two American airborne divisions. The mission of the British was to capture the bridge at Arnhem, the furthest point in enemy-occupied Holland, in an attempt to bring the war to a swift end. This was the second lift on Day 2 of the Operation and, due to captured documents, the element of surprise had been lost and the Germans would, therefore, give them a warm reception.



*General Sir Bernard Montgomery inspects 156 Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, 4th Parachute Brigade at Oakham School, Rutland, March 1944. The men on the front row to the right are members of the Medium Machine Gun Platoon; for them Arnhem would be costly. From right to left are: Pte. H Hopwood KIA; Unknown; L/Cpl. H Littlewood; Pte. G Tutton KIA; A/Sgt. O Lilly KIA; Pte. E A Ball; Pte. H Stanyer KIA; Pte. C Smith. To the left of Montgomery is the tall figure of Lt Col Sir Richard des Voeux, CO of the 156 Battalion.*

After some 30 minutes into the flight, the US Crew Chief came aft to say there was a problem. The parachute on one of the containers (with the spare ammunition) slung under the aircraft was spilling out. The aircraft was, therefore, forced to land at a US base in East Anglia. Following some quick repairs, it took off following the still visible tail of the air armada.

## Obituary of Major Jeffrey Fraser Noble MBE NOM (Fr)

The Dakota carrying the other half of Jeffrey's MMG Platoon had taken his place in the formation. Whilst flying over the Dutch countryside, it was hit by flak. B Company Commander John Waddy of 156 Battalion described what happened: "I stood by the side of the open door of my aircraft as we travelled towards our drop zone near Arnhem. There were 36 Dakota aircraft in the serial carrying the 156 Battalion. Many of the American pilots and crew of these aircraft were green, as our battalion had found to its cost on a previous exercise when they dropped us miles from our DZ. Bearing this in mind, Brigadier Shan Hackett (4th Parachute Brigade Commander) had suggested that I closely monitor our route, which is why I was looking out of the open door. The flak was becoming more intense as we travelled across the Dutch countryside. When the aircraft to my right was hit on the port wing and caught fire, it began a steep dive of around 45 degrees. When it hit the ground, it exploded in a fireball. I looked at my men who were seated each side of the aircraft and who, in the din, had not noticed what had happened. I said nothing."



*Lieutenant Jeffrey Noble, Officer Commanding Medium Machine-Gun Platoon, Support Company*

Unaware of this tragedy Jeffrey's aircraft flew on, arriving at the drop zone near Ede, eight miles from Arnhem. Jeffrey described the drop zone as shrouded in smoke with no signals visible and, without a navigator on board, they jumped solely on the guesswork of Jeffrey and that of the crew chief. Several men at the end of the stick landed in the German-occupied woods. After a shaky start, accompanied by occasional shots and explosions, Jeffrey arrived at Battalion HQ where he found he had only one machine gun instead of four and just some 10 men instead of his original 36. Several later turned up wounded – including Sergeant Brownlow and Corporal Ball – and more arrived after various adventures.

Jeffrey forcibly seized another gun from a 1st Parachute Battalion jeep, and they formed an ad hoc section.

They marched for five hours towards Arnhem and, after contact with the Germans around midnight and an exchange of fire, they were ordered to make camp. At first light, they made a bold attempt to get through to the beleaguered paratroopers at the bridge in Arnhem. Brigadier Hackett ordered 156 and 10th Parachute Battalions to attack the strongly defended German positions which were manned by elements of the 9 SS Panzer Division spread out across the east side of the Dreijenseweg (the German blocking line). Jeffrey and his men engaged with the Germans with particular success against the snipers but, although the 156 had given a good account of itself, heavily outgunned with tanks and multi-barrelled anti-aircraft guns, it was ordered to pull back to the village of Wolfheze where Hackett believed the Germans were moving in behind them. With their heavy loads, the harried survivors of the MMG Platoon managed to get to Wolfheze as dusk fell.

At first light on Wednesday, 20th September, around 130 men of the 156 – including the MMG men – found themselves surrounded by both infantry and tanks in Wolfheze. They had become separated the evening before from the rest of 156 who, unknown to them, had received orders to cross the railway to the south. B Company 2ic Captain Montgomery gave the order 'Sauve qui peut' (French for everyone for himself). A bit dramatic Jeffrey thought at the time. Having used the last of his ammunition against the enemy, Jeffrey led the charge – some with fixed bayonets – through

## Obituary of Major Jeffrey Fraser Noble MBE NOM (Fr)

the German line, towards Oosterbeek, over fences and through gardens until they reached tree cover. Later in the day, after joining up with a company of The King's Own Scottish Borderers, they were ordered to surrender to the Germans by its commander, much to Jeffrey's and the 156 men's chagrin. Jeffrey and his men, however, had other ideas and slipped away into the woods moving towards the sound of gunfire. A few hours later though, with hundreds of Germans moving into the area and no ammunition left, they were surrounded and finally reluctantly surrendered. Jeffrey was to spend the rest of the war at Oflag 79 at Braunschweig.

The rest of the 156 (around 270 men), together with Colonel des Voeux and Brigadier Shan Hackett, valiantly fought their way through stiff opposition in the Bilderberg Woods towards Divisional HQ in Oosterbeek. In the late afternoon, pinned down in an area that would become known as Hackett's Hollow, the remaining 156 and 4th Brigade HQ men broke through the encircling German opposition in a sustained bayonet charge. The 70 surviving 156 men were ordered to defend the north-east Oosterbeek perimeter, which they did for five days before the remaining 27 men were ordered to evacuate across the river in Operation Berlin.

Jeffrey Fraser Noble was born in Ilford, Essex on 15th October 1923 and finished his schooling at Southend High School. On 14th May 1942 Jeffrey joined the Queen's Royal Regiment where he was put forward for officer training. Following his commission as 2nd Lieutenant he was one of the first cadets to transfer directly into the Parachute Regiment, where he trained first at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire and then on 8th June he completed the parachute course at Ringway, Manchester. At Ringway, his report described him as very keen and fearless, but a little awkward.

Jeffrey was assigned to the 156 Parachute Battalion and tasked with escorting a draft of 70 men from the UK by ship to join the Battalion based in Sousse, Tunisia. It was here that he met his new commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard des Voeux who took him under his wing, giving him the nickname 'The Boy' on account of his youthful looks, and the name stuck. 156 (first known as 151) had been formed in India in October 1941 with volunteers from 28 different regiments. Des Voeux had been ADC to General Browning in the Grenadier Guards and subsequently was part of General Browning's initial HQ (known as The Dungeon Party) in London that was tasked with the formation of Britain's airborne forces (which became 1st Airborne Division). He was offered the command of 156, which he accepted on condition that he be allowed to take his former RSM – Gay – from the Grenadiers with him. On 15 March 1943 he took command of the battalion and training was then stepped up and field craft improved.

Jeffrey was a 19-year-old 2nd Lieutenant and told to reconstitute the Medium Machine Gun Platoon, which had been disbanded. Fortunately, his three sergeants were very experienced and, together, they controlled recruitment and built a strong unit.

On 9th September 1943, as part of 1st Airborne Division, 156 Battalion made a successful seaborne landing at Taranto, Italy. They travelled across the heel of Italy and had several encounters with German paratroopers who tried to delay their progress. It was here that Jeffrey saw his first action as his guns supported C Company's attack on the hillside village of Mottola, where they routed their German counterparts. A bizarre incident happened in Mottola when Jeffrey and his fellow officers were approached by an Italian Transport Officer, Tenente (Lieutenant) Bugatti, complete with mistress and a sergeant who was his own personal chef and had previously worked at The Savoy in Rome. Tenente Bugatti was a member of the famous Italian car family and now that Italy was allied to the British and Americans, was doing his bit to ensure good relations between former antagonists.

## Obituary of Major Jeffrey Fraser Noble MBE NOM (Fr)

It was Bugatti's opinion that his country had never been allied with the Germans but had merely been 'co-belligerents'. Bugatti handed over his detachment of lorries and offered the services of his chef to the officers of the Battalion. A drinks party was arranged where the Tenente's beautiful and voluptuous mistress dispensed drinks and compliments in equal measure. Jeffrey and his colleagues felt a little envious of the war the Italian was having.

The main Battalion action occurred at San Basilio and, close to Castellanetta, Jeffrey's platoon was very much involved in clearing the Germans from their hillside positions. Casualties were taken on both sides, with the Germans only withdrawing after putting up a very good fight. After several other engagements, including the capture of the strategically important airfield at Gioia del Colle, their mission was completed and 156 were shipped back first to Uppingham in Rutland, England in December 1943 before moving to Melton Mowbray the following February, where they prepared for their next operation – Arnhem.

In July 1945 Jeffrey continued his military career by initially joining the 1st Parachute Battalion and going to Palestine as 2ic of S Company, becoming GTTi Ops at HQ 6th Airborne Division. He then had a spell as ACO at RAF Fairford before he was gazetted into the Royal Fusiliers in late 1948, serving first in Egypt and then Palestine as GSOIII 3 Brigade. He returned to the Parachute Regiment as a regular and was 2ic of the 10th Parachute Battalion TAs in August 1953.



*Jeffrey Noble (on the left) accompanying the Queen Mother on her visit to the Annecy Museum, France.*

Jeffrey retired from the army with the rank of major after the Suez operation in October 1956 to pursue a successful career in human resources that culminated in a top post with IIT Europe in Brussels where he excelled.

Jeffrey met his wife-to-be Rebecca (Bobbie) Robinson on his return from the German PoW camp in April 1945. They married later that year on 24th September.

Jeffrey was always haunted by the great loss of life of men under his command on Dakota Chalk number 619 and the 6 US aircrew when their Dakota aircraft was shot down on its approach to the DZ at Arnhem. Military Chaplain Brian McAvoy read out Jeffrey's words, describing the

characters and qualities of his men, to the families of the 156 veterans who visited their graves at the Nijmegen Cemetery last September. It moved Jeffrey to know that at the exact hour 75 years on from their deaths, a service was held in their honour and a small wooden cross laid next to each grave by the children present. It is worth remembering that 156 had suffered the highest percentage losses of all the battalions who fought in the 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem, including the loss of their much-admired commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel des Voeux. With only 37 men out of 600 returning after the battle (10 of whom were evaders and escaped after the battle), they were disbanded and amalgamated into 1st Parachute Battalion.

## Obituary of Major Jeffrey Fraser Noble MBE NOM (Fr)

Jeffrey, together with wife Rebecca, returned to Saltby Airfield for the Regiment's annual reunion in October 2017, the last officer of the Battalion to do so.

It is the 100th birthday of Colonel John Waddy OBE this month, one of Jeffrey's fellow officers in the 156 Battalion. These two last survivors of 156 were great friends and one of the last things Jeffrey said was that, regretfully, he had not managed to write John's birthday card. Jeffrey was an engaging, striking figure of 6'3", having an affable and fun-loving personality, illustrated by the fact that whilst based in Melton Mowbray he and the two fellow subalterns in his company, Ronnie Adams and Michael Cambier, became great friends and pranksters, known as the 'Three Must Get Beers'.

Jeffrey and Bobbie moved to Annecy in France in 1980. They were wonderful and generous hosts and had many local friends, as well as sharing their home and beautiful surroundings with former members of the 156 and their families. They became closely involved with the veterans of the French Resistance who fought in the Battle of Glières. Jeffrey was instrumental in setting up exhibits in a new museum in Annecy covering the actions at Glières during WWII. In 1991 he invited Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother to the region, and he was pleased to show her around the museum and introduce her to members of the Resistance. As a result of his contribution to raising awareness of the heroic efforts of the Glières Resistance, Jeffrey was awarded the French Ordre national du Mérite in May 1996.

Jeffrey and Rebecca (Bobbie) were married for 74 years and Bobbie survives him together with their son David and two daughters, Patricia and Mary.

### JOHN O'REILLY

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Major Jeffrey Noble, Commander of 156 Parachute Battalion Medium Machine Gun Platoon at Arnhem. Jeffrey was the last officer who fought at Arnhem to attend the Battalion's Annual Reunion in October 2017. He is photographed wearing his 1940s parachute smock at home in 2018. The 'Boy', as he was called by Lieutenant Colonel Sir Richard de Voeux, aged 95 in this photograph.