

More Sources than Heinz...

Just One Patrol in Normandy

By Andrew Flindall

Much of the time, we consider ourselves fortunate to find a single account of an event, but it never stops us wanting more. Be careful what you wish for, though, multiple sources often contradict each other. And how do you choose between conflicting accounts?

History 101 tells us that primary sources are better than secondary ones. The reality, however, is not always as clear cut: is a personal recollection (primary) fifty years down the line automatically better than a near-contemporary third-party (secondary) account? Consider this...

Towards the back end of June 1944, 1/5 Queens – 1/5th Battalion, The Queen's Royal (West Surrey) Regiment – was holding the line near the village of Livry. Our story concerns Major Hubert Nangle, Officer Commanding A Company, who led the battalion's least unsuccessful patrol in that area.

From Patrick Delaforce's *Churchill's Desert Rats: From Normandy to Berlin with the 7th Armoured Division* published in 1994, we have the man himself (plus some secondhand background info):

A new arrival to 1/5th Queens from the Ghurkhas, and more recently an instructor with the Army Small Arms Training School, was Major 'Jack' Nangle. Brigade Intelligence wanted a fighting patrol sent out to bring back a prisoner for identification:

I was leading the patrol along the hedgerow when I heard the click of a bolt being drawn back, so using my 'Instinctive Pointing Sense', I fired a burst from my Sten gun in the direction of the sound. There was a groan and a rush of feet. On investigation we found a German lying dead behind a Spandau. My burst had hit him between the eyes. This showed the value of the IPS!! . . . so the patrol hoisted the corpse and I grasped his hands round my neck in front of me.

Derrick Watson recorded that Nangle was awarded the MC for this patrol: 'It raised the morale of A Company and the battalion. Of particular comfort was the discomfiture of Brigade Intelligence when they received the gruesome remains. They were not amused.'

Derrick Watson is very much part of this story. He was a lieutenant in 1/5 Queens and served as their Intelligence Officer at the time. Not only was he there, he arguably had the best seat in the house in terms of what was going on. Yet, even with those credentials, Watson's recollection that Nangle got a Military Cross is wrong. Nangle was, in fact, recommended for an immediate MC for another action in August, though this was struck through upgraded to the first of his two Distinguished Service Orders (see next page).

Incidentally, the Imperial War Museum's photographic archive is blessed with photos of Major Nangle receiving each of his DSOs:

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205411895>

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205414726>

As a further aside, there's also a photo of Lieutenant-Colonel Nangle as Commandant of Southern Command's Weapon Training School in 1943. He dropped a rank to get a company!

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205506343>

His Gurkha connection is almost certainly an error – it was a different, decorated, and maybe-related Nangle who was with 1/9 Gurkha Rifles.

Army Form W/2121
 Date recommendation passed forward
 Brigade 1/5th Bn The Queen's Royal Regt
 Division 1/5th Bn The Queen's Royal Regt
 Corps 1/5th Bn The Queen's Royal Regt
 Army 1/5th Bn The Queen's Royal Regt

Schedule No. (To be left blank)
 Rank and Army or Personal No. 141443 WS/Major
 Name DOCT. NANGLE Hubert Jocelyn (Rudolf & Herbert R.)

Action for which commended (Date and place of action must be stated)
 Near BRSUILL on 1st Aug '44 this Bn was given the task of capturing the village. Major Nangle was in command of the company which was to secure the final objective, and at 1930 hrs he led his men into the village and cleared it of the enemy.

On the eastern outskirts two German tanks held up their advance with very heavy Spandau fire, and with complete lack of fear Major Nangle tried continually to stalk them and destroy them with a PIAT. So heavy was the machine gun fire however that he was forced to withdraw his company slightly to allow artillery and Typhoons to deal with the tanks. When this had been done Major Nangle again led forward his company through the village only to find that other tanks and infantry had once again entered from the other side. Amid a hail of fire from tanks and machine guns, he rallied his men, who were in some disorder and it was only through his fearless courage, determination and untiring energy that his company was at last able to attain its objective.

His example throughout the day was an inspiration to all ranks of his company and resulted in no small way in the successful conclusion of the operation.

Recommended by Lt Col [Signature]
 Comdg 1/5th Bn The Queen's Royal Regt
 Brig. Comd. Queen's Lorried Inf Bde (131)
 Honorary Cross
 D.S.O.
 21-12-44
 D.S.O.
 Lt General
 Commander, Second Army
 COMD. 7 ARMD. DIV.
 215833
 B. J. H. [Signature]
 Lieutenant General
 Commander 30 Corps

Catalogue Reference: W/2121
 Image Reference: 730

National Archives WO 373/49/536 ff 729-730

Getting back to our patrol story, our next jump back in time is to 1953 when the Queens' regimental history was published. It's the sort of anecdote that you'd think the regimental chronicler would seize upon to add some colour. Except he didn't - it's not mentioned at all. In his defence, Major Foster had eight very busy battalions to cover in his *History of The Queens Royal Regiment: Vol. VIII, 1924-1948*.

Stepping back another five years, the *Journal of the Queen's Royal Regiment* ran series of articles entitled *The Diary of a Regimental Officer* by Major Burton, the battalion's then second-in-command. This does include a brief mention of Major Nangle's patrol:

On our right was an American infantry Division which held Caumont.
 1st/5th Queen's position was a dog-leg in shape ; that is to say we had one and a half companies facing south and one and a half companies facing east. The corner was a group of farm buildings. Any movement in the forward localities of the south face brought immediate enemy reaction in the form of shell or mortar fire. We were very close to the enemy posts on this face, about 200 yards in one or two spots. The enemy opposite us was holding a string of outposts. Generally speaking, he never occupied the same post two days running. He had plenty of alternative posts dug for his Spandau teams and he rang the changes. His mortar O.Ps. were close up and very hard to find. We used to send small recon patrols out by day to the south to try and find out all we could, and after a time were able to pin-point some places which seemed always occupied. At night patrols were sent out to try and get a body, dead or alive. Generally speaking, these patrols had bad luck and our total bag was one dead German, and he had no marks of identification on him. The units which relieved us had exactly the same experience, so we were told later.

Surrey History Centre J/442 *Journal of the Queen's Royal Regiment* - believed to be p78 Vol IX No.2 August 1948

Our next stop on the timeline is the battalion's 'official' war diary from the National Archives at Kew. This key document is depressingly brief:

| WAR DIARY | | | |
|---|------------|--|-------------|
| OR | | | |
| INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY. | | | |
| Instructions regarding War Diaries and Intelligence Summaries are contained in F. S. Regs., Vol. I. Title pages will be prepared in manuscript. | | (Erase heading not required.) | |
| Hour, Date. | Place. | Summary of Events and Information. | Remarks and |
| JUNE 26 | T. 744621. | Patrol N.T.R., save enemy now using booby traps in hedge gaps etc. Somewhat heavier intermittent shelling + mortaring. 1 x O.R. killed + 2 x O.R. wounded. | |
| " 27 | " | "B" Coy patrol engages enemy + inflicts 2 casualties. "C" Coy patrol reports digging heard at 755613. Lt J.H. Bond with 21 x O.R. reinforcements received. 4 x O.R. wounded. | |
| " 28 | " | Patrol night 27/28 - N.T.R. Enemy Fl (Mk.VI?) shells 8 th H.Q. area for 1/2 hr, at first light. 3rd Flight leaves Didlington, Norfolk + reaches Tilbury. | |
| " 29 | " | "A" Coy fighting patrol, night. 28/29 (Maj Nangle + 8 RR) engage enemy outpost at 753619 and bring in 1 enemy dead. 2 x O.R. wounded. | |
| " 30 | T. 744610 | "D" Coy fighting patrol, night 29/30 find no trace of enemy area around 754612. 1 x O.R. wounded. | |

National Archives WO 171/1366 June 1944

The neat and consistent handwriting might suggest that this was written up at the end of the month, as was quite common. Unless there was some useful appendix to the war diary, that would usually be the end of the trail. In our case, though, it isn't...

By some miracle, the source from which the official war diary was written up still exists in the Surrey History Centre, having been deposited there by Derrick Watson! Like many regimental museums, the Queens transferred its paperwork to their county archive for proper preservation. That turned out to be a sensible move as the museum itself was destroyed in 2015's catastrophic fire at Clandon House.

Lt Watson's original longhand intelligence log contained a number of loose typescript sheets. One was for 29 June 1944:

WAR DIARY.

29th June, 1944.

In the early hours of this morning a patrol led by Major Nangle went out on A. Coy.'s front with the intention of bringing back a German dead or alive for identification. Moving quietly through the darkness the patrol had not passed the start-line when they heard the unmistakable sound of a Spandau being cocked! Major Nangles emptied two magazines from his Sten gun in the general direction of the sound and went to ground, firing the pre-arranged signal for artillery help. The owner of the Spandau meanwhile retired some distance and opened up and the patrol lay very low indeed. The D.F. fire was delayed because nobody saw the Verrey Light except C. Coy., and by chance C. Coy.'s telephone line was "dis." But when the fire did come it was pretty enthusiastic and quite drowned Jerry's own contribution of mortar-fire. Our own mortars joined in with some effect; in fact Sgt. Smallbones was heard claiming exultantly this morning that he had got through 160 bombs. The patrol commander was convinced that his burst of Sten had hit somebody and the when the noise had died down the patrol searched the area. They found one German shot through the head and on bringing the body back found it to be completely devoid of identification of any sort. So it rather looks as if the Germans, too, had been patrolling in our direction, probably in the hope of ambushing one of our patrols. The dead German was brought back and buried in the growing graveyard round the quiet little chapel in the hollow by the R.A.P.

Brigade is determined to get some identification and D. Coy. is to send out a similar party tonight.

Surrey History Centre QRWS/8/7/1/p1/12

That's still not quite the end of the tale. We now come to the original source: the daily entry in the log:

Thursday, June 29^a 0 + 23 { as previously.
A Coy Patrol night June 28/29. F.O. 02.15 hrs.
reports - led by Major Nangle + consisting of 8 PL reached the hedge running S.E. from 752621 without incident and proceeded along the hedge S.E. without incident till it reached a point half way along, approx 753619. The patrol was moving very silently + Major Nangle heard the click of a bolt from the corn on his right. He immediately fired a 300 magazine in the direction of the sound, a distance of about 10 yds; this produced a moan. The patrol withdrew about 15 yds to listen + could hear rustling in the grass. While still trying to locate this a Spandau (probably handled by the main's companion who had moved out of the corn into the hedge further south) opened fire + 2 bombs from a 50m mortar fell just in front of the patrol. The agreed signal '3 Green Berry lights for arty fire to cordon off the area of operations was given but this did not produce any immediate results. (The patrol's communication broke down at that particular moment + E Coy who saw the lights was unable to locate them.) The 38 set carried by patrol also became temperamental at that moment - it was impossible to pass the code word. Accordingly one Pl engaged the Spandau while one party broke thro' the hedge to approach the other side + another party proceeded to beat through the corn. At this particular time there were sounds of considerable activity heard from area of tracks + road further at 753619. A truck was heard to drive away etc. As this plan began to operate, communications were restored, arty fire came down + very effectively stopped the movement reported. The beating party then discovered the enemy who had been wounded in the left temple by Major Nangle's firing he was alive but died as they were examining him. Their task being accomplished the patrol returned carrying the body with them. Unfortunately it was discovered that all identification marks, shoulder epaulettes, letters, even identity disc had been removed before the German took up his post.

Without wishing to appear ungrateful, it's likely there would have been a patrol report and perhaps a debrief, but these have not survived. (If you are interested in seeing some examples of original patrol reports, a handful exist in 1st Rifle Brigade's June 1944 war diary WO 171/1358.)

So where does that leave us? What's the truth of the matter? One of the downsides of historical research is that more information usually leads to more questions than answers. Admittedly, Nangle's patrol is a rather extreme example of being spoilt for choice, but it does illustrate the fallibility of both contemporary records written in less-than-ideal circumstances and participants' misty memories from decades later.

Me? Well, I favour Lt Watson's 1944 secondhand account over Maj Nangle's late-life horse's-mouth one. I don't believe the latter is setting out to deceive but memories fade over time and poetic licence can get tangled-up in yarns as they're spun.

At the end of the day, you've only got your own gut feeling to go on. If there's no right answer, you can argue that there's no wrong one either. Whether you keep one version of the events and ditch the other, take an 'average', make a 'best fit, or simply state both and let the reader make up their own mind; the choice is yours.

For what it's worth, the approach I've considered for a much more complex event that I've 'deep-dived' is to tell the tale as I see it, then detail the conflicts and compromises in an appendix beyond the narrative. One day that might happen...