

Colonel E.C. O'Callaghan MBE MC Beachley Commandant - 1971 To 1974

Royal Engineer who joined the invasion of Sicily by glider and later fought for four days and nights at Arnhem



O'Callaghan: led a charge on a machine-gun detachment

Colonel Eric O'Callaghan, who has died aged 80, was awarded the MC during the invasion of Sicily in 1943 and later fought at Arnhem.

Early in July 1943, the 9th (Airborne) Field Company Royal Engineers, part of the 1st Airborne Division, based in North Africa, loaded their American Waco and British Horsa gliders in preparation for the invasion of Sicily. This was to be the first major tactical operation by British glider-borne troops.

O'Callaghan, then a lieutenant with No 3 Platoon, was part of a *coup de main* group, equipped with 10 gliders, ordered to attack and secure the Ponte Grande bridge near Syracuse. They were then to hold it until the arrival of the 8th Army invasion force.

In the late afternoon of July 9, O'Callaghan lifted off in a glider for the three-and-a-half-hour flight to Sicily. The wind was rising and the heavy buffeting caused many of the fabric coverings to split. The rapid inrush and outflow of air inflated and deflated the interior, giving rise to apprehension that the craft might disintegrate at any moment.

Many of the tug aircraft pilots, new to this work, became lost - and their gliders, released prematurely and forced back over the water by the strong winds, came down in the choppy sea causing heavy casualties. O'Callaghan said, afterwards that his towing aircraft was either hit by flak or developed engine trouble. The pilot was not able to sustain-height and the glider crash-landed on top of a wall several miles from its target, killing or injuring several of the men.

O'Callaghan, the only RE officer on board, together with an officer from the 2nd Battalion, the South Staffordshire Regiment, led the survivors south towards the bridge where they could hear firing. The group attacked a battalion HQ, forcing the enemy to disperse after taking substantial losses. The Ponte Grande bridge was seized and held against a series of determined counter-attacks. It was briefly retaken by the enemy, but the arrival of the spearhead of the main invasion force secured the bridge for the Allies. O'Callaghan was awarded an immediate MC.

Eric Charles O'Callaghan was born at Alverstoke, near Gosport, Hampshire, on January 5 1923. After being educated at Gosport Central Grammar School, he enlisted in the Hampshire Regiment at the age of 18, and served in the ranks before going to OCTU and being commissioned into the Royal Engineers.

Soldiering in wartime Britain was too tame for O'Callaghan and, after volunteering for the Airborne Sappers, he saw active service in North Africa, Sicily and Italy before returning to England to prepare for D-Day.

On September 17 1944, O'Callaghan, in command of the 2nd Platoon of the 9th (Air-borne) Field Company RE, took off in the first wave of gliders bound for Arnhem. The platoon was ordered to seize and hold the railway bridge over the Rhine and to remove any of the demolition charges. O'Callaghan's platoon landed without loss and, at 6pm, attacked the railway bridge along the embankment, while a platoon from 'C' Company 2nd Parachute Battalion attacked it from the line of the river.

As the combined assaults reached the bridge, the enemy destroyed the centre span. O'Callaghan searched the bridge for further charges while under harassing. fire from the far bank.

The platoon then reverted to an infantry role, fighting from house to house near the main road bridge as the Germans counter-attacked with armour and infantry in repeated attempts to dislodge or destroy them.

For four days and nights, without sleep and short of food and water, the remnants of the platoon, many of them suffering from loss of blood, held on to their sector of the ever-decreasing bridgehead. With ammunition running low, O'Callaghan led a charge on a machine-gun detachment, and, when an enemy infantryman charged at him through a window, he shot him dead - but such was the momentum of the onslaught that the man's boot caught O'Callaghan full in the face and broke his nose.

At midnight on September 20, O'Callaghan was hit in the head and neck, and lost consciousness for a time. The following morning, he was taken prisoner and, after treatment, was moved to the PoW camp at Schloss Spangenberg, a medieval castle near Kassel. He was mentioned in despatches for his conduct at Arnhem.

In the last weeks of the war, as the PoWs were being marched eastwards, they managed to persuade their escort of elderly guards that the plan to surrender to the advancing Red Army had little to recommend it. The guards agreed and ordered the column to turn about and retrace its steps; the PoWs were, in due course, liberated by General Patton's troops.

In October 1945 O'Callaghan was posted to Palestine with the 1st Airborne Squadron RE, subsequently assuming command of it in 1947. Heavy fighting broke out later that year between the Jews and the Arabs and there was increasing terrorist activity.

On one occasion, O'Callaghan was called out to deal with a domestic hot water tank which had been crammed full of explosives and placed on a milk float in a heavily built-up area.

The explosives were starting to sweat, and O'Callaghan decided to try to move the float to a beach near Haifa. While one of his sappers drove the float, O'Callaghan straddled the tank to prevent it rolling off and sprinkled the explosives with a watering-can. At the end of his tour, he was appointed MBE and received a second mention in dispatches.

A posting to the Royal School of Military Engineering, Chatham, in 1949, was followed by a year at the US Army Engineer School, Fort Belvoir, Virginia. After a spell at the War Office and a tour of duty in BAOR in 1958, he returned to Sandhurst as a company commander before moving to Cyprus for a UN tour of duty and, subsequently, to command his own regiment.

O'Callaghan returned to the Royal School of Military Engineering as Chief Instructor at the Plant, Road and Airfields Wing before being posted to Germany as Commander RE with the 4th Division in the rank of colonel.

In his final appointment before retiring from the Army, he was commandant of the Army Apprentices' College at Chepstow, Gwent.

After leaving the Army, O'Callaghan lived near Fleet, Hampshire, where he started his own investment management company. In 1996 he and his wife Caroline moved to Lymington, Hampshire, where they managed the enterprise between them.

Eric O'Callaghan died on May 23. He married, first, in 1943, Gladys Wilden, who died in 1949. They had a daughter. He married, secondly, in 1950, Dorothy Rogers, with whom he also had a daughter. This marriage was dissolved, as was a third brief marriage.

In 1989 he married Caroline Grimwood; they had a son and a daughter.