

# Voices of War Life Story

**Sandy Cortmann**  
1920- 2021



WWII, Army, Alexander Cortmann, 1920, Main

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# Introduction

Over the last decade or so, we have spent considerable time researching the personal histories of soldiers, and Sandy was one of the veterans we were fortunate enough to meet.

It was September 2020 and we were sat in the Schoonoord cafe in Oosterbeek, for the 75th commemorations. We saw a veteran in a wheelchair come in, looking for somewhere to sit in the extremely crowded cafe, so naturally we made space at our table and got chatting to him. His name was Sandy Cortmann, and it transpired that this was his first visit to Arnhem since landing there in somewhat different circumstances 75 years ago. His friend Gary, (himself an ex-para) and his carer Alana had taken him from his care home in Aberdeen for this special visit. Before this trip, Sandy had never really talked much about his military past until he was contacted by the local para association, who looked into his story. He was a “lost veteran”. His memories of the battle had kept him away from the reunions over the years, and this was his first visit since 1944.

Whilst we sat with him, he had a phone call - relayed to him by Gary, as Sandy couldn't hear a thing - and it was loudly announced he was fit to jump! Sandy's face was a picture of joy. He was no longer an old man in a wheelchair - you could see the 22 year old paratrooper that had volunteered for a mission all those years ago, not knowing what was ahead of him. He turned to us and asked us to wait for him on the DZ afterwards, as we would need to help pick him up. “There'll be my leg....” he said, “there'll be my arm...”, then he paused for a moment; “And there'll be the biggest bit of me!”, Well, that part is best left to the



imagination as to what he might have been referring to... Sandy had a great sense of humour, something many of the Dutch people who spent time with him over those few days still remember, as do his friends.

We were working on putting together all the stories he told us during that time, alongside details provided by those who knew him far better, when the sad news of Sandy's passing came during the covid lockdown in 2020. Sandy will now be one of the first memories from our soon to be released "Voices of War" database and we hope you enjoy reading his history.

**Click here for the  
video of Sandy's  
jump at  
Arnhem 75.**

**Click here for  
Sandy's news  
interview**





**Name:** Alexander Cortmann

**Other names/aliases:** Sandy

**Date of birth:** 12.09.1922

**Place of birth:** Aberdeen, Scotland

**Nationality:** British

**Date of death:** 23.05.2020

**Place of death:** Aberdeen, Scotland

**Burial and memorials:**

**Service No:** 2890203, POW No. 92100

**Unit(s):** Gordon Highlanders, Army Air Corps, 3rd Battalion,  
Parachute Regiment

**Rank:**

**Medals and awards:** 1939-1945 Star, War Medal, Italy Star, Africa  
Star, France & Germany Star

**Education:**

**Clubs and affiliations:**



## Life Story

Alexander “Sandy” Cortmann was born in Aberdeen, and his father was recorded as a gas works stoker. He had several jobs before his military career, including delivering milk and training as a plumber. He was called up in January 1942 to 1st Battalion Gordon Highlanders because tradesmen were needed and then sent to Northampton to undertake a Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers course. From there he went on to serve in a special unit that trained the Home Guard in explosives use. However he was soon to be given a life-changing decision - the option of joining the 2nd Gordons or the Parachute Regiment. The 21 year old chose the paras and was soon at RAF Ringway for his training. He was posted to 3 Para and sent into North Africa and subsequently Italy before returning to the UK. It was during his time in Spalding, prior to MARKET GARDEN, that he met his future wife Joan during leave.

After being captured following the battle in Arnhem (detailed later), Sandy was captured and spent the rest of the war as a POW. He returned home after his release to marry Joan, but then was quickly sent back into action in Palestine.

After he was finally demobbed, the family moved north again to Aberdeen and Sandy returned to his trade as a plumber, before joining the water board. Joan and Sandy started a family but sadly both Joan and the children suffered with muscular dystrophy and they died young - his son Allan was 29 and his daughter Susan 30 when they died. Joan passed away in 1999 and Sandy mourned her loss deeply, caring a photo of her with him to the end.



## UNIT WAR DIARY

16th September 1944

Place: Spalding

Bn confined to camp and briefed for operation MARKET.

17th September 1944

Place: Arnhem

0700 - Bn proceeded in convoy to SALTBY airfield.

1135 - Bn emplaned.

1400 - Dropped on a DZ WEST OF ARNHEM. Assembled and began approach to bridge of ARNHEM

## Operation Market Garden

*The following history is taken from the unit diaries and includes comments from interviews with Sandy where he described events, during Arnhem 75 in 2019.*

### **Day 1 - Sunday 17th September**

The men of the 1st and 3rd battalions were billeted in Grantham and Spalding prior to the battle. On the morning of the 17th, after many cancellations, a 05:00 reveille roused the men from their beds for a breakfast that came with the warning to eat well, as there was no knowing when their next good meal would come. At 07:00 they were taken by truck to Saltby airfield, where they boarded and were ready to go for their short flight departing around 11.30hrs.



The 1st Parachute Brigade and 1st Airlanding Brigade were the first drop into Holland, accompanied by Divisional HQ, 1st Airlanding Light Regiment, Royal Artillery, and attached engineer and medical units. The three battalions of the parachute brigade landed on DZ 'X' where they formed up and took 3 separate routes into Arnhem, all with the target of securing the bridge. Lt. Col. Dobie's 1st Battalion would follow Leopard route north of the railway line to occupy high ground north and north west of Arnhem. John Frost's 2nd Battalion took Lion Route - the road that ran adjacent to the river into the centre of Arnhem - the Lion route) and secure the main road and railway bridges, as well as a pontoon bridge situated between them. The 3rd Battalion under Lt. Col. Fitch would head through Oosterbeek to Arnhem (Tiger route), assist in the capture of the road bridge and take up positions in the east of the town. Sandy was with 2 Platoon, C Company. On their way in, they were spotted by the car of the Arnhem Garrison commander, Major-General Friedrich Kussin. It was men of the 3rd Battalion who shot him as he sped towards them at the crossroads. At the same crossroads, troops were forced to take shelter in the woods as they came under heavy fire. At the time of the landings, only one organised unit was in place to oppose the Allied advance toward the bridges (the 16th SS Training Battalion camped in Wolfheze) and their commander – Sepp Krafft – acted quickly to establish a blocking screen west of Oosterbeek.

*'When the fighting started we were just in amongst it. You can describe it as brave, you thought you were brave, but once you got down there, Jesus Christ, terrified, absolutely terrified. You just heard bangs and machine guns. I didn't understand what that was all about.'*





It was early in the fighting that [Gordon Matthews](#), Sandy's close friend, was killed. As Sandy recounted: *“As far as I know a mortar bomb landed at Gordon's feet and boom, blown Gordon to bits. Later on that day I was coming up the street there was a boot on the pavement and I sort of kicked it before I realised the foot was still in the boot, that must have been Gordon's foot. Telling it now, shocking. At the time you just went ‘bye Gordon’. That was it.”*

Their advance quickly ran into trouble. The reconnaissance squadron was ambushed by the northern flank of Krafft's blocking line and withdrew. The 1st and 3rd Parachute Battalions were also slowed as they hit the German defensive line, and they spent the rest of the day looking for a breakthrough. The 3rd Battalion went south towards Oosterbeek where they spent their first night.

Night 17th - 18th Sept  
- Bn, minus “C” Coy,  
was concentrated some  
300 yards beyond X-rds  
already mentioned, and  
remained there for the  
night.

## **Day 2 - Monday 18th September**

Overnight, the 1st and 3rd Parachute battalions had skirted round south to the 2nd Parachute Battalion's original Lion route, hoping to follow them towards the bridge. Before dawn they were up and attempting to break through the German positions but by 10:00 they realised further attempts were unlikely to succeed and they took time to re-group. After a few hours, attacks resumed but they too were unsuccessful.

## **Day 3 – Tuesday 19th September**

The men of the 1st and 3rd battalions were awaiting reinforcements





from the South Staffs and 11th Parachute Battalion, and they again hoped then to be able to break through to the bridge. Lieutenant Colonel Dobie scheduled an attack before dawn, but a report came through that the bridge had fallen and so it was cancelled. This incorrect news was soon corrected and the attack had to proceed. The men moved up between the railway line to the north and the river to the south with the 1st Battalion in the lead, supported by the remnants of the 3rd Battalion, the 2nd South Staffords on the left flank, and the 11th Parachute Battalion following behind. The lead men were spotted as they approached the German defensive line, and they were trapped in open ground, pinned by heavy fire from three sides. The attack was quickly reduced to nothing, and the surviving men fell back.

#### **Day 4 - Weds 20th September**

The defensive perimeter around Oosterbeek was formed and the Driel ferry crossing secured. The remnants of the battered units that didn't make it into Arnhem were gathering in Oosterbeek, and Major Richard Lonsdale was taking control of those men and the withdrawal back to the area around the Church in Oosterbeek. This was next to the house of Kate ter Horst who was bringing in wounded soldiers to the rooms

**1700:** First opposition - infantry and two armoured cars. "B" Coy, advance guard, dealt effectively though slowly with infantry, but didn't cope with armd cars, because they had no PIATS with their leading platoon, because they were rather taken back with this first sight of armour, and because 6-pr attached to this Coy was facing wrong way when cars appeared and was knocked out when trying to face right way. German staff car and 4 staff officers annihilated.

"B" Coy suffered about 5 casualties (all wounded). About half a dozen prisoners were taken. Advance of Bn was held up until about 1800 hrs. Location Xrds 685785



of her house to care for them.

Sandy recalled holding the hand of one young soldier who was calling out for his mother as he lay dying: *“I could hear him calling ”Mammy, Mammy”, so I crawled out, I just touched his hand, grabbed it and he died. I thought, what a thing to happen. I was choking, but I was alive.”*

The supply drop had once again failed to reach the men, Although a message had been sent to change the DZ to one near the Hartenstein, some aircraft flew to LZ ‘Z’ and fell into German hands. The men on the ground tried to signal the RAF pilots, but they had orders to ignore any such signal from the ground. Consequently, most of the supplies were dropped off target and the Germans taunted the paratroopers with their enjoyment of the rations. Ten of the 164 aircraft involved were shot down around Arnhem, and only 13% of supplies actually reached British hands.

### **Day 5 - Thurs 21st September**

By 05:00 on Thursday morning all resistance at the bridge had ended and the remaining men surrendered. In the final hours of the struggle, a radio message was sent from the bridge. It was not picked up by the British but was heard by the German forces, who recalled that it ended with the sentences: “Out of ammunition. God Save the King.” By this point there were around 3,584 survivors of the 1st Airborne Division hiding in the woods and buildings around Oosterbeek, with the intention of holding a bridgehead on the North of the Rhine until XXX Corps arrived. The Lonsdale Force was in the south-east, and they replaced a big German attack, assisted by divisional light artillery. As the men at the bridge surrendered, the Germans could now turn their full attention



to the men within the Oosterbeek perimeter and their attacks were fierce. The Germans had received much reinforcements which were put into action immediately but the British troops successfully held their positions.

This was partially helped by the arrival of Sosabowski's 1st (Polish) Parachute Brigade who had finally been able to take off, although some were forced to turn back. One of the few messages to get out of Arnhem warned the Poles that DZ 'K' was not secure and to land instead on the polder east of Driel where they should secure the Heveadorp ferry on the south bank of the Rhine so they could cross. At 17:00, under intense fire, the Poles dropped. They formed up successfully, only to find that the ferry was gone - it had been sunk to prevent its use by the Germans. The main advantage of their arrival was to draw troops to their position and relieve pressure on the Oosterbeek Perimeter.

### **Day 6 - Friday 22nd September - 'Black Friday'**

Heavy fighting continued around the perimeter in Oosterbeek throughout the houses and hotels where snipers had taken up positions. Bittrich had ordered attacks be stepped up, and the numbers of casualties pouring into the aid posts was growing. Two staff officers swam over to Sosabowski's HQ, and requested 6 rubber boats to facilitate some of the Polish troops crossing to help the men in Oosterbeek. The plan was agreed and actioned that evening, but the guiding cable was too weak and broke under the strong current and the boats lost. Only 55 Poles made it over before dawn and only 35 of these made it into the perimeter. The situation was becoming increasingly desperate.



## Day 7 - Sat 23rd September

Some small resupply drops were made but these were not sufficient to make much real difference. The decision was made to withdraw the remaining men of 1st Airborne Division across the Rhine and planning between the commanders was held at divisional HQ.

## Day 8 - Monday 25th September

The orders for Operation Berlin came through at dawn. At 22:00 the withdrawal began. Men left their positions and made their way down to the river. Some small arms fire was laid down to fool the Germans into thinking they were still in position. Sandy and his comrades made it down to the river safely, and when they arrived, started to strip to make the crossing. Many that had gone previously have been pulled down in the heavy clothing or boots round their necks, so no chance was no being taken. At this point Sandy revealed that he was going nowhere, as he couldn't swim. His friends decided that rather than leave him alone, they would remain together, which meant capture.

Sandy became one of nearly 3000 soldiers who were captured after the battle.

### Post battle and imprisonment

The men endured a long and hard journey by train to reach their camp, with many of them wounded and here were given no food. When

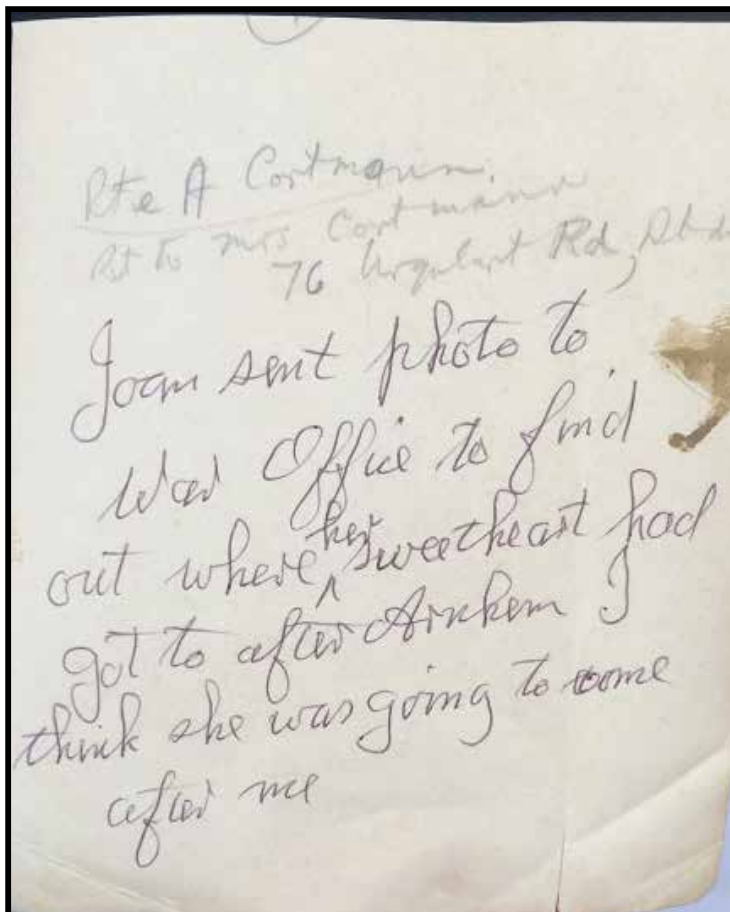
Sandy finally arrived at the camp, he would have found an interesting mix of prisoners, as it was mostly used as a transit camp for prisoners. There were Africans, French, Indians, Italians, Russians, British, and after the battle of the Bulge, Americans. Due to the transient nature of

Name:	A Cortmann
Rank:	Private
Army No:	2890203
Regiment:	Army Air Corps
POW No:	92100
Camp Type:	Stalag
Camp No:	XII-A
Camp:	Limburg, Baden-Württemberg



the camp, estimates of numbers held there vary but it is thought up to 20,000 at any one time was possible. Daily rations for each man was a fifth of a loaf of bread with a serving of margarine and an occasional filling for breakfast, followed by coffee after morning roll call. Lunch and evening meals were just a watery soup. With the arrival of the Americans in December 44, rations were reduced to a tenth of a loaf, followed by coffee, then a soup at lunch time, and either a potato soup or three jacket potatoes for supper - potatoes were a staple of the prison diet.

Information did not always make it home to loved ones, and this was the case for Sandy. His fiancée Joan contacted the War Office for information, as the photos below show. On the reverse of the photo of Sandy and Joan is a note written by Sandy that reads: *“Joan sent photo to the war office to find out where her sweetheart had got to after Arnhem. I think she was going to come after me.”* and his name and address shown above.





# Arnhem 75

**Memories from the 75th  
commemorations of Operation  
MARKET GARDEN**





















**Above:** Sandy at the graveside of Gordon Matthews, his friend who was killed in the first day of fighting.

**Below:** Sandy toasts Gordon with a dram.



## The man in the photo



Over the years there have been some claims to the identity of the soldiers in the iconic photograph of the paratroopers walking through the rubble during the battle. When we met Sandy at Arnhem 75, he told us he was in possession of a photo from Arnhem, and we realised that he was referring to the photo above. He stated that it was given to him by the military photographer and we brought it up on my computer and he confirmed he was the figure on the left. Not doubting that he was sure of the accuracy of his story, I have looked into it further, as I'm sure that with the best will in the world, memories from 75 years ago fade. He has however told the story several times to his friends and the parachute association, and he also stated that it was a staged photo, so that element adds veracity. The photo, like many, was staged but was done so to reflect the realities of the situation and to ensure that there was a record of events that was not always possible to do during the intense fighting, whilst ensuring both the photographers and subjects were not placed in more danger.





**Above:** The original photo in Sandy's possession.

It seems unlikely that he would have an original photo of that unless it was given to him by the photographer. So we then looked more closely at the face of the soldier and compared it to Sandy. Without being rude, Sandy does have a rather distinctive nose! If you look at the close up of his army photo and that of the soldier in the Arnhem one below, I believe there is a strong resemblance. We then resized them and superimposed one of the other and the match is identical. We believe the photos opposite show that Sandy was indeed the soldier in the famous photograph.







**Above:** The two images to compare. These were then re-sized to allow one to be superimposed on top of the other.



**Left:** The first image shows the photos being lined up, and the facial features seem to directly match.



**Left:** The military photo of sandy is on top of the other image, and the nose, eyes and chin match up exactly.



# Sources

The majority of photographs are taken by Penny Guides/Voices of War. Some are taken from open source news sources and are attributed where appropriate.

The quotes from Sandy are from conversations with the authors during Arnhem 75.

Photographs of personal documents are reproduced with kind permission of the family.



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