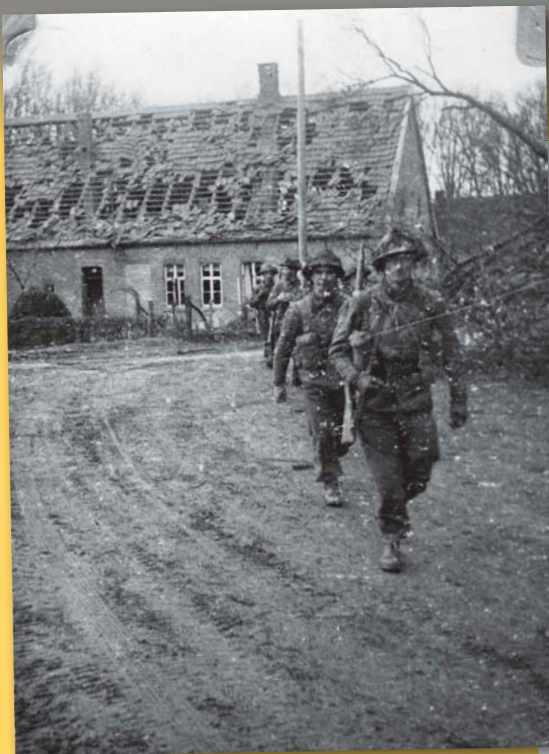




THE WASP'S DEADLY STING

An attempt to capture the German town of Lingen a month before the war's end turned into a rescue mission spearheaded by a Wasp flame-throwing carrier commanded by a remarkable citizen-soldier whose courageous leadership altered the course of the battle. Steve Snelling investigates.

ABOVE: Courage caught on camera: a remarkable shot of Sergeant Ernest "Bull" Langford's Wasp Universal Carrier charging through the streets of Lingen and into a hail of sniper and machine-gun fire. This photograph, and others in the same series that appear on the following pages, were taken by Major John Searight who was serving in the 1st Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment. (All images courtesy of the author unless stated otherwise)



LEFT: Into action: a section of the 1st Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment begin its advance into Lingen on 4 April 1945. One account described Lingen as "a bastion of Nazi doctrine", adding that there "were several Officer Cadet Training Units in the district and these contributed a fanatical type towards the defence of the town".

RIGHT: Ernest Leslie Langford with his wife Ethel in 1940. Called up in July 1940, Langford was posted to the 7th Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment which was then in the process of being rebuilt following the capture of the bulk of the battalion at St Valery-en-Caux. Rapid promotion followed. He was made Lance-Corporal in October, Acting Corporal in December, full Corporal in March 1941, Lance Sergeant the following September and Sergeant in February 1943. He ended the war as an Acting Company Sergeant Major.

BELOW LEFT: An example of Wasp flame-throwing carrier. (Courtesy of The Tank Museum)

BELOW RIGHT: Major Jack Dye pictured earlier during the fighting in North-West Europe standing beside a captured German gun. Twice wounded in Normandy, he was later awarded a hard-won Military Cross for his courageous leadership just weeks before the action at Lingen which ended his war.



Major Jack Dye was in something of a quandary. Somewhere, on the other side of a cobbled square in the middle of the German border town of Lingen, one of his platoons was fighting its way house to house against a fanatical foe seemingly willing to shed every last drop of blood in its doomed defence of the Fatherland. But precisely where they were was anyone's guess.

The 25-year-old company commander scanned the buildings in vain for some sign of them. He was growing anxious. Not just about their safety, but as to how they were faring. He needed to know if they were held up or if they needed help.

"I was completely out of touch," he recalled. "The problem was the radio sets we had were absolutely bloody useless in built-up areas."¹

With enemy resistance stiffening and every building either side of the square a potential hornets' nest of opposition, he was reluctant to bash on regardless without first discovering the fate of his "missing" platoon.

In the absence of any radio communication, he made up his mind to cross the square and seek them out. It was one of the worst decisions he ever made and very nearly his last. Leaving his command group, he dashed

hell-for-leather into the square, making for a building on the opposite side he imagined had already been captured. He was within seventy-five yards of it when a burst of submachine-gun fire told him he had made a terrible mistake.

Five bullets tore into his right leg, cutting him down mid-stride. As he collapsed, his helmet clattered onto the

"One bullet had broken my thigh. I tried to crawl, but I was quite incapable of moving."

cobbles and his bare head fell across his left arm. Despite the searing pain, he was conscious enough to notice the time on his watch: it was 14.10 hours on 4 April 1945, and a long and agonising ordeal had just begun.

*

The assault on Lingen, a town of strategic and tactical importance barring the way to the north German plain, was already almost twelve hours old and its capture was proving every bit as difficult as the battle-hardened troops

of the British Army's 3rd Division had anticipated.

The successful crossing of the River Rhine lay behind them, but the triumph of Operation *Plunder* had seen no discernible breakdown in morale among the German troops facing 21st Army Group. Charged with fighting a futile delaying action, the men of *Armeegruppe Student* discharged their duty with grim determination and none more so than the units defending Lingen.

Situated behind the double water barrier of the River Ems and the Dortmund-Ems canal, the town was held in considerable strength by 111 Battalion, *Grossdeutschland Brandenburger* training regiment and several hundred "grounded" parachutists of *II Fallschirmkorps* together with an assortment of SS, *Wehrmacht* and *Volksturm* (Home Guard).

The job of taking Lingen fell to 185 Brigade, which had only just recovered from the heavy losses sustained in the capture of Kervenheim a couple of months earlier. The plan was to exploit the Guards Armoured Division's heroic





ABOVE LEFT: Taken seconds after the image on page 27, this is another picture showing Sergeant Ernest Langford's Wasp moving forward during the fighting in Lingen.

ABOVE RIGHT: The street battle: while infantrymen of the 1st Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment seek whatever shelter is available, smoke pours from a building which has almost certainly been "flamed" by Sergeant Langford's Wasp.

BELOW: The devastating sheet of flame produced by a Wasp in action. This variant of the standard Universal Carrier was fitted with the Flame-thrower, Transportable, No.2. The Mk.I had a fixed flamethrower on the front of the vehicle fed from two fuel tanks with a combined capacity of 100 gallons - 1,000 or so were produced. The Mk.II, meanwhile, had the projector fitted in the co-driver's position. The Mk.II.C (C for Canadian) had a single seventy-five gallon fuel tank on the rear of the vehicle outside the armour protection, allowing a third crew member to be carried. (Imperial War Museum; TR2320)

success in capturing intact a bridge over the Ems by seizing a bridgehead over the nearby canal and, hopefully with the enemy wrong-footed, following up with a rapid assault on the town itself.

All went well at first. Helped by a diversionary artillery bombardment directed towards the southern end of the town, the 2nd Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry capped a night march with a successful assault crossing of the canal. Bagging fifty prisoners, they quickly wrested control of the east bank and by 09.00 hours, the 2nd Battalion, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment had followed through and was in position to begin the advance into the northern outskirts of Lingen.

In those initial stages it appeared as though the defenders had indeed been caught off guard. Among approximately 170 men captured by the Warwicks were the town commandant and his entire staff including two colonels and three majors. By late morning, the whole of the north-east quarter of Lingen was in British hands and at negligible cost.

It was now the turn of the third of 185 Brigade's infantry units, the 1st Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment to take over. In

command of the battalion was Lieutenant Colonel Peter Barclay, who had won fame as the recipient of the Army's first gallantry award of the war. Since then, he had been through many tough fights, in the process of which he had added a Distinguished Service Order to the Military Cross earned on the Saar battle front more than five years earlier.

Barclay was under no illusions about the scale of the task facing him. For all the ease of the brigade's early advance, he knew that they had yet to confront the paratroopers and SS units which intelligence reports had accurately predicted to be lying in wait for them.

What followed was, in the words of the battalion's war diarist, "a real soldier's street fighting battle" which fully lived up to the Norfolks' CO's worst expectations. According to Barclay, the defenders fought "tooth and nail"² in what his second in command, Major Humphrey Wilson, described as the "sticky end" of a savage battle.³

'A' Company on the left and 'B' Company on the right led the way, dodging snipers and scrapping with hidden strong-points as they advanced steadily, house by house, towards the far end of Lingen. 'B' Company, in particular, made swift progress, out-stripping all of their comrades to leave themselves in danger of being cut off.

Realising the threat from Germans infiltrating behind the leading companies, Barclay pushed 'C' and 'D' Companies forward in an effort to plug the gap and by midday the battalion was fully engaged in a bitter slogging match. Creeping forward behind

the leading companies, Major Wilson was nearing the main square when "suddenly ... the enemy seemed to come alive all round us".⁴ One moment, Germans would pop out from cellars and open fire before quickly disappearing again; then more would appear at upper windows and pour fire down on the Norfolks, pinning them against the sides of the streets. "One needed eyes all round to catch them before they had a go at you," noted Wilson.⁵

In a letter written to his wife shortly after the battle, Wilson told how about fifty paratroopers "held us up from all angles". "At one period," he added understatedly, "it really was a bit unpleasant as they kept getting behind us and bullets were flying in all directions, then they started shelling us and it was no fun".⁶

By then, the two prongs of 'C' Company's advance had reached as far as the town square. A single platoon, led by Sergeant W. Nelson, was on the left whilst the main body was on the right. The latter was under the command of Major Jack Dye, a twice-wounded veteran of D-Day who had been recommended





LEFT: Major Humphrey Wilson, second-in-command of the 1st Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment at Lingen. His actions that day contributed to the award of his Military Cross. In a letter to his wife, he described Lingen as "a very Nazi town". He added: "We got the sticky end against some rather tough paratroops (less their aeroplanes) and about 50 of them held us up from all angles. At one period it really was a bit unpleasant as they kept getting behind us and bullets were flying in all directions ... However, it eventually died down when we got the flame throwers and fired one or two strong points, no one can stand up to that."

for the Military Cross on two separate occasions in the space of forty-eight hours less than five weeks earlier.

Dye later recalled: "We had done a lot of house clearing by this stage of the war and we considered we were pretty sharp at it."⁷ This was borne out by their rapid and relatively untroubled advance as far as the main square. It was then, however, that things went awry. Having lost sight and communication with Sergeant Nelson's platoon, Dye made the snap decision he would quickly regret – to go and look for them.

"I told my command group to stay where they were, thank God, and then ran out across the square,"

he recalled. "But I'd got it wrong. I thought Sergeant Nelson had got further on than he had and I ran, in fact, towards a house still occupied by Germans and they brought me down in the middle of the square.

"I was hit in quite a lot of places. One bullet had broken my thigh. I tried to crawl, but I was quite incapable of moving. I hadn't got any feeling in the bottom half of my body at all. I was cross because it was entirely my own fault. I thought, 'bloody hell, so near the end'. It was pretty depressing really and, because they were still firing at me, the only thing I could think to do was pretend to be dead. So I closed my eyes and just waited for the fatal shot."⁸

It appeared as though he wouldn't have long to wait. Some fifteen minutes after being hit, and with bullets cracking all around him, he was struck again. The round passed through his right hand and out through his wrist, adding to the

excruciating pain he was in.

Throughout all of this the din from shot and shell was deafening. "I was aware of the enormous amount of noise," he recalled. "Fighting in built-up areas is a very noisy business anyway, but there was a tremendous amount of firing going on. Shells were landing at the far end of the square and my people were keeping up a terrific rate of fire to prevent the Germans from coming out and pulling me in."⁹

Although uncertain whether he was dead or alive, men from his company made a number of gallant attempts to rescue him. All were beaten back by a storm of fire which resulted in the death of one stretcher bearer.

Though drifting in and out of consciousness, Dye was all too aware of the battle raging around him. "There were times when I was either willing myself to sleep or not to think about was going on," he said. "Trying not to go mad, not to panic. It was like being in front of a firing squad and not knowing when the order was being given to fire."

Only a miracle it seemed could save him from that death-trap of a square. Fortunately for Jack Dye that miracle duly arrived in the clattering form of a Wasp flame-throwing carrier. Its commander was Sergeant Ernest Langford, a tall, slim Fenman with a reputation for forceful leadership.

Sometimes known as "Hoss" or "Bull", on account of his tendency to chase after action, he was a printer by trade and a soldier by instinct. As a carrier platoon sergeant with the 7th Royal Norfolks, he had come through some of the hardest fighting of the Normandy campaign and when heavy casualties forced the break-up of his unit he transferred to the 1st Battalion, serving with

RIGHT: Surrender: three German officer cadets are marched into captivity by a group of Royal Norfolks which includes Private Ken Wilby.

BELOW LEFT: Aftermath: men of the Royal Norfolks rest up after the fight at Lingen with a tank unit.

"I then heard the unmistakable sound of the flame-thrower being primed and instantly realised it was a Wasp carrier."



it during the advance through Belgium and Holland into Germany.

Never a man to suffer fools gladly, Langford was, as Jack Dye put it, "a man of character" and just the man for a crisis. More than that, he was widely regarded in the battalion as the most proficient of all the unit's Wasp carrier commanders.

The Wasp, a hybrid development of the traditional Bren-gun carrier, was the most terrible and terrifying addition to the infantry battalion's armoury. To British troops fighting their way through towns and villages turned into mini-fortresses by enemy units prepared to resist to the last man, it was "by far the most effective weapon" imaginable.¹⁰

Yet, feared as it undoubtedly was, the Wasp was also a fearsome machine to operate. Not only was its inflammable cargo as potentially lethal to its crew as to the enemy, but the carrier itself was only thinly armoured and utterly devoid of overhead protection, rendering its occupants particularly vulnerable in street fighting where





defenders could direct fire down into them from buildings towering above.

Added to those shortcomings was one more. The Wasp was, to put it mildly, a temperamental instrument of war. So much so, that for the assault on Lingen, an action which the 1st Royal Norfolks' war diarist felt warranted the attachment of a squadron of heavily armoured Crocodile flame-throwing tanks, the infantry had to make do with the

only Wasp among an entire section that was mechanically fit for purpose.

That solitary Wasp, commanded by the pugnacious Sergeant Langford, had been held back by Lieutenant Colonel Barclay as a mobile reserve, and when word filtered back of the trouble encountered in the main square it was a little way from the fighting in a neighbouring street. What happened next remains a matter for conjecture.

According to one record, Langford was "ordered" to "flame" the enemy-held house in the square in order to allow a rescue party to reach Major Dye. However, Dye felt the official version did not ring true. Everything he knew about Barclay and Langford pointed to it being a volunteer mission.

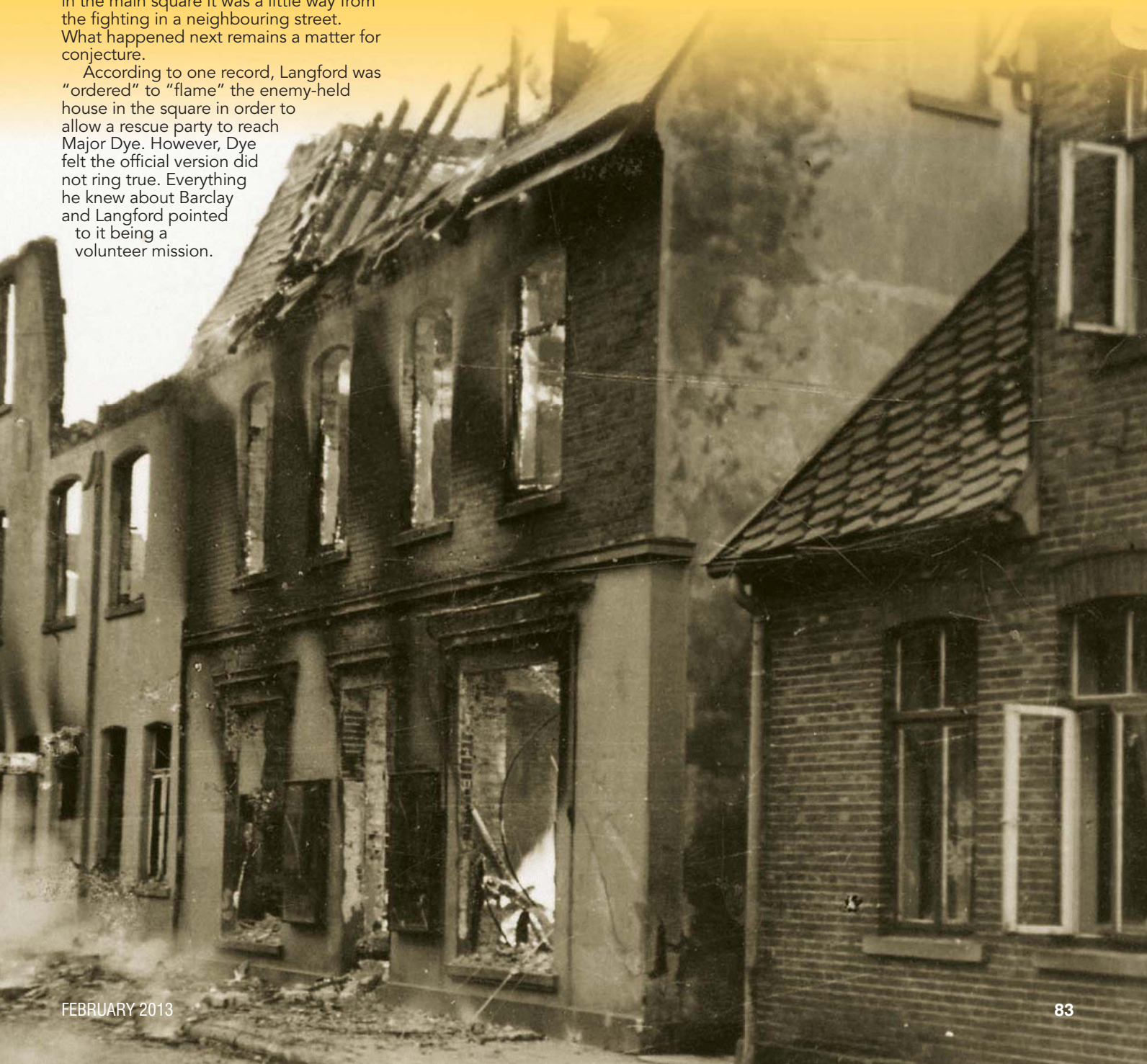
"With the Germans still occupying the upper storeys of some of the houses and the Wasp having no overhead protection, the risk was great," he said. "It was not something you could order anyone to do."¹¹

Either way, a rough plan was hastily devised. It was simple enough. After a brief but rapid bombardment of the buildings at the far end of the square, Langford would charge up the street, take up position close enough for his flame operator to direct jets of fire into the enemy strong-point while at the same time serving as a barrier to cover



ABOVE: Victory celebration: Acting Company Sergeant Major Ernest Langford DCM, fourth from the left, with a group of Royal Norfolk sergeants in Germany at the end of the war.

BELOW: Blackened and scorched, a building in Lingen, transformed by the German defenders into a strongpoint, bears all the hallmarks of a Wasp attack.





ABOVE LEFT: Peace-time soldiering: Ernest Langford DCM, left, serving with the 1st Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment in Germany as part of the British army of occupation. He was demobilised in February 1946 with an "exemplary" record signed by the man whose life he had saved at Lingen – Major Jack Dye.

ABOVE RIGHT: Pictured during a post-war reunion, Ernest Langford can be seen standing second from the left at the back with a group of Royal Norfolk Regiment veterans, including Major David Jamieson VC (standing far right) who earned his Victoria Cross while serving alongside Langford in the 7th Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment at Grimbosq in Normandy.

BELOW LEFT: Parade of heroes: Ernest Langford seated on the left of Montgomery following an open-air ceremony in which the Wasp commander received the ribbon of the Distinguished Conduct Medal from the commander of the 21st Army Group.

BELOW RIGHT: Men of the 1st Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment on the long road to victory. The capture of Lingen was one of a number of fierce battles fought by the battalion during the final few weeks of the war. In the aftermath of the battle for Lingen, Major Humphrey Wilson wrote: "There are still many tough pockets to be overcome, and mines in roads and booby traps, etc, are everywhere. I'm sure everyone at home thinks it is all over bar the shouting, but every day lots of chaps get killed or badly wounded in this frantic bash on through Germany."

the rescue operation. Quite how he was to accomplish all of this in the face of a veritable storm of close-range fire from all directions was left entirely to Langford's

discretion.

Dye, of course, knew nothing of all this. Cocooned in a semi-conscious world of his own, barely able to register anything beyond the cacophony of noise exploding round him, he had long since given up hope of being brought in. Then, as though in a dream, he heard above the sound of battle the distinctive clank and clatter of a tracked vehicle coming nearer and nearer until it was almost on top of him.

"Despite the bullets raining down on him, Langford somehow managed to manoeuvre his carrier in such a way that the track was right up against me, shielding me from the fire," recalled Dye. "Through the mist, I then heard the unmistakable sound of the flame-thrower being primed and instantly realised it was a Wasp carrier. The Germans would have known this too and I was aware of a lot of shots being directed on it from above. How Langford survived I really don't know. He must have got right down low."¹²

On board with Langford was Private F. Houghton. It was his first experience of operating the Wasp's flame-throwing equipment under fire, but he behaved

like a battle-hardened veteran. As machine-gun bullets rattled against the stationary carrier, he coolly fired off a 'wet' shot, spraying the building with highly flammable liquid, before firing the 'hot' shot.

The result was instantaneous combustion. Dye was near enough to feel and hear "the tremendous roar" as the building erupted in flames.

"At that moment," he recalled, "I felt myself being grabbed by Private Hart, my company stretcher bearer, and my second in command, and was half-carried and half-dragged away before being pushed down into a cellar."¹³

For Jack Dye the battle for Lingen, as well as the war itself, was over. For "Bull" Langford the rescue merely marked the beginning of an extraordinary intervention that changed the course of the struggle. Over the course of the next couple of hours, Langford's Wasp was to be found wherever the fighting was at its fiercest and the resistance most stubborn. Time after time, he and Houghton braved a storm of fire to break the deadlock.

Once, without waiting for orders and in the absence of supporting fire, he destroyed an enemy machine-gun post that was barring the way. Next, he adopted similar tactics against a strong-point sited in a cellar that was frustrating the advance. Running the gauntlet of sniper fire, he steered his bullet-scarred carrier to within twenty yards of the enemy position. Seconds later, it was "a sheet of flames".¹⁴

Of the ten enemy soldiers seen to bolt from the blazing building, eight were





ABOVE: Journey's end. Soldiers from 'D' Company, 1st Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment march into the ruined city of Bremen on 26 April 1945. The battalion was still occupying the city when news of a ceasefire came through on 5 May.

LEFT: The badge of the British 3rd Division, known at various times as the Iron Division, 3rd (Iron) Division or as the "Iron Sides". At the time of the battle for Lingens, the Division included the 185th Infantry Brigade, which in turn comprised the 1st Battalion, Royal Norfolk Regiment, 2nd Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment and 2nd Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry.

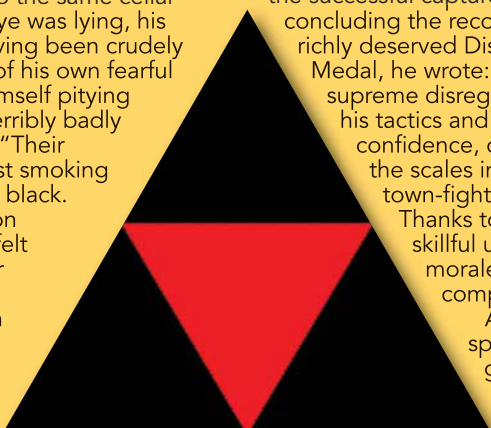
either killed or captured. The effects of the flame assault were truly terrible. According to Private Ken Wilby, the survivors were "pitiful sights, all their faces were black, skin peeling off".¹⁵

Some of the prisoners were corralled at bayonet point into the same cellar where Major Jack Dye was lying, his multiple wounds having been crudely bandaged. In spite of his own fearful injuries, he found himself pitying them. "They were terribly badly burnt," he recalled. "Their uniforms were almost smoking and their faces were black. They were holding on to each other and I felt desperately sorry for them. It just showed how awful a weapon the flame is."¹⁶

By 18.00 hours a pall of smoke hung over the war-torn town of Lingens

where a number of buildings were still, in the unsympathetic words of the 1st Royal Norfolk's war diarist, "burning nicely". Among them was a block of flats said to have been occupied by several hundred SS troops who had refused to surrender.

The search for Germans of "the type that is not prepared to give in" continued into the evening, adding to the strain of the infantrymen who were "just about exhausted" by a day of more or less non-stop street fighting. Indeed, the battle for Lingens had underlined the enemy's determination to fight on, even with the end of the war in sight and total defeat a certainty.



At Lingens British casualties had been kept to a minimum, thanks in large measure to the outstanding courage and great initiative displayed by Sergeant Langford. Rarely can the actions of one man influence the outcome of a battle

to such a degree as those of the Royal Norfolk's Wasp commander on that spring afternoon, four weeks and four days before the war's end.

Lieutenant Colonel Barclay went so far as to credit him almost entirely with the successful capture of the town. In concluding the recommendation for his richly deserved Distinguished Conduct Medal, he wrote: "This NCO's supreme disregard of danger, his tactics and his infectious confidence, completely turned the scales in a very difficult town-fighting operation.

Thanks to him and his skillful use of his Wasp, the morale of the enemy was completely undermined."

Among those with special reason to be grateful was Major Jack Dye. While Langford returned unscathed to civilian life, a war

hero who kept his medals in a tin box buried in the sideboard and his memories to himself, Dye made the most of his wonderful good fortune.

Having made a full recovery, Dye resumed his career in the post-war army, rising to command the 1st Battalion East Anglian Regiment. When Ernest Langford DCM succumbed to cancer at the early age of 58, it was as Major General J.B. Dye, CBE, MC that he attended his saviour's funeral.

All of his myriad post-war achievements were part of the great debt he could never repay. Speaking more than half a century after that day in April 1945 when his life hung by a thread, Jack Dye declared: "Everything that's happened to me since, I owe to him and his bravery. I simply wouldn't have lived. I couldn't have lived much longer out in that square ... As it says in the citation for his award, he saved my life."¹⁷ ■

NOTES:

1. Author interview.
2. Brigadier F.P. Barclay, *Features of Fun, Fact and Follies in a Full Life* (privately published memoir).
3. Letter published on 30 April 1945, in a newsletter distributed among the families of officers of the 1st Royal Norfolk Regiment.
4. Unpublished memoirs of Lieutenant Colonel Humphrey Wilson. He was awarded a Military Cross for his "inspiring leadership" at Lingens and his "disregard of personal danger" during the battle for Brinkum ten days later.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Letter published on 30 April 1945, in a newsletter distributed among the families of officers of the 1st Royal Norfolk Regiment.
7. Author interview.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. War Diary, 1st Battalion, the Royal Norfolk Regiment.
11. Author interview.
12. *Ibid.* Jack Dye later received the Military Cross for his inspiring leadership at Haus Winkel on 1 March 1945.
13. Privates Houghton and Hart both received Commander-in-Chief's Certificates for their actions at Lingens. The recommendation for Houghton spoke of his "great gallantry and skill", while Hart's conduct was described as "exceptionally intrepid throughout".
14. Author interview.
15. Recommendation for the immediate award of a Distinguished Conduct Medal to Sergeant E.L. Langford.
16. Quoted in John Lincoln, *Thank God and the Infantry, From D-Day to VE-Day with the 1st Battalion, the Royal Norfolk Regiment* (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1994).
17. Author interview.