

March 1945

March was a month that saw fierce fighting in Europe as the Allies drove forward into Germany. With their men away fighting, many in Milborne Port watched the news eagerly. On 8th March, cease-fire negotiations for the surrender of German forces in Italy began. Then more than 100 civilians died when a German V-2 rocket destroyed London's Smithfield Market. Britain retaliated on 14th March, when the RAF dropped the 22,000-pound 'Grand Slam' - the largest bomb of the war to date - on Germany's Bielefeld railway viaduct. On March 20th, Hitler appeared in public for the last time.

On 23rd March, Allied forces from Britain, Canada, and the United States under General Bernard Montgomery launched Operation Plunder. For the British, including the Guards tank brigades, the emphasis was on the crossing of the river around Wesel. (On 7th March, British and American troops had crossed the Rhine River at Remagen and advanced into central Germany, but this was only a small breakthrough.) The artillery and air bombardment for Operation Plunder was so heavy and effective that the German defences were quickly breached. The parachute drops went to plan and accomplished their aims quickly. The 1000s of vehicles and boats available allowed the allies to cross the river and move through countryside flooded by the Germans to hinder the allies. Once bridges were in place for their heavy tanks, the Guards Brigades crossed and began an advance that was at times rapid and at others held up by last ditch defence.

Milborne Port's Major Stanley Southcombe - of the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers - was lead engineer of the 6th Brigade attached to the Guards armoured division. While the Guards were in the thick of the action, he went forward to examine the damage that had occurred. He built mobile workshops so that the tanks could be repaired, or rebuilt using parts from damaged tanks, ready to continue the fighting. He was Mentioned in Dispatches for his gallant service in March 1945.

Meanwhile in the East, on 7th March, the Chinese 37th Division captured Lashio, Burma, the southwest terminus of the Burma Road, and by 20th March, the fiercely defended Burmese city of Mandalay was captured by Allied forces of the British 19th Indian Division. On March 24, the war in northern Burma came to an end as the Chinese 50th Division met the Chinese New First Army near Hsipaw, Burma. Many men from Milborne Port had been fighting in Burma for years.