

## PROLOGUE

I was 34 years old when my father died. We had a great father and son relationship, we were also the best of friends. The statements which I have made below regarding his early life and building his business are from conversations which took place between the two of us. I knew he had been a paratrooper in WW2. He very rarely talked about the war but on the odd occasion when he had drank too much he would tell me things which shocked me. These very emotional and private moments will always remain between father and son. I knew my father was well liked in his social and business life. I only found out how much he was liked by his Paratrooper comrades following his death. After clearing my father's office desk I came upon a bunch of old letters. These letters were from men who had served alongside him in the 8th Battalion Parachute regiment during the war and contained some details of their exploits as soldiers but more so portray their fond feelings for my father. The contents of these letters revealed that he was a well-respected army Paratrooper rifleman and highly thought of by the men who served with him. The biggest compliment paid to my father was that several surviving WW2 paratroopers were present at his funeral in 1993. My biggest regret is that I never really took much interest in what he experienced during the war, but maybe that is because he never wanted to talk about it himself. There is more I could have written about my father's army and steeplejack life but I decided to restrict it to the following story. I hope all who read this find it interesting and inspiring.

*Nick Rafferty*

## SAM'S STORY

Most interesting stories often involve hardship.

This story is about a man who was born at a time in our countries history that would see him raised in poverty and suffer hardships that would be unthinkable to anyone living in modern times. This is not a unique story it is more a typical example of a generation of British people that through sheer determination and courage pressed on with life through unimaginable adversity. Sam Rafferty was one of these people.

Sam was born in 1923, he was the eldest of seven brothers, he also had one elder sister and three younger sisters. He had other younger siblings who sadly died and did not survive those early poverty stricken days. Sam's family were very poor, he used to say "*even the poor thought the Rafferty family were poor*". In 1935 Sam's father sent him out to work to help feed and support his family, he was just 11 years old. He finished school and got a job as a pan lad down Chatterley Whitfield coal mine. After just a short time working down the pit Sam had a lesson on how dangerous it was and it almost cost him his life. One day there was an enormous collapse and he was buried alive on the coal face for two days until he was rescued. Sadly some of the men he worked with were not so fortunate and died in the accident. This near death experience at such a young age did not deter Sam and he continued to work down the coal pit until he was 14 years old.

As the late 1930's approached there was talk of another War with Germany. Sam finished working down the coal mine and enlisted with the Warwickshire (Midland Counties) infantry Battalion. During the early 1940's a call went out for men to join an elite infantry regiment. These men would be required to jump out of aeroplanes into battle which was a brand new concept at this time. These men would have to withstand the hardest training the military could hand out; they were to be called Paratroopers. Sam's thoughts were to quote, '*if I'm going to fight then I want to fight with the best.*' His sense of adventure meant that he was curious about

jumping out of aeroplanes. What Sam had overlooked was that the expected survival time of a Paratrooper in combat was measured in minutes. Unaware of this aspect he applied to join the parachute regiment. The training was significantly harder and more demanding than other units which meant that the majority of the men who applied did not make the grade and were returned to their original unit (RTU). Sam's early life hardships made him a prime candidate for the Paratroopers. On one occasion he was told to appear before his commanding officer, his CO remarked that he seemed to cope very well with the training and asked why this was so; Sam's reply was that since joining the Army it was the first time in his life that he had three good meals a day and matching clothes! He went on to complete his balloon jumps, which he claimed were unnerving to say the least, and his parachute jumps from the famous C47 Dakota to win the coveted paratrooper wings. He became one of the original members of the 8th Battalion parachute regiment (8 Para) that was formed in November 1942 and commanded by the redoubtable Lt Col Alastair Pearson.

Before he made his first combat jump he made many good friends in the army, one in particular was a young man named Stuart Brownsword whose nickname was Ginger due to the colour of his hair. Ginger was a man of many talents; he had a baritone singing voice and was one of the boxers for the battalion. The latter is where Sam and Gingers friendship began. In order to toughen up the men the regiment introduced what was known as the 'Milling'. Each man was given a number and then stood in a circle. The Sergeant would call out a number for a man to enter the centre of the circle. He would then call out another number which meant the man already in the circle did not know where the attack was coming from so you had to be ready. A fight between the two men would then take place until one was beaten into submission. This very rarely happened as neither man would want to give up. This attitude was a quality the parachute regiment was looking for. As brutal as this seemed at the time, Sam said it was to prove an essential part of survival for a paratrooper. Sam fought Ginger in the milling and despite this and a busted nose to show for it he and Ginger became the very best of friends.



A proud Sam (left) and his best friend Stuart 'Ginger' Brownsword after gaining the coveted Para Wings.

With the arduous training completed, Sam was physically and mentally fit. He was ready to fight the Germans. Sam flew into Normandy in Aircraft 249 (C47 Dakota) as part of A Company 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon 6 Section. In the early hours of the 6th June 1944 circa 12:40am, he and members of 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon made ready to make the jump. He said *“the dark sky was lit up with explosions and tracers, the aircraft was bouncing”*. The green light went on followed by adrenalin filled screams of "Geronimo". Sam followed his platoon out of the door into the dark night and the unknown. Unlike the American Paratroopers the British jumped at 400/500ft with no reserve chute which meant that they were down on the ground very quickly. Sam hit the ground in Normandy unhurt; little did he know however, he wasn't where he was supposed to be. His battalion had been scattered all over Normandy. Within the ensuing chaos he managed to join members of another parachute battalion and went on to attack a small French town named Ranville. Interestingly Ranville was the first French Town to be liberated by the allied forces on D-Day 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944. A French tour guide made this fact known to me when I went to Normandy in 2009 and visited Ranville and Pegasus Bridge. Sam never discussed the horrors of what happened that day and the days that followed. This is a typical response of soldiers who have suffered extreme stress in combat. He did however recall things of a lighter mood. He mentioned that it became known that several paratroopers had been captured by the Germans and were being held near to their position. Sam was part of a team that was sent out to get these men back. This was achieved but there was wounded amongst their number, so they commandeered a hand cart that apparently had the squeakiest set of wheels ever. Sam said *“these wheels were loud enough to alert the entire German army!”* The fact that they all survived this rescue he recalled was a miracle. There is another time in Sam's life when he would require the use of a hand cart but not in such dangerous circumstances. Sadly Ginger, Sam's best friend was killed in combat on the 19th August 1944; he is buried in Ranville cemetery in Normandy with hundreds of other brave 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne paratroopers. Sam was close to him when he was killed. Losing his best friend troubled him all the days of his life but this was not the end of his experiences as more terrifying and horrific situations were still to be endured.

Following 8 Paras Normandy Campaign the Battalion were sent back to England to reorganise and to accept new replacements to prepare for the invasion of Germany. On his return the empty beds in the billets were a sobering reminder of his friends that would never come home. Sam's Army records show that he was moved from A company to B company as B company had suffered heavy losses and needed combat veterans to assist the replacements. But Sam said he was moved for a different reason. One of his pals was clipping his heels during drills, this apparently had happened more than once and it eventually miffed off the drill sergeant which resulted in Sam being moved to B company. He was far from happy about this at the time however, it was a decision that would later save his life as the C47 Dakota with his original platoon was shot out of the sky killing all on board.

The preparations for the drop over the Rhine into Germany were temporarily put on hold as the German army had made a huge push into the Ardennes forest known as the battle of the Bulge. The 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division were shipped overseas on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1944 and were involved in combat operations that finally helped stem the German attack. Sam said he had never been so cold in his life. These freezing temperatures endured by the soldiers have been made famous by the American 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division in the series Band of Brothers in their gallant defence of Bastogne in the Ardennes forest.

Following the Ardennes it was back to England once more to make the final preparations for the drop over the Rhine. Since his return from Normandy Sam was now with B Company 5 Platoon 4 Section. The thought of undertaking this parachute jump caused a feeling of foreboding to many of the veterans of D-Day as they knew what to expect and were informed that 8 Para were to take the lead and be the first wave of allied soldiers into Germany. Furthermore they were to jump at 1000ft as opposed to 400/500ft which was the norm for the British paratroopers. Unlike D-Day this was going to be a daylight jump into the fatherland. They were to be the first in and they knew the Germans would be waiting. Despite this Sam had every faith in his training and his Para mates, some of whom were battle hardened soldiers. He knew that they would meet the challenge that had been set before them and this was proved true on the day of the drop. Personally Sam had mixed feelings, the excitement of jumping into Germany combined with the thoughts of whether or not he would survive the day. *'Courage is not freedom from fear; it's being afraid and going on'*. Sam was fearful but he said they all were, if any one said they weren't they were lying. Sam's confidence was that he was doing this jump with the toughest most courageous men you could ever want to meet and that gave him the reassurance he needed.



Sam kneeling down (5<sup>th</sup> from right) with Paratroopers of 5 Platoon B Company prior to the drop over the Rhine.

The flight over was good, it was a fine spring morning and all went well but as the formation of planes carrying 8 Para approached and crossed the Rhine all hell broke out. Sam said you had two choices, you could jump or freeze following which you'd be shot at the door and pushed out. There was only one choice for Sam and that was to get out of the plane and get on the ground. The C47 Dakota was being thrown about amid the flak and explosions going on all around them. Sam managed to exit the plane when the green light went on. His parachute deployed and he started to float towards the ground amid total chaos. He looked around and was gripped by fear. He looked up to the canopy of his parachute to see tears and rips appearing

as bullets and flak past his descending body. The German army were shooting at them as they descended to the ground. He was sure that he was going to be hit... he was waiting to be hit. The descent seemed to take forever as he had jumped from 1000ft. In this time he felt completely helpless and just hoped that he would get down without getting killed, he started to pray like mad. Sam hit the ground and had survived the jump unhurt. It was chaos with fierce fighting from both sides as close quarter combat and hand to hand fighting ensued. Sam and his Paratrooper mates in B Company were dropped on and near to an enemy strong point. A medic assigned to B Company, Tony Leake, recorded what happened next; "*B company met stiff opposition in a hatchet shaped wood on the southern side of the drop zone (DZ) this was an enemy strong point, the paratroopers (B Company) that landed in the wood were shot and killed as they hung in the trees*". Tony Leake goes on to say that a terrible battle then took place between B Company Paratroopers and the German soldiers. A lot of men were killed and wounded on both sides, the slaughter was the worst Medic Tony Leake had seen in the whole of the war. He described "*the attack made by the brave B Company Paratroopers was like going over the top in the Great War*". It is known that Sam was involved in this battle to take the German stronghold in the woods, this fact is recorded in the historical note book of Sergeant Ralph 'Pop' Yates. Pop records Sam's name and also that of others in 5 platoon some of whom had not been so fortunate as he recorded them as missing, wounded and killed. Although badly shaken by this Sam had survived when so many of his friends were killed or badly wounded. His account of what happened in that attack was relayed to me late one night when Sam had drunk a full bottle of scotch. I feel bound to respect my father's memory and keep what he told me between the two of us as he became very upset about it at the time. After surviving this parachute drop the war continued with many more losses in B Company. The 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division eventually met up with the Russian Army at Wismar. Sam was kissed and hugged by a Russian soldier. All he recalled of this meeting was that the Russian stank to high heaven, he did wonder if the Russian thought the same about him.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne were to see the atrocities of the death camps at Bergen Belsen concentration camp as they moved deeper into Germany. Until this time Sam said your mates were like your brothers, you fought for your mates but when he saw the evil atrocities of the concentration camp he realised that Nazi Germany had to be stopped and that is what every soldier in the allied forces had fought and died for. Sam used to say "*it was man's inhumanity to man*".

The War was over and Sam had survived how, he did not know. Many times in his later life I caught him reflecting on these times and remembering his friends who did not come home. He had tears in his eyes and I would ask him if he was ok but he would keep his composure and say he was fine and that he was just thinking. Such was his way that he would never reveal the full horrors of what he and others had suffered and endured, he chose only to reflect on his experiences that were not so bad. So having gone through all of this by the young age of 21 you would have thought he would have been allowed to go home, but he wasn't. The 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne were deployed to Palestine and thus the needless loss of many young paratroopers lives continued.





Sam (front row right) in Palestine after the War.

In 1946 at the age of 22 Sam Rafferty was finally demobbed from the Parachute Regiment. He had been with the 8th Parachute Battalion since its formation in 1942, he was a combat veteran of D-Day, the Ardennes and the Rhine.

So what new life experiences were now in store for Sam.

Sam was now home with his family but little had changed, in fact things were worse. So he set about trying to find work. Despite Britain being battered by a war, work was in short supply. Whilst he had been in Palestine the returning armed forces had grabbed what jobs were going. He managed to find labouring work such as sack and bag carrying and hard back breaking ground works on building sites but this was the odd day or two with no full time employment available. He was struggling to adjust to civilian life, what he had been through and the skills he required in the war now seemed to count for nothing. Having given all his army pay to his family he was poor again and back on the streets of Stoke with no opportunities. He wrote to his regiment and asked if he could return, his CO replied positively saying they needed veterans to train the new generation of paratroopers. Sam packed his kit bag and with no money in his pocket set off on foot to re-enlist at the army recruitment office in Hanley, Stoke-On-Trent. This was about a 5 mile walk from where he lived in Goldenhill. His walk took him through Burslem one of the five towns of the Potteries, and it was here that fate stepped in when he saw two steeplejacks working on a big industrial brick chimney on a factory. He put his kit bag down and sat and observed these two men swinging around the chimney on the end of ropes, happily pointing the chimney brickwork. He said it was one of those moments when you think *“that looks dangerous, that's for me, I can do that”*. So he sat and waited for the men to come down the chimney, they climbed down the vertical ladders with ease and a natural skill, which further impressed him. He approached the men and asked them what job is this. They replied *“we are Steeplejacks, we repair chimneys and churches”*. He then asked if there were any jobs going. One of the men turned to him and said *“what makes you think you can do this job?”* Sam replied, *“I'm an ex-paratrooper so I'm not afraid of heights”*. *“That may be so”* they replied *“but this job requires you to have the balls to let go and work with your hands”*. One of the men lit a cigarette which prompted Sam to say, *“I bet you a cigarette that I can climb this chimney, walk around the top and climb down”*. *“Help yourself”* one chuckled, *“but you do realise that this monster is nearly 300ft high”*. Sam set off up the chimney, everything felt normal to him which pleased him because he hadn't got any cigarettes to settle the bet if he didn't make it! There was no doubt in his mind that he was going to do this and he did, much to the surprise of the two steeplejacks watching on. When he got down they gave him a smoke and he asked again for a job. They said they worked for a company that had

an office in Hanley named Blackburn & Starlings. Sam was on his way to Hanley anyway, so off he set with a spring in his step hoping that he might get a job. Sam always believed that this was fate as he later found out that the Hanley office was just a small branch office and the boss only visited once a month from the main office in Nottingham. He arrived at the small office and asked the lady if there were any jobs going. She replied “*you're in luck, the big boss arrived just a few minutes ago*”. They met and Sam explained that he was on his way to re-enlist in the Parachute Regiment but would like to become a Steeplejack. Sam was given a job and told to start the very next day on the big Power Station Chimneys. This is when he first met Norman Bealand known as Chalkie Norm (leading foreman on the job), Sid France, Don Heath (who later worked with Sam and became a Director of Rafferty's) and Charlie Condliffe. These men, he claimed, were hard-core steeplejacks. They knew the job inside out and were highly skilled workmen. Sadly Charlie fell 280ft to his death after being gassed on a chimney on Shelton Bar Steelworks a year later.

Sam's career as a steeplejack was nearly cut short (sounds familiar). He had been working on the power station chimneys for about 3 weeks when the weather turned and the men decided to do some work to the internal brickwork. The days shift was coming to an end, Don and Chalkie Norm were wrapping up the day's work with Charlie on the outside of the chimney leaving Sid and Sam inside the stack doing a last few bits on bosuns seats. He recollected noticing a strong smell of fumes then a surge of heat. The power plant to this chimney had restarted not knowing that Sam and Sid were still inside. Both men were about 5ft from the top of the chimney when the surge of heat and fumes came, Sid screamed to Sam ‘*get out now*’ and lurched himself up the seat rope. Sam followed his lead, leaving the ropes and seats inside. He later claimed if they had been just a few feet lower they wouldn't have got out in time and they would have fried alive inside the chimney.

Chalkie Norm took a liking to Sam and requested him on every job he worked on, which meant that Sam was regularly employed. They made a good team and Sam was eager to learn and after 2 years was promoted to Steeplejack. Chalkie was old school, he was a qualified stone mason and bricklayer and a natural climber. In 1948 Chalkie suggested to Sam about going it alone, they pooled their money and started their own company which they named Norman Bealand & Son. Sam was the son in the name as Chalkie didn't have any family so they each had an equal share in the company. With the money they had they purchased a hand cart, 300ft of steeplejack ladders, some ropes, blocks and bosuns seats. Chalkie had a little motor scooter and he went around the pot banks and factories offering to repair the chimneys. Soon they had a few contracts and they were in business. During these early days Sam, Chalkie and two other steeplejacks they employed named Frank Dunn and Dougie Pace were seen pushing a hand cart with ladders and ropes on board around the streets of Stoke. This time he made sure it didn't have squeaky wheels! Unfortunately, the partnership with Chalkie was only going to last about a year. Chalkie wanted to immigrate to New Zealand and become a sheep farmer and he wanted Sam to go with him. However, Sam had just started courting a young woman named Lily so he decided to stay in England. He purchased Chalkie's share of the business and renamed the business Rafferty Steeplejack & Demolition Company. It was 1949 and Sam was penniless but he owned his own business. He didn't hear from Chalkie again until 1978, he sent a letter from New Zealand addressed to *Sam Rafferty, Steeplejack, Stoke-On-Trent* and it somehow found its way around the world to Sam. He was over the moon to hear that Chalkie was alive and kicking on his sheep farm in New Zealand.

The 1950's was a tough decade for Sam. Despite Stoke being a Steeplejacks Paradise with all the Pot bank and factory chimneys, business was not good. He managed to pay the bills but never made any real profit. It was a struggle to make ends meet and he felt that his back was always up against the wall. However, there was progress, he no longer had a hand cart, he made enough money to purchase an old second hand post office van and a piece of land at the bottom of Nash Peake Street in Tunstall, Stoke where the company's factory and offices still are today. He married Lily and purchased a little two up two down mid terraced house in Mollart Street, Hanley, Stoke and had three children, Linda, Karen and Nicky. He was working all the hours that he could to provide for his family and was determined to make a better life for them. During this decade Sam employed his six younger brothers Harry, Joey, Kenny, Ronnie, Johnny and Alan. The brothers were well liked by the people of the Potteries and became minor celebrities appearing in numerous newspaper articles which recorded their high risk steeplejack activities.



Sam standing on the scaffolding above his three younger brothers after installing a 140ft steel chimney in 1950's.

In the late 1950's Sam decided to further the knowledge he gained from self-defence in the parachute regiment. He took up martial arts, these being Judo and several types of Karate. He was trained by an instructor named Lenny Moss. Lenny and Sam became the best of friends. After 12 years of hard training Sam gained his black belts in both Judo and Karate and they opened a Dojo together where he became an instructor. They trained the Staffordshire police force and people of all ages, even pensioners. Sam travelled overseas to the Far East to gain further knowledge and understanding of the fighting arts he loved. In the UK he was fortunate to meet and receive instruction from Norman Grundy (Black Belt 6<sup>th</sup> Dan) who Sam nicknamed "the one man army".



The 1960's arrived and Sam had grafted hard for over 10 years with little to show for his efforts. Circa 1963 Sam tendered for a contract to demolish a large single story building. An order was placed and the work had started. It then became apparent that a mistake had been made at the quoting stage. The tender required the contractor to remove the building, foundations and 5ft of ground underneath. He had not allowed for removing the foundations and 5ft of ground and had no idea how this had been missed... he was in trouble. He approached the client and asked if they would help him out but they refused. The business was now faced by a massive loss on the job that would wipe out years of hard work. When all was thought to be lost Sam happened upon a fortune that was to change his life. With the building demolished and the digging of the ground started the men found sheets of buried copper under the foundations of the building. Sam rushed to site and to his amazement there were tons of copper sheets that now belonged to him as they were buried within the 5ft of earth underneath the building. It was believed that the copper had been stockpiled and buried sometime during WW1 to hide it from the Germans and had subsequently been forgotten about. This buried treasure put Rafferty's on the map. Sam developed the Nash Peake site with offices, stores and a workshop, new vans and tackle were purchased along with a new little semi-detached house for Sam and his family.



Development of Rafferty's Nash Peake Works and Plant in 1960's.

In the decades that followed Sam's business grew to a well-known and respected national company. In the 1980's Rafferty's won their first international contract. The company has gone from strength to strength. Sam's only son Nick took over the running of the business in 1981 which allowed Sam to retire and enjoy the fruits of his hard labour until he died in 1993. On reflection of his life it is evident that he took every positive out of all his experiences and used these to the benefit of his family and all who knew him. Nearly 70 years later the Business is still going strong today and is still being run by his Son Nick. Sam's two Grandsons Matthew and Daniel are now working for the company and are working hard to preserve his legacy. Thanks to Sam, his hard work and determination things are very different for his family today. However, this written account of Sam's life shows that they will never forget their roots