

## **Albert Leslie Beckingham (1916-2007) Jumping with 224 Field Ambulance on D.Day 1944**

**By**

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**A.L. Beckingham preparing to jump on D-Day 1944**

I was serving as the Senior Chaplain 52 Brigade in Helmand Afghanistan when I received a ‘morale pack’ from my loving wife Ruth, with lots of little goodies and small comforts which mean so much when in the midst of conflict. In amongst these was the *Baptist Times*<sup>1</sup> which I love to read and keep up with all the news back home. As I was reading the obituaries I was taken aback to see one for Albert Leslie Beckingham<sup>2</sup> who, without him knowing it, had been a significant influence on me and my chaplaincy ministry. I was, however, delighted to see a special day we had in common for he came to Christ on Good Friday 1931 and I came to the same Lord on Good Friday 1982. I hope you are inspired as I was about his unique Baptist Ministry.

Soon after Beckingham had been converted he was inspired by the life and ministry of Hudson Taylor to enter the China Inland Training College but the outbreak of war closed that door and he became the pastor at Hainault-road Baptist Church in Leyton where he met the love of his life

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Twidell & Peter Beckingham, ‘Leslie Beckingham (1916-2007), He Sought to Follow the Lord’s plan for his Life.’ *Baptist Times*, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2007, 19.

<sup>2</sup> See Neil E. Alison, “One of the Humble Few: The Revd A. L. Beckingham CF (1916-2007)”, *The RChDJ* 47 (2008): 44-45.

Eileen Grimsy whom he married in 1941. However he felt compelled to volunteer for military service after experiencing the London Blitz and “felt it [his] my duty to offer as a chaplain.”<sup>3</sup> He volunteered as a United Board Army Chaplain<sup>4</sup> early in 1943 and would go on to serve in the forces until February 1953 both in India and Singapore. Even though he was an active participant, he believed “that war does not line-up with Christ’s teaching and example.” However, he also believed that the war “was forced upon us, it showed how clearly and badly the nations had missed God’s way”;<sup>5</sup> indeed “we were fighting the war...to secure freedom for others and ourselves.”<sup>6</sup> He volunteered and was accepted for the newly established and elite Parachute Regiment (6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Parachute Division) which had Commando ethos which demanded a high level of physical and mental robustness.

The only group of chaplains, during this period of history, who received specialist military training were those attached to the Parachute Regiment and the Special Air Service (S.A.S.). Those known to have served with the Airborne Regiments<sup>7</sup> during World War Two were A.C.V Menzies C/E; A.L Beckingham U.B (Bapt); A.R. Down U.B (Cong); A.W.H. Harlow C/E; Alan Buchanan MC C/E; B. Benson R/C; Bernard Egan R/C; C.H. Bingham C/E; D. McGowan R/C; E.I. Phillips C/E; G.A. Kaye C/E; G.A. Pare C/E; George E. Griffiths C/E; H.J. Irwin C/E; J.G. Morrison C/S; J.J.A. Hodgins C/E; J.O. Jenkins C/E; J. Rowell C/E; J.W. Johnston C/S; John Gwinnett C/E; Murdo Macdonald C/S; R.E. Price C/E; R.F. Bowers C/E; R.J.F. Mayston C/E; R.T. Watkins Methodist; Selyn Thorne C/E and W.R. Chignell C/E. There was only one to serve with the Special Air Service and that was J. Fraser McLuskey<sup>8</sup> C/S.

Beckingham, along with his men, was interviewed by psychiatrists to make sure that he would be mentally robust enough to cope with the severe demands of military training which would include such stressful activities as parachuting, or as one person put it ‘Jumping from a perfectly serviceable aircraft.’ Beckingham records his experience:

No one was...still permitted to take the Parachute Training Course until they had taken two weeks physical training at an army P.T. Camp to make sure of fitness. This involved drill on the parade ground, endurance marches and an assault course. The padres took exactly the same course as all others and were required to reach...the same standards. My most vivid memory of this was one minute in the boxing ring with an opponent of approximately equal weight and

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<sup>3</sup> A. L. Beckingham, 1998, Questionnaire.

<sup>4</sup> The United Navy, Army and Air Force represented the denominational interests of the Baptist and Congregational Unions at this time. For a full introduction to the beginnings and development of the U.B. see Neil E Allison, *The Official History of the United Board Revised, Volume One: The Clash of Empires 1914-1939*, (Norfolk: United Navy, Army and Air Force Board, 2014); Neil E Allison, *The Official History of the United Board Revised, Volume Two: The Clash of Ideologies 1939-1950*, (Norfolk: United Navy, Army and Air Force Board, 2015) and Neil E Allison, *The Official History of the United Board, Volume Three: The Age of Conflicts 1950-2014*, (Norfolk: United Navy, Army and Air Force Board, 2018) see also Ronald W. Thomson, *Ministering to the Forces. The Story of the Baptist and Congregational Chaplains and the Work of The United Navy, Army and Air Force Board 1914 - 1964*, (London: B.U.G.B.I. & Cong. Union of England and Wales, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> Letter Beckingham to Allison, April 3rd 2000.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account of the ministry of airborne chaplains see Chris Van Roekel, *The Torn Horizon: The Airborne Chaplains at Arnhem*, (Groningen: Jan and Wenda ter Horst and Chris van Roekel, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> See Fraser J. McLuskey, *Parachute Padre: Behind German Lines with the SAS France 1944*, (Stevenage: SPA Books 1985); also Fraser J. McLuskey, *The Cloud and the Fire: His Path for me*, (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1993).

height. It seemed a long minute.<sup>9</sup>

This physical training was followed by an intense period of parachute training for day and night time drops. J. Fraser McLuskey explained that the reason for such robust training for chaplains was that: “While one denomination or another might be held most efficacious for man’s upward ascent, Church and Chapel, Protestant and Roman, bow all alike to gravity and fall with equal force.”<sup>10</sup> In other words the chaplains were expected to endure what their soldiers had to endure and be able to jump into action with their units, otherwise the chaplain would remain an outsider. “There was no doubt that the position of a parachute chaplain made all the difference to his relations with the men. He could truly say that he was one of them, and the men, for their part, liked to feel that the chaplain was undergoing the same trials as themselves, and their mutual feeling of discomfort, nervousness, and exhilaration, were equally shared.”<sup>11</sup> However, this training carried with it a great physical risk. A sad illustration of this occurred during a night drop from a balloon basket. Beckingham wrote that:

It was from a night exit from the basket that the dear man’s parachute, who jumped immediately before me,...failed to open and he was killed. The R.A.F. instructor giving the orders to jump kept his nerve remarkably - made no comment on what happened - and gave me the command to jump. It was my sad duty to go with a fellow officer to see the dear wife of the dead man and break the news to her.<sup>12</sup>

After passing all his training and now being able to wear his parachute ‘wings,’ Beckingham was posted to 224 Parachute Field Ambulance which was part of the 6th Airborne Division. This unit recruited from those that professed conscientious objection to the war but were not absolutists. They would become a distinguished unit. Colonel Alistair Young who commanded 224 Parachute Field Ambulance spoke fondly of this command. He once asked one of his volunteers “Don’t you bloody conchies ever think of anything else but your bloody consciences?” Nevertheless he called them “excellent in battle” and when one of them went missing – he was later found in a German prisoner of war camp – Colonel Young wrote to his parents: “He was known by all ranks for his modesty and for the courage with which he bore his Christian convictions. Such men are rare.” Another received the Military Medal for rescuing wounded paratroopers from the drop zone during the 1945 advance over the Rhine after having been told by an NCO “You’ll never get there and back alive”.<sup>13</sup>

This C.O. Unit would be parachuted into action on 5 June 1944 as part of the D Day Campaign. However, Beckingham had initially been due to be posted to another regiment, but he had put in a complaint. Smyth described the event. He wrote that “Beckingham was a minute, very light man, who had literally slaved to get his wings and when, later on, he was told that he was earmarked to go over by sea with the R.A.S.C., he formed up before the Senior Chaplain and

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<sup>9</sup> Letter Beckingham to Allison, March 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Fraser J. McLuskey, *Parachute Padre: Behind German Lines with the SAS France 1944*, (Stevenage: SPA Books 1985), 24.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Michael Snape, *The Royal Army Chaplains’ Department: Clergy Under Fire* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), 301.

<sup>12</sup> Letter Beckingham to Allison, March 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Will Ellsworth-Jones, *We Will Not Fight: The Untold Story of World War One’s Conscientious Objectors* (London: Aurum Press, 2008), 257.

complained bitterly that he hadn't gone through all that just for that. His logic prevailed and was allowed to jump in with the Field Ambulance."<sup>14</sup>

After jumping with 224 Field Ambulance and extracting himself from a muddy marsh he found his way to the Field Hospital. Minutes after his arrival he was to bury a fellow chaplain, Alec Kay<sup>15</sup> of the 8th Airborne Division. Naturally, he took pastoral responsibility for the troops of this Division, as well as the 1st Canadian parachute Battalion whose chaplain, George A. Harris,<sup>16</sup> was missing, later found to have been killed in action.<sup>17</sup> Remaining with the Field Ambulance, he took responsibility for spiritual care of the wounded and dying. Beckingham wrote that "there is no doubt that my duties were made that much more pleasant by the presence of a number of conscientious objectors who had volunteered to jump with the unit in order to serve the wounded. Some of these C.O.s were convinced Christians and welcomed any spiritual help the padre could offer."<sup>18</sup> Ellsworth-Jones in his book *We Will Not Fight* records some helpful details relating to 224 Parachute Field Ambulance and the reason why some C.O.'s felt the need to join up. He wrote that: "Some members of the NCC (Non Combatant Corps) actually became uneasy about the fact that their life was so comfortable. Some transferred to...162 – sometimes called the 'right wing of the pacifist movement' – volunteered to become medical paratroopers, with D-Day being their frightening debut."<sup>19</sup> It was while serving with the Field Ambulance that Beckingham had his most fruitful ministry as far as evangelism was concerned. Many were very responsive to the gospel message and he later baptised nine of them at Salisbury Baptist Church.<sup>20</sup> Beckingham concluded from his own experience that: "They were splendid men, all of them."<sup>21</sup>

He stayed with his unit until his attachment to the Canadian 'Para's' as they moved forward. It was while he was with the Canadians that an officer admitted to Beckingham that during a serious engagement he had read a psalm which "seemed as if it were specially written for me."<sup>22</sup> During his ministry he gave communion "as often as possible"<sup>23</sup> using his issue communion set. His simple "talks" were concerning the "Saviour who had died for the sins of the world and was alive for ever more."<sup>24</sup> As a U.B. chaplain he found no difficulties "caring for all in need"<sup>25</sup> regardless of denominational allegiance or lack of faith. Unsurprisingly opportunities, during operations, for a full scale field services were rare and his pastoral ministry was lived out by a quiet conversation and offering a prayer and celebrating Holy Communion in small huddled groups. This was borne out by his questionnaire which would put presence and visitations as priorities. After the war in Europe was over Beckingham spent his time visiting the families of his soldiers killed in action.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Smyth, *In This Sign Conquer* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co Ltd, 1968), 252.

<sup>15</sup> Smyth, *In This Sign Conquer*, 252.

<sup>16</sup> Smyth, *In This Sign Conquer*, 252; See also Walter T. Steven, *In this Sign*, (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1948), 103.

<sup>17</sup> *Baptist Times*, May 26th 1994, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Letter Beckingham to Allison, March 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Ellsworth-Jones, *We Will Not Fight*, 257.

<sup>20</sup> Beckingham, 1998, Questionnaire.

<sup>21</sup> *Baptist Times*, May 26th 1994, 9.

<sup>22</sup> *Baptist Times*, May 26th 1994, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Letter Beckingham to Allison March 2000.

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<sup>25</sup> Beckingham, 1998, Questionnaire.

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A.L Beckingham has provided a faithful demonstration of, what I would term, as Liminal Ministry<sup>27</sup> which I have argued is the best pastoral model of chaplaincy and is the proven foundation of Christian military chaplaincy. This spiritually pragmatic approach needs to be expanded into a more defined theological model. The ministry of the chaplain in any period of history is in a real sense “other worldly” as the chaplain represents another government not of this world, the Kingdom of Christ, but applies the wisdom, gospel and sacraments of Christ to concrete situations. In the most appalling situation, such as war, the chaplain is able to give hope and point beyond mere nationalism to something far greater. Because of this they hold a position of unique trust as a friend and advisor to all within the military regardless of rank and situation. The chaplains’ other worldly perspective help them to uphold human dignity and often choose to be where the trauma is greatest and their ministry is most urgently needed. He is a uniformed identified member of that organization and participates in the rigorous training needed to be a soldier. The chaplain however still remains a liminal and ‘threshold’ figure like the concept of a ghost who exists in the living world but is not fully part of it. The chaplain is in the military but not of it, in effect ‘in between and betwixt.’<sup>28</sup> He wears an officer’s uniform, but has no executive authority; he is in the midst of conflict but does not carry a weapon, he is a herald of peace and an eternal kingdom in the midst of death and limited horizons....”<sup>29</sup> This “model” may be accused of being idealistic, but without such an ideal of chaplaincy it will become simply functional, emptied of its spiritual content.

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<sup>27</sup> Neil E Allison, ‘The Role of Military Chaplains in its Historical Context: A Free Church Perspective,’ (*In die Skifig / In Luce Verbi Journal* (South Africa, December 2016).

<sup>28</sup> V. Turner, *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure* (London: Aldine Transaction, 2009), 95.

Turner explains that: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony.”

<sup>29</sup> Neil E Allison, ‘The Role of Military Chaplains in its Historical Context: A Free Church Perspective,’ (*In die Skifig / In Luce Verbi Journal* (South Africa, December 2016).