

## Private Ronald Albert Frank LANSDOWNE

Service number 5682998  
Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry  
2<sup>nd</sup> (Airborne) Battalion  
Divisional Defence Platoon, 1<sup>st</sup> British Airborne Division  
Killed in action on 25/26 September 1944, aged 21

Born in Wells in 1923, Ronald went to Wells Central School and then joined the Post Office, first as a messenger and then as a postman. When he turned 18, he joined the Somerset Light Infantry, and then transferred to the 'The Ox and Bucks', which were glider infantry in the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. Ronald landed on the first day of the battle for Arnhem, and died on the last day of the battle when he drowned during the night-time withdrawal over the Rhine.



The grave of a British airborne soldier killed during the battle of Arnhem

Photograph by Sgt. C. H. Hewitt, No. 5 Army Film and Photo Section, Army Film and Photographic Unit © IWM BU 3646  
(<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205203296>)

Ronald was born in Wells on 3 February 1923, to Ernest Frank Lansdowne and Alice Florence née Berry. His father was a paper mill worker. He had a younger brother, Harold (whom the family called Jack), who was born in 1925. Soon after Harold's birth they moved to 36, Southover. Ronald's father died of tuberculosis in late 1927.

Ronald went to Wells Central Boys' School, and on leaving school was employed by the Wells Postal Service, first as a messenger and then as a postman. Ronald belonged to the congregation of the Wells Methodist Church. In September 1939, he was living with his mother and brother at 25, Southover.

In 1941, probably as soon as he was 18, Ronald joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry. On 10 October 1942, he transferred to the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Airborne) Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, which were glider infantry. Originally the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and provided the Divisional Defence Platoon, whose job was to protect the Divisional Headquarters.<sup>1</sup> This they continued to do after the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was transferred to the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the Defence Platoon is from 'The Tale of a Few Bridges' by Steve Berridge (<http://www.lightbobs.com/the-tale-of-a-few-bridges---2-oxf--bucks-li-1944-45.html>).

Division in 1943. By September 1944, the Divisional Defence Platoon was still mainly made up of men from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion.

Ronald was a member of the Defence Platoon, and this is why, on 17 September 1944, the first day of the battle for Arnhem, Ronald landed in a Horsa glider at Landing Zone 'Z' about one mile south-west of Wolfheze, even though his regiment was not present.

The objectives of the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division were to capture and hold the bridges over the river Rhine at Arnhem. However, in the end, only a force slightly over battalion strength managed to reach and hold the northern approaches to the road bridge. On 20 September, after it had been cut to pieces trying to get to Arnhem, the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division withdrew to the Oosterbeek perimeter. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, all resistance at the road bridge ceased. During the defence of the Oosterbeek perimeter, the Defence Platoon was engaged in the defence of the Hartenstein Hotel, which had become the Divisional Headquarters.

On the night of 25/26 September, after fighting for nine days, what was left of the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division were withdrawn across the Rhine. Just under 2,000 men were safely withdrawn out of a division that originally numbered about 9,000.

News of what happened to Ronald on that night was given in the *Wells Journal* of 5 October 1945:

It was stated that a member of the Unit last saw Pte. Lansdowne near a river immediately prior to the evacuation of Arnhem. The operation involved the crossing of the river at night, during which many casualties were sustained and unhappily no further information concerning Pte. Lansdowne has been received from the survivors.

Ronald died in the river and his body floated down the Rhine for about 38 miles to Hagenstein, where it was found by German soldiers on 27 November 1944. The Germans buried Ronald by a brick-work's chimney stack about 100 yards from the south bank of the river, which in Hagenstein is called the Lek.

On 27 November 1946, Ronald was reburied at the Amersfoort (Oud Leusden) General Cemetery in Plot 13. Row B. Grave 1. He has a memorial plaque in the Wells Methodist Church, and is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

In birth records, army record and the *Wells Journal*, Ronald's surname is always spelt with an 'e' at the end, but on his memorial plaque, his surname is spelt 'Lansdown'.