

Voices of War

Life Story



Gerald William Lathbury DSO

1906 - 1978



Name: Cleasby-Thompson

Other names/aliases:

Date of birth:

Place of birth:

Nationality: British

Date of death:

Place of death:

Service No:

Unit(s): Royal Artillery

Rank: Lieutenant-Colonel

Medals and awards:

Education:

Life Story

Lieutenant-Colonel Cleasby-Thompson was a regular officer of the Royal Artillery, commissioned prior to the Second World War. Details of his early life and pre-war service are limited in the published record, reflecting both the technical nature of artillery command and the relative lack of surviving personal papers. His career trajectory, however, indicates that he was regarded as a competent and reliable regimental officer, with experience suitable for command in specialist formations.¹

By the early 1940s, Cleasby-Thompson had transferred to airborne forces and became involved in the development of artillery support for airborne operations—an area that posed particular challenges owing to weight constraints, limited ammunition supply, and reliance on gliders for deployment.²

In 1944, Cleasby-Thompson held the rank of lieutenant-colonel and commanded the 1st Airlanding Light Regiment, Royal Artillery, part of the 1st Airborne Division. The regiment was equipped primarily with 75mm pack howitzers, intended to provide close artillery support to airborne and airlanding infantry once deployed.³

Unlike parachute units, the airlanding artillery depended on the successful arrival of Horsa gliders, making it particularly vulnerable to losses during landing and to delays in assembly. Cleasby-Thompson's responsibilities therefore extended beyond conventional artillery command to include the rapid organisation of dispersed batteries under combat conditions.

Operation Market Garden and Arnhem

During Operation Market Garden in September 1944, the 1st Airlanding Light Regiment was tasked with supporting divisional operations west of Arnhem, including the defence of the Oosterbeek perimeter. Elements of the regiment landed on 17 and 18 September, suffering losses to both enemy fire and landing accidents.⁴

Despite these difficulties, batteries of the regiment were brought into action and provided sustained artillery support during the fighting around Oosterbeek. Middlebrook notes that airborne gunners at Arnhem frequently employed their guns in direct-fire roles, reflecting both ammunition shortages and the proximity of German infantry.⁵

Cleasby-Thompson remained forward with his regiment during the battle. As German pressure increased and the perimeter contracted, command and control became increasingly difficult. On 20 September 1944, he was wounded during the fighting and subsequently captured by German forces.⁶ His removal from command occurred at a stage when artillery support was already severely constrained by losses of guns, ammunition, and personnel.

Captivity

Following his capture, Cleasby-Thompson spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner of war. As with many captured officers from Arnhem, his captivity removed him from further operational service, and he played no role in the later phases of the battle or the evacuation of surviving British airborne forces across the Rhine.⁷

Assessment

Lieutenant-Colonel Cleasby-Thompson's role at Arnhem has received relatively little individual attention in the historiography, largely because artillery actions were subordinated in narrative accounts to the more dramatic infantry fighting at the bridge and within the Oosterbeek perimeter. Nevertheless, modern operational studies emphasise the importance of the 1st Airlanding Light Regiment in sustaining the division's defence for as long as it did.⁸

Cleasby-Thompson's experience reflects the broader difficulties faced by airborne artillery commanders: dependence on fragile delivery systems, limited resupply, and the necessity of adapting doctrine to close-quarters fighting. His wounding and capture further reduced the division's already strained command structure during the later stages of the battle.

Post-war Career and Legacy

Little is recorded in published sources regarding Cleasby-Thompson's post-war career or later life. His relative obscurity contrasts with the operational significance of the unit he commanded, but this is not unusual for artillery officers whose contributions were largely collective and technical rather than individual or symbolic.⁹

References and Sources

British Army Lists (inter-war and wartime editions); Royal Artillery officer records.

Otway, T. *Airborne Forces* (London: Leo Cooper, 1951).

Saunders, Hilary St George. *The Green Beret: The Commandos at War*.

1. Urquhart, R. E. *Arnhem* (London: Collins, 1958), pp. 134–140.
2. Middlebrook, Martin. *Arnhem 1944: The Airborne Battle* (London: Viking, 1994), pp. 326–330.
3. Ryan, Cornelius. *A Bridge Too Far* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), pp. 411–413.
4. Hibbert, Christopher. *The Battle of Arnhem* (London: Batsford, 1962).
5. Routledge, Brigadier N. W. *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery: Anti-Aircraft Artillery 1914–55*.

6. Urquhart, R.E. *Arnhem* (London: Collins, 1958), pp. 24–31.
7. Hibbert, Christopher. *The Battle of Arnhem* (London: Batsford, 1962), pp. 83–85.
8. Middlebrook, *Arnhem* 1944, p. 254.
9. Urquhart, *Arnhem*, p. 113.
10. Ryan, Cornelius. *A Bridge Too Far* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974), p. 339.

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