



This research is courtesy of Bob O'Leary, Honorary Secretary of the Leigh-on-Sea Branch of the Royal British Legion.

### MR CHARLES H BENFORD

Charles H Benford was born on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1919, near Maldon on the River Blackwater. He was the second eldest of 9 siblings (3 Brothers and 5 Sisters). Sadly, only Charles and 3 sisters are alive today.



Charles told me that after his Mother had her 4<sup>th</sup> Child, Charles went to live with his Grandparents in Plaistow. He went to New City Road School in Plaistow and was top of the class 2 years running. His Grandfather was a Butcher and had his own shops initially at Woolwich then at Plaistow. Charles worked at the shop in Plaistow for some time but later started work at the Co-op Dairy in Guildford Road in Southend.

He started work on the bottling machine, but eventually was promoted to the Accounts Department and eventually was effectively the Plant Manager and visited other dairies in a supervisory capacity.

By this time however, War had broken out and Charles was called up (at the age of 20) and first reported for duty with 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Essex Regiment (The Pompadours) at Warley Barracks (Brentwood) on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1940. He underwent 3 to 4 months training before the Regiment was moved to the Isle of Wight where they laid about 60 miles of steelwork around the island to protect against invasion.

The battalion remained with the 25th Brigade until February 1944 when it became part of the [56th Independent Infantry Brigade](#), alongside the 2nd Battalion, [South Wales Borderers](#) and 2nd Battalion, [Gloucestershire Regiment](#), where it was to remain for the rest of the war. The battalion received large drafts of men to bring it up to strength and began training intensively for the [Allied invasion of France](#). The battalion and brigade landed on [Gold Beach](#) on [D-Day](#), 6 June 1944, from roughly 1:00 pm. Charles (now a Sergeant with a Bren Gun Carrier platoon) remembers sailing in a

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Landing Craft from Lymington in Hampshire to Gold Beach from where they fought their way inland to liberate Bayeux the following day.

The 56th Brigade took part in the Normandy landings, liberated Bayeux on 7 June leaving the town mainly intact. All its battalions were involved in the taking of Tilly-sur-Seulles with the 2nd Essex finally investing the town. Later actions were north of St Germain d'Ectot and the liberation of Thury-Harcourt in the Suisse Normande. It was prominent in the drive towards Le Havre and the 49th was one of the assault divisions taking the city in Operation Astonia in September 1944. Continuing to fight in Belgium at Poppel and then the Netherlands it was the assault brigade for the final assault on Arnhem in April 1945. The 56th served well, and ended the war in Germany. The division came mainly under command of First Canadian Army throughout the campaign.

They fought through the [Battle for Caen](#) serving again with the 50th Division and briefly with [59th Division](#). The 56th Infantry Brigade were eventually assigned to the [49th \(West Riding\) Division](#) (The Polar Bears), after the [70th Brigade](#) of that division was disbanded due to an Army-wide shortage of trained infantrymen. The battalion and brigade would remain with the 49th Division for the rest of the war, serving mainly with the [First Canadian Army](#). In 1945, they fought in the [Second Battle of Arnhem](#). By the end of the war the 2nd Battalion had suffered over 804 men killed, wounded or missing, with 183 of them paying the ultimate price. Charles told me that the last Dutch town they liberated before Arnhem was a place called Wageningen in April 1945. The people, city, and institutions of Wageningen suffered greatly during World War II. The central part of Wageningen was destroyed by artillery fire soon after the German invasion of the country in May 1940. The town is also famous for its role at the end of the war: Wageningen was the site of the surrender of German General Johannes Blaskowitz to Canadian General Charles Foulkes on May 5, 1945, officially ending the war in the Netherlands.

Whilst the war was underway, Charles began to exchange correspondence (as a pen friend) with Doreen Turvey. Eventually Charles and Doreen married in September 1945 at West Ham and later became proud parents to son John and daughter Sandra. Although sadly Doreen died in 2011, Charles now has 10 grandchildren and 7 great grandchildren.



After the war Charles resumed his successful career with the Coop Dairy and eventually retired in 1984 after 33 years' service. In addition to his campaign medals, Charles was awarded the Légion d'honneur (pictured left) by the French Government in recognition of those who fought and risked their lives to secure  
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France's liberation during the Second World War.

Charles has been on many Regimental reunions in Europe and in the UK, the Leigh-on-Sea Branch of the Royal British Legion were able in May 2015 to get Charles included with a party of 160 Veterans that travelled to Arnhem in 80 London Taxi Cabs (courtesy of The London Taxi Charity for Military Veterans) to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Arnhem's liberation.

He has been a Member of our Branch since May 2005 and although he has not enjoyed the best of health in recent months, we hope that he will be able to attend and enjoy our future meetings for a long time to come.

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