

Lt-Col Peter Norbury, trained and led a platoon of dogs clearing land mines during the Second World War – obituary

During the initial assault across the Rhine he and his dogs crossed by boat under heavy fire then cleared a groyne on the enemy's bank

By [Telegraph Obituaries](#) 4 April 2022 • 5:56pm



Norbury when he was serving in the Sudan; he was a temporary colonel at the time

Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Norbury, who has died aged 98, commanded a platoon of mine dogs in the Second World War.

In September 1944 Norbury, then a second lieutenant in the Royal Engineers, crossed the Channel in command of No 4 Mine Dog Platoon, one of the last dog platoons committed to the continent and the advance to Germany.

He had two sergeants, one a sapper, the other a vet. There were about four or five handlers in each of the three sections and each of these had two or three dogs. In addition, there were four drivers and a cook. Operations were restricted to the hours of daylight. The dogs could find mines in the dark but the handlers could not see the dogs.

In March 1945 Norbury's platoon took part in the initial assault across the Rhine and was tasked with clearing a groyne on the enemy's bank so that the first of five floating Bailey bridges could be built. The groyne was about 10 yards wide and it projected into the river for about 35 yards.

Norbury crossed the river in a small boat with his sergeants and five handlers, each with one of their dogs. During the crossing, the boat was targeted by an observation post in a nearby village. They came under mortar fire, and a stray artillery shell seriously wounded the veterinary sergeant.

On reaching the far bank, the mine dogs cleared the groyne of mines. These included three “S” mines, which were greatly feared by soldiers because of their habit, when triggered, of jumping up, exploding and causing dreadful injuries to anyone close by.



Peter Norbury with two of his mine dogs

Peter Norbury was born at Billericay, Essex, on February 21 1924. He spent his early years in Australia. For many years his family had lived at Bendigo, some 100 miles north of Melbourne. They found gold there and built a large Victorian-style mansion called “Fortuna”, which still stands.

In the 1930s they moved back to England and young Peter was educated at Oundle, and Truro Cathedral School. He was a member of the Army Cadet Force and held one

of the first Lord Lieutenant's Commissions, a scheme designed to identify future military leaders.

In 1942 he left school, and after completing his basic training he joined the Royal Engineers and volunteered to work with mine dogs.

The dogs came from two main sources – Battersea Dogs Home and families who wanted to help the war effort, some of whom perhaps found it a strain feeding large dogs during the war.

Labradors were favoured, being strong, biddable and resilient, but other breeds, including Alsatians, Collies and cross-breeds were also sometimes used.

All the dogs went through three weeks' "obedience" assessment, and their training in mine clearance was carried out alongside exercises for guarding, searching for casualties, accompanying infantry patrols and carrying messages between units.

Mine dogs were trained in several stages. At the start of a session the dogs would be fitted with a special harness to teach them that they were "on duty". They learnt to quarter the ground, moving from left to right and back again as their handler slowly worked them forward.

The first stage began with live anti-tank mines laid on the surface with a cube of meat inside the lid. The dog would smell the meat and initially try to head straight towards the mine, but it was restrained and taught to maintain the quartering pattern until it reached the mine. Then it was trained to sit with the mine between its front paws. It was then patted and rewarded with the cube of meat.

In the second phase, mines were buried flush with the surface. In the third, they were buried to a normal depth, and in the final stage there was no meat in the mines, but the handler carried meat cubes on him.

When the dog located a mine, the handler would prod for it with a sharp steel probe, and mark the site with a small white cone ready for subsequent disposal.

In February 1945 the platoon's dogs were deployed in the Battle of the Reichswald, an operation to clear German forces between the Meuse and the Rhine. They came under constant fire but Rex, a black Labrador, proved outstandingly resilient and continued to sniff out mines in the forest left by the retreating Germans.

His courage saved the lives of many soldiers during the battle and he was given the task of making sure that an area of the forest was safe before it was visited by Winston Churchill.

At the end of the war, Rex was awarded the Dickin Medal For Gallantry. The award, honouring the wartime service of animals, was instituted in 1943 by Maria Dickin, founder of the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA).

Norbury wrote the citation: “Rex has always worked with great zest. Whilst on duty in the Reichswald Forest, he worked under the worst of conditions both overhead and underfoot with complete disregard for the heavy enemy shelling. He helped to clear a pathway through a thickly sown anti-personnel minefield, so saving casualties that would have most certainly occurred but for his devotion to duty.”

After the war, Norbury worked at the War Dog Training School at Sennelager, Germany, before gaining a Regular Commission. His postings took him to Singapore, Thailand and Sudan before he retired in 1973 in the rank of lieutenant-colonel.

He then joined the Planning Inspectorate at the Department of the Environment.

Settled in a village in Dorset, he enjoyed wood-turning to make a variety of bowls and platters.

In 1948 Peter Norbury married Barbara Morgan. She predeceased him and he is survived by their two sons and a daughter.

Peter Norbury, born February 21 1924, died February 28 2022