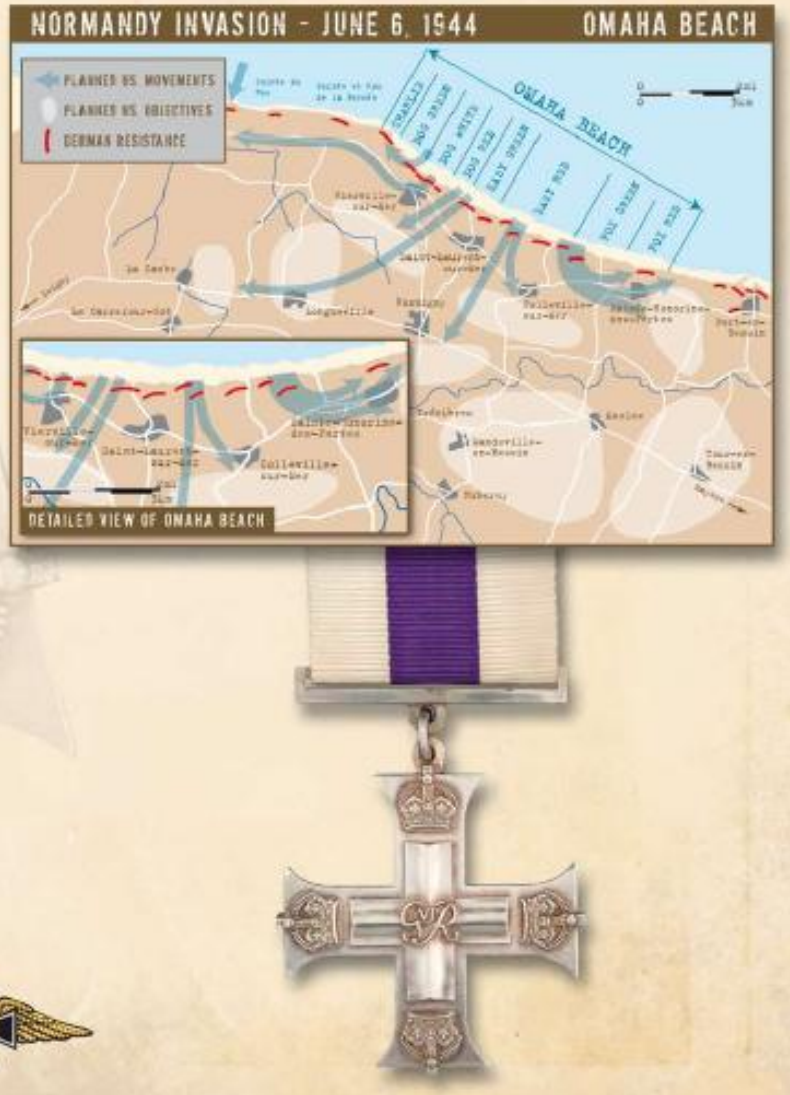
‘Ministrare Non Ministrari’

The Revd Geoffrey Clarence Harding

Padre Harding joined the Royal Air Force Chaplains’ Branch in 1943. Attached to a Mobile Radar Unit in 1944, he is believed to be the first RAF chaplain to land on the Normandy beaches during D-Day.

Military Cross Citation

‘This chaplain landed with a unit on the beaches of Normandy on “D” day. The beach was under intense bombardment and was strewn with dead and wounded. Mr Harding worked for 36 hours, most of the time under direct fire, giving help to the wounded and burying the dead. He set an inspiring example and was responsible for saving many lives. During the evening of “D” day he walked along a road, which was under fire, into a village in enemy hands. He entered a house in which were many snipers and obtained water which he took back to the wounded. His gallantry and disregard for his own safety were worthy of high praise.’

‘Well, we were plagued by that beastly 88 millimetre. In fact in the end we had 25% casualties. We rushed up and down the beach one way or the other but we couldn’t get out of the range of the beastly thing. I thought we really had had it, I was giving myself up to an early grave and I must admit that most of my remarks on the previous Sunday to the congregation now felt rather thin. But it came to me very, very strongly indeed, almost as though a voice spoke in my ear that we must get off that beach at all costs and take refuge under the shadow of the cliffs. So I went forward, found a suitable site in the 3rd house up on the left where there was an open courtyard. The few Germans ran away and apparently hid themselves in the house next door thus proving no trouble to us. And I then waved forward everybody I knew to get off that blasted beach - I use the word in its proper sense - as fast as we could. Technically I think I committed mutiny, though technically I think I made the proper choice. But somehow we got off the beach and got our wounded off too.’

‘Somebody told me at the time I walked up and down the beach as calmly as if I were walking up and down an aisle in the church, but that was simply due to the fact that I’m constitutionally lazy and entirely refuse to be hurried, least of all by the enemy.’