

MY MEMORIES OF 'D-DAY'

6th June 1944

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Written by:-

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The Build Up

I served as a wireman (Electrician) in the Royal Navy from January 1943 until 1946. After initial training we were drafted into 'combined operations' i.e. co-operation with Army and Air Force activities, training to land on the beaches of Normandy. Of course at that time, one did not realise the ultimate conclusion. The Landing Craft on which I served was Tank Landing Craft 2455. This craft was American built, powered by 3 Grays two stroke engines.

Living accommodation – 10 crew and 2 Officers, who usually lived ashore until required for active service. When we were drafted to take over there were 15 crew and 2 Officers living permanently on board for over two years. To put it mildly – these were cramped conditions. Over a period of time, we sailed from the Isle of Arran (Scotland) to South Shields for refit, which included a large platform, installed in the tank deck. The idea was to carry Centaur Tanks, which were raised on the platform ready for bombardment when approaching the beaches. From South Shields we eventually travelled to Poole harbour and believe me, we were not lacking for company – masses of Landing Craft anchored in the harbour. After staying at Poole for a few weeks the next port of call was Southampton. Obviously we sensed action would soon take place. The docks were alive with troops and all types of transport was parked in the docks, ready for loading onto ships and Landing Craft. If my memory serves me right L C T 2245 was tied up against the jetty on June 2nd 1944. Two Centaur Tanks were secured onto the special platform and two jeeps on the tank deck. To keep us company were Royal marines and Canadian soldiers (Infantry). The T.L.C was packed to full capacity. There was no cover for the army, just standing or sitting – exposed to the elements. I felt concern for the soldiers slipping and sliding on the deck with their studded boots. By now, we were well acclimatized to the conditions aboard, making us quite nimble underfoot. The time seemed to drag – hanging about, wondering what the next move would be. All leave had been cancelled and we were banned from leaving the docks. At last on 5th June 1944 we sailed out of Southampton docks.

On Our Way

Sailing in line between the Flotilla Leaders (flag ship), we headed out of Southampton water into the English Channel. The weather conditions were atrocious. A force 8 gale was blowing. The craft, built with a flat bottom hull, was tossed about in all directions. We sailed past a sea fort and the crew waved to us and made certain gestures which were duly returned. It was just reaching dusk. The captain called the crew together and in true naval fashion, said 'Well lads, this is it. The invasion of Normandy.' He wished us the best of luck. Let's face it, what else could he say? I was handed a large cardboard carton containing portable distress lights. They were a simple apparatus consisting of a length of flexible cable, battery and bulb fixed to a crocodile clip – the idea being, on abandoning ship you plug the flex into the battery and clip the bulb onto your hair (bad luck for the bald lads!) as the craft travelled further out, the weather conditions worsened and it seemed the craft would turn over. As the craft's bows dived into the trough of the waves, the engines, having no resistance due to the propeller coming out of the sea, would roar away and then the noise would stabilise when the bows came out of the trough. By this time I estimate that 90% of the soldiers were extremely sea sick, just holding onto anything at hand and the crew was unable to help them. I remember looking down from the poop deck at those soldiers and thinking what a healthy lot they all were, all that training for fitness but now old Mother Nature was laughing at us. The stench of diesel oil and vomit all over the deck became a situation one would not forget in a hurry. Experiencing these conditions right through a very dark night, being tossed about in such a rough sea, caused us to reach a state of exhaustion. Our eyes felt as heavy as lead and we smelt of diesel oil. However being so filthy made little difference because the black became camouflage. Yes we were indeed exhausted but the spirit was strong. As dawn appeared, the outline of the Normandy coastline came into view. I was in the wheelhouse. Suddenly the door opened. 'Brighteyes' appeared – his duffle coat hood almost covering his bright eyes, looking a proper rag-a-muffin! He was aiming his rifle and shouting in a clear Cockney accent, 'Right, where are you? You Nazi bastards, we're ready.' I looked at him and thought 'Christ – we wouldn't stand a chance' but it caused a good laugh!

We Have Landed

As daylight approached and the French coastline became clearer, tiredness seemed to disappear – even the soldiers seemed to revive. I think they had suffered so much during the voyage that nothing else mattered but to leave the Craft. In my eyes, these lads were heroes and I admired every one of them. Now the vision was good but the sea was still very rough. We had passed a few destroyers and battleships. Suddenly we were reminded that this was no holiday trip when the H.M.S Warspite opened a broadside. The shells were screeching over the top of us. The blast knocked my tin helmet over my eyes. I think we were one of the first craft to make the landing. The bombardment from the warships were making their mark. Black smoke and fierce flames accompanied by deafening explosions appeared from

inland. Action stations was called. My duty was to lower the ramp, which enabled the tanks and troops to land. The lowering of the ramp door was operated by a manually operated winch, which was installed in the for'ard cable locker. What a position! – right in the front part of the craft. Before we were called to take up our position for landing, I looked down from the stern and I shall always remember a breathtaking sight of so many craft of all types making their way. I watched with mixed feelings of pride and sorrow for there were plenty of heartbreaking instances to follow, when you saw craft blown up by mines. As we got nearer to the beach, the sound of sten guns and mortar fire was intense. Action stations for landing was ordered. I ran along the tank deck to get to the cable locker. A hail of bullets struck the side of the bulwark. I soon got into that locker. The Centaur tanks had started their engines ready to move. At last the order came to lower the ramp, by pulling a lever which disengaged the clutch and lowered the ramp. The Centaur tanks were moving off the craft and the soldiers were crouching, following behind for cover. We were caught by sniper fire. The horrors of war became only too clear as three of our soldier comrades fell dead. When the last soldier landed, the tide was going out very fast. The intention was to reverse the craft off the beach to make sure we would not be left high and dry, in other words to keep her afloat. This did not happen. Orders were given 'full astern' – there was no response. The petty Officer motor mechanic looked down the engine room hatch. I can still see his expression to this day – a look of utter dismay. 'Captain, the engine room is flooded.' We all felt helpless and hopeless. We had achieved our main task but now there was plenty more to do. Eventually the tide ebbed out and there we were left high and dry on the Juno Beach – a sitting target – totally exposed. The Germans had carried out a thorough job, fixing tripod type of angle, which supported small mines. We were surrounded by them, hence the disaster to the engine room. The RAF certainly rued the skies – except on one occasion. It was approximately mid day when German Stuka Bombers dived and bombed the deck, I was in the crew mess at the time. We threw ourselves onto the deck, the scream from the Stuka's siren made it feel as though the bomb was meant for you personally – which wasn't far wrong. After the bombing onslaught, surrounding craft were burning and torn to pieces. The surviving crews joined other crafts. Sappers were already clearing the minefields whilst the tide was out. When the tide came in more Landing Craft beached and the movement of troop vehicles increased. By this time the beach and a mile or two inland was being held. Apart from the dreaded sniper fire we had a chance to estimate the degree of damage to the engine room. It became apparent that the craft could still float but without the engines and generator working. As I am writing the report an instance comes to mind – just after the initial landing two German Officers (in my opinion) walked along the beach – one in his striped pyjamas wearing only one slipper and the other one just had his pyjama trousers on. I don't think they were expecting an early call! The little town of Corsella was the local place to our landing. It was observed that sniper fire was coming from the church steeple. Bofors Guns soon out aid to their action. The saddest memories for me on 'D-Day' was when the troops were landing during the afternoon. They had disembarked from their craft and in some cases the depth of the sea was still shoulder height. The tide was strong and the sea was still very rough. We had attached hawser ropes from wrecked craft to the beach. The soldiers were in a desperate

situation carrying full packs on their shoulders. By holding on to the ropes it enabled the majority to pull themselves safely onto the beach. Sadly we saw too many of them who did not manage to grasp the rope, or they slipped underfoot. The weight they carried and the force of the sea was just too much for them. They drifted out to sea and we watched helplessly. To this day I shall never forget those lads. When the tide was out, we surveyed the local minefield. As the latter craft approached the beach, we tried hard to warn them of the danger of mines by waving our arms and pointing. There was one particular P.L.C. (Personal landing Craft) which looked more like a motor boat – it carried about four or five men. It was right in line for a mine field. We were shouting and waving, desperately trying to warn them off but unfortunately they thought we were cheering and greeting them with signs of goodwill. Eventually their craft hit a mine and blew up. We picked up the one survivor. He was crying and laughing at the same time – in shock of course. Also, all his front teeth were cracked. One thing which mystified us was, he was covered in dark blue paint. Later he explained that he was attached to the 'Advanced Unit of Sign-writers'. He dealt with signposts. I am sure that never again will I see such marvellous organisation and discipline that I experienced on Juno Beach.

On the Beach and Afterwards

After –'D-Day and a few more days on, the beach was well free of enemy to enable freedom to manoeuvre – clearing mines and the unfortunate casualties. The army had transferred the battle ground into Piccadilly Circus! (Without Eros.) Heavy wire mesh or plating was laid down on the sand, making temporary roadways, and right in the centre of them stood the smartest Red cap Soldier, directing transport to various directions. He looked so clean and not a hair out of place, obviously carrying out his duty with great personal pride. It was just as well those snipers were rounded up safely!

The damage in the engine room of our craft was temporarily repaired and it was decided that we should be towed out to Mulberry Harbour (a temporary harbour formed by several ships) we always had a number of German fighters attacking the craft and we were always on the alert for frog divers (divers who placed mines to the side of ships).

Petty Officer Motor Mechanic worked on the engines and I worked on the generators. I cannot describe our relief when we finally got them going – phew. Our mission started again. We travelled to the large cargo ships, which were anchored way out in deeper waters. The army (Pioneer Corps.) would load the tank deck with cargo and we would make for the beach on high tide, then anchor. As the tide went out, the craft was left high and dry on the beach. The cargo was quickly unloaded and the exercise would be repeated.

After three months I became ill and transferred to a hospital ship (Duke of Rothsy). Eventually I arrived in Basingstoke Hospital. As I lay safe and sound between clean white sheets do you know what really got on my nerves? The quietness. You can never win can you?

...From one of the lucky ones.

(signed R.G. Watts) Ex. Wireman. Naval Rating.

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