

The 'Sea Devils'

Men Of Sea, They Shot, Fought And Marched On Land

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“R.N. COMMANDO” says their blue and white shoulder flash, but the Germans know them as the “Sea Devils” and the toughest fighters ashore and afloat.

They specialise in invasions and seaborne raids behind the enemy lines and are so versatile that they are capable of tackling almost any job a sailor or soldier may be called upon to perform.

All are British naval officers and rating but in addition to considerable experience at sea, each has passed through the Army Commando battle school, trained to shoot, fight and march on land under the most arduous conditions.

“N” or “Nan” Commando was the first of the Royal Navy units to be formed in the Spring of 1943. During a visit to their operational base at a front-line port in Italy I saw in action young “sea devils” who toy with death in the hot spots of trouble throughout the Mediterranean.

Their log book is an impressive record of how effectively they have been a thorn in the side of the German Army all the way from Sicily.

Mixed Bunch

They are a mixed bunch. Their ranks contain men from all sorts of trades and professions. Some are regular Navy men, but the majority are war-time volunteers.

They include clerks, salesmen, labourers, artists, miners and students. The average age is 23.

Oldest man in the unit is the Commanding Officer , Lt-Cdr T. J. Turton R.N.V.R – 39 year old pre-war publican.

But the jovial host who was so popular with the customers of the Black Bull Inn, Whetstone, in peace-time London, is a very different proposition as a man of war.

This massive figure bristling with dagger, pistol and Tommy-gun, who leads his “sea devils” with the spirit and dash of an old-time buccaneer, has brought something more than good cheer to numerous Jerry defence posts along the Italian coastline.

First Ashore

Commander Tom, as he is affectionately known, was first man ashore in the Sicily invasion, and his ensign was the first allied flag to fly again in enemy-occupied Europe.

Close on his heels was Padre E. A. Way, Free Church of Scotland chaplain, unarmed and carrying his haversack of first aid gear.

The initial task of Nan Commando in this operation as in the other major invasions in the Messina Straights and at Anzio, was to get their landing craft ashore on an enemy beach where other large-scale landings were to be made.

Although opposition in the Sicily invasion was not as heavy as was anticipated, three members of Nan Commando were killed. But the assault was carried out with such speed that an enemy pillbox was captured with the German personnel still inside. Under mortar and spandau fire the Navy Commandos and British Army sappers worked for hours to blast a way through for landings and organise exits on the beach.

To Schedule

Despite the local difficulties and a couple of Luftwaffe raids, the jetties were established within 48 hours and cranes were discharging stores and transport from the ships.

Infantry and tanks got ashore according to schedule, and they soon cleared the enemy gunners from the area. Snipers continued to harass operations during the night and four soldiers who slept in a bivouac on the beach were found dead next morning with their throats cut.

Having smashed open the back door of Europe for Eighth Army, Nan Commando went into training for their next big job – the invasion of Italy.

Striking at dawn the sea devils crossed the Messina Straits under cover of a barrage greater than that at Alamein. They landed at Gallico near Reggio in the teeth of fierce spandau fire from numerous points.

Securing their objective without losing a man, they began the task of preparing the beach. Work continued without a break through a gruelling four hours of intense mortar fire.

In Third of Time

General Montgomery had allowed the beach parties 14 days in which to get the advance mobile material forward for Salerno. But by working night and day the Navy's commitments were completed in four and a half days.

In the first wave, two L.S.T.s, nine L.C.T.s, and 80 L.C.M.s touched down at one time.

First man to land in Italy was R.N. Commando Lieut. W. B. Wallace, a young peace-time builder of Newcastle. He and a rating were smuggled ashore in darkness 15 minutes before zero hour.

The rating was killed but the lieutenant carried out a reconnaissance and by means of a signal torch guided the incoming ships safely to the beach. He operated the landing arrangements for two days on his own.

But for a small mistake in the initial landing the Anzio invasion might have proved a costly failure for the Allied armies.

Nan Commando landed on the wrong beach. In doing so they escaped a death trap.



*“Commandos crouch low in an L.C.A. as they approach the assault beaches. Their anticipation of what lies ahead is evident in their faces.”
Picture from Ex Shallufa November 1943 used in the 'Sea Devils'.*

For the enemy anticipating our plans, subjected the correct beach to a terrific bombardment with 15-in. Guns.

While the Germans were wasting their ammunition, the Commandos were going lower down against light opposition. In this sector they took Jerry by surprise.

Enemy gunners were preparing to enjoy an early breakfast when the sea devils paid their call. They fled leaving their liver and sausage grilling on the fire.

A serious problem was a heavy mine. Petty Officer D. A. Grainger was mentioned in despatches for clearing a path by crawling on his hands and knees prodding for mines with a bayonet.

Finding suitable exits from the beach proved an extremely difficult job. Eventually paths were opened up an incline though many vehicles could not make it up under their own power and had to be winched up.

Rocket ships cleared the beach of mines. Lieut. Alec Varley, a young Liverpool artist operated a pontoon which was in position for landing the tanks from L.S.T.s by 10 a.m.

At 11 a.m. Field Marshal Alexander and Admiral Trowbridge were ashore viewing the situation and speaking to a number of German prisoners.

It was at Anzio that Nan Commando had their toughest time. Nine men were killed when a shell hit their billet.

A.B. John Snowden, 22 year old Northumberland miner, had a narrow escape when a shell burst among a group of eight. He received a bad gash over the eye and was unconscious for many hours. Now he is back again.

Lt. John Russell, of Devon, was awarded the D.S.C. For devotion to duty when wounded in the initial landing. He lost a leg but is now back in uniform with an artificial leg as a naval armaments inspector.

Lt. Ian Harris, D.S.C., a young Australian medical student, was another Commando who distinguished himself. A soldier lay wounded on the beach. No doctor was available, so Lt. Harris amputated the man's hand with a jack knife, knitted the veins together and saved the soldier's life.

Also the young Lieutenant went out in a duck under shellfire and swam in the icy water to rescue a number of unconscious soldiers floating in the water.

Then he worked for hours bring them round on the beach by artificial respiration.

Ever since Anzio, Nan Commando have carried out daring raids along the enemy coast to shoot up positions, collect information and bring back prisoners.

But not all have been seaborne raids. One of their most audacious ventures was a Jeep trip behind the enemy lines to round up a gang of Fascists.

Lt. Cdr. Turton and Lt. Wallace made the journey to a small inland town before it fell into allied hands.

With the aid of partisans they called at a number of houses and rounded up 11 Fascists. The citizens thought they had been liberated. They mobbed the two naval officers, made them gifts of food and wine and tolled the church bells.

The commotion attracted the Germans to the scene and the Commandos made a speedy getaway, leaving the Fascists in the care of the partisans. Cdr. Turton and his men went back later in strength to collect the prisoners.