

Hugh Birley Assistant Beach Master 1943-45

Hugh Birley's Combined Notes written spring 2003 with extracts from letters to Paul Seaton and Griffin Turton, edited by Griffin Turton 30th of November 2008.

Pantellaria 1943

I came into the organisation rather through the back door. I was serving in a destroyer in the Eastern Mediterranean in 1942, when having passed a selection board I was sent down to S. Africa to be turned into an officer and I came back to Alexandria as a Midshipman in March 1943 proudly clutching a 'draft chit' which said "For disposal to Destroyers".

Proudly because this was what I had asked for, destroyers being the only ships I knew but after a week or so without any destroyer asking for my services, I and several others were sent for by the 'Captain of the fleet', the officer responsible for appointments and told that we were to be "lent" to Combined Operations for a job which should take about six weeks.

There had been for some time a unit called the Mobile Beach Party. This had followed Eighth Army along the N. African coast using ports and beaches for small coasters and such few landing craft as were available, supplying the troops with ammunition, food and water. This unit was now to be expanded into a full Beach Commando as laid down in the UK and I was one of the extra bodies drafted in to bring it up to strength.

We received some very rudimentary training at the Combined Ops base beside the Great Bitter Lake half way along the Suez Canal. As an exercise we once 'invaded' the far shore of the lake with a few soldiers and three or four landing craft.

After this we travelled from Alexandria to Malta in the cruiser HMS Orion. Our sailors had been taught to keep their weapons with them at all times; but Orion's Master at Arms, the head of the ship's police, was horrified at the thought of small arms on the Mess Decks. Almost half way to having a mutiny! We compromised by collecting the guns and placing them under the eye of a Royal Marine sentry.

At the time Malta was just emerging after several years of siege conditions. The cook of an American freighter in the harbour appeared and threw an armful of no doubt stale loaves of bread into the water and couldn't understand why he nearly caused a riot. The Maltese were jumping into small boats, rescuing the loaves and squeezing out the filthy harbour water and shaking their fists at the American.

After a day or two we travelled on to Sousse in N. Africa in the Destroyer HMS Petard. This was fun for me as she was the ship in which I had been serving as a seaman a few months before.

We camped in an Olive grove a mile or two out of Sousse and though we had no official means of transport we managed to collect an assortment of captured vehicles in the Cape Bon area, where the last of the Afrika Corps had recently surrendered. The NOIC (Naval Officer in Charge) Sousse looked slightly askance when I drew up outside Navy House driving an Italian tricycle with our acting CO Lt Dickie Franklin RNVR (Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve) sitting proudly on an old car seat in the open box back. It was the nearest thing to a Jeep that we had.

Whilst at Sousse as an Assistant Beach Master, I was expected to lecture to the troops on Combined Operations techniques. This was in preparation for the landing on the Italian island of Pantellaria.

Pantellaria is a volcanic island surrounded by cliffs and with no beaches at all. After a massive aerial and sea bombardment the assault was to be made in daylight through the small artificial harbour at the North end. It has occurred to me that this is perhaps why our lot were chosen for the job. It might so easily have turned out like Zeebrugge or St Nazaire and we were perhaps considered more expendable than the more professional units trained at home.

In the event all went well. The harbour area had been thoroughly plastered with bombs over several days. There were few Germans on the island and the Italians were for the most part deep in their air-raid shelters formed from tunnels in the soft volcanic rock. Our only serious discomfort

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came from Focke-Wulf 190s which came skimming over the sea from Sicily bombing and strafing us several times a day while the "100 per cent air cover" promised us by General Spaatz of the US air force was droning round in circles high over head.

There was in fact one other landing place on the island; a small cove towards the south end. Two enemy landing craft of the type we called "F" Lighters roughly equivalent to our LCTs (Landing Craft Tank) had come in on the very morning of our invasion. One was manned by the German navy and the other by Italians and they were captured I believe by the crew of a British tank. The German craft had received some damage to her bow from, I presume, a tank shell.

Some days after the landing Sub Lt Jonas RNR (Royal Navy Reserve) from our unit and I were given the job of taking these two vessels to N. Africa. Lt Jonas was senior to me so he took the undamaged Italian one leaving me the German with the damaged bow.

The Italian air-raid shelters in Pantellaria had been hopping with fleas and so was the accommodation in the "F" Lighter. What a blessing it was to have DDT, which the other side didn't.

For my crew I had a young Leading Seaman as my cox'n Bill Feltham and seven other sailors, six from our unit and a Signaller from Royal Naval Beach Signal Party No.8 and also a sergeant and several soldiers from the Royal Engineers who were my engine room staff.

We were only given a few hours notice before we were expected to sail and during this time we did our best to secure the damaged bow door with mooring wires. We set off and joined a convoy of Landing Craft heading for Sousse but there was quite a heavy sea running and it soon became apparent that our lashings on the door were not tight enough. If the door fell open we might well have sunk so I informed the convoy by Morse lamp and turned the ship stern-on to the sea while we had another shot at securing it. By the time this was done the convoy had disappeared in the darkness. I had no chart and could only return on a reciprocal course until we could make out the island and the cove from which we had started.

We set off again the next morning with a single British LCT in company and reached Sousse safely having had a better trip than the other captured F. Lighter which had remained with the convoy. The LCT ahead of her which was crowded with troops had hit a mine and although she did not sink there were a great many casualties. Some of whom were rescued from the sea by the Lighter's crew including Sub Lt Jonas, who went over the side to help the survivors leaving his trousers on the deck but when he got back they had gone. So later the afore mentioned NOIC Sousse had reason once more to look askance when he was visited by Sub Lt Jonas dressed in a string of signal flags, as once back in Sousse he had not wanted to waste a moment before reporting the presence of mines in the swept channel.

I feel sure the Germans would have made good use of two captured ships but I and my crew were ordered to rejoin the Commando as soon as it returned from Pantellaria. At the time Sousse was a busy base for the landings in Sicily and both vessels were left quite unguarded in Sousse harbour where they were thoroughly looted while we moved on to a fresh camp in Tunisia.

Salerno 1943

After Pantellaria a new CO was appointed, Lt Cdr Pearson RN. He had been a regular officer at the end of the First World War but then came under the "Geddes Axe" and spent the inter-war years farming in Kenya.

Camped near Bizerta we were next to a huge American ration dump. There were numerous air raids which the Americans countered by laying great smoke screens over their storage areas. Several times we removed all badges of rank etc. and disappeared into the fog, dodged the patrols and sentries, and staggered back each with an unidentified box of US rations. Tinned turkey and fruit juice were among the most popular but anything that made a change from our British Army rations was welcome.

Around this time we were given the letter "D" for our commando, the original D having been almost wiped out in the raid on Dieppe in 1942.

Our next job was to supply two small beach parties for the landing at Salerno in September. Another RN commando covered the main British invasion beaches where X Corps landed in the

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northern part of Salerno Bay and an American Corps took the southern part.

Two supplementary landings with which we were concerned, were higher up the coast, north of Salerno town. American Rangers landed at Maiori on the Sorrento peninsular and a British Commando Brigade at Vietri Sul Mare close to Salerno town.

The Brigadier was Robert Laycock, later to be Chief of Combined Operations and the brigade consisted of No 41 Royal Marine Commando and an Army Commando and I was one of the ABMs for this landing.

We travelled from Palermo in an ex Belgian cross channel steamer, now an LSI (Landing Ship Infantry). Sitting in the smoking room we listened to Eisenhower's broadcast telling of the Italian surrender. The P.M.'s son Randolph was there, being attached to Laycock's HQ and he obviously had some foreknowledge of the surrender. We were wisely assured that we must still expect plenty of opposition from the Germans, which proved only too true.

Our landing took place in pitch darkness and as was usual the two ABMs were in the first assault, I was in the left hand Landing Craft Assault (LCA) and Sub Lt Stevens in the right hand LCA. On reaching the beach we would turn right and left towards each other hoping to meet somewhere in the middle having formed an idea as to whether or not we had landed in the right place.

I landed and walked to my right but saw no sign of my colleague I was challenged, stood stock still in the darkness, and was relieved to hear footsteps retreating up the beach. Next day revealed a post containing a large Breda machine gun, one of several the Italians abandoned without firing a shot. I soon located "Steve" his LCA must have beached a few minutes later than mine. We had been landed in exactly the right spot and soon set up our lights to bring in the later waves of landing craft.

As it got light we soon realised that the soldiers had not penetrated very far. The beach came under intense mortar fire and we were clearly under observation as the mortars followed relentlessly whichever end of the beach we chose to bring in the next lot of landing craft.

At this time I had a slight brush with Randolph Churchill on the beach. He accused me of having my "Beach Exit" marked in the wrong place. I pointed out it was in the best place, though it was not the place which had appeared best from the aerial photographs we had seen and that fixing it was my responsibility and not his! He wasn't very pleased.

However there was not much to bring ashore as the Commando brigade had been allocated only one LCT which brought a few anti-tank guns towed by Bren-gun carriers, trucks of ammunition etc. and a few Jeeps. I am sure they would have liked a bit more artillery as they were there to intercept tanks coming from Naples. I have heard only one LCT could be spared for this landing and I wonder if those two "F" Lighters were still mouldering in Sousse.

When all the troops were ashore we were left with one Landing Craft Infantry (Large) stuck on the beach. She had received several mortar hits round the bows and some of her forward compartments were flooded making it impossible for her to drag herself off the beach under her own power.

Her crew joined us ashore and perhaps prompted by an order for our small party to set up an ambush on a minor road owing to a threatened visit by some enemy tanks, the Captain rowed out into deep water in a borrowed dinghy and dumped all his code books and marked charts over the side. To our relief no such visit occurred.

Eventually contact was made with a US Navy salvage tug stationed off the main invasion beaches. She agreed to come and drag the LCI(L) into deep water but Brigade HQ told us first to load her with all the wounded we could collect, such prisoners as had been taken and ourselves. The tug arrived and produced the biggest rope I have ever seen and dragged us off the beach until we floated, somewhat down by the head. The upper deck was a mass of stretchers because this was one of the LCIs which was not suitable for stretcher cases because her troop spaces were filled with 'bus seats' but it was a calm night and we steamed gently back to Palermo taking a straight course regardless of mine fields and swept channels as the marked charts were at the bottom of the sea.

Part of our voyage back to N. Africa after Salerno was in an American Liberty Ship adapted

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for troop carrying. Her Captain, in his seventies, told us he had left the sea and been farming in the US for twenty years before coming back for the war. He told us that his best crop was Soya Beans and could not understand why this made him so unpopular with us. We had had more than our fill of the disgusting soya bean sausages called "soya links" issued as rations. Rather more palatable were the supplies of rough red wine we had in both N. Africa and Italy. We generally kept a 4 gallon Jerry can full under our mess table.

Anzio 1944

We rejoined the rest of "D" Commando in Tunisia and later moved to Algiers from where we had some hope of being sent home as were many of the Med's Landing craft in time for Normandy, no such luck. Just after Christmas 1943 we travelled by sea via Alexandria back to the gritty comfort of H.M.S Saunders, the Combined Ops base on the Suez Canal, to be reunited with our kit left there eight months before.

At Saunders was "N" Beach Commando, who suddenly received orders to be ready to depart for another operation. I and one or two others from "D" were given 35 minutes notice to join them to bring their numbers up to strength, before we departed for Naples.

My switch from "D" Commando to "N" was done at such short notice that there was no time to collect one of my two blue uniforms from a tailor where it was being "promoted" by having the Midshipman's patches replaced by the single wavy stripe of a Sub-Lieutenant. My friend "Steve" told me later that he did send it on but I never saw it again.

So I found myself an ABM in N3. We were taken back to Italy in a cruiser and spent some time with the troops who were to do the assault at Anzio. Then we did an exercise landing using the old beaches of the Salerno landings South of Naples where we were visited by the US General Mark Clark and after another spell of lecturing to the troops we embarked for Anzio.

The actual landing at Anzio was extremely easy. There was a huge stretch of beach, backed by dunes and pine woods. Large minefields were carefully marked "Achtung Minen". The only delays were due to the process of making beach exits through the soft sand and cleared passes through the mines. The very few German's in our sector quickly melted away.

The beach phase only lasted a few days, after which we had a gale which left us with numerous landing craft and a just completed floating pier flung far up the beach. The pier we had hoped to use for LSTs to overcome the rather gentle beach gradient.

Fortunately the US Engineers had been very quick to make "hards" in the small fishing port of Anzio by bulldozing the rubble of bombed houses onto the shore. Three LSTs could berth there at once and achieved a very quick turn round by arriving from Naples full of loaded trucks and doing the return journey full of empty ones. The mole was used by LCTs working as lighters from ships anchored in the bay, as also were a large number of DUKW amphibious lorries.

If only the US army commanders had been as quick to exploit the success of the assault, the tragedy was that, the order was given to dig in and the result was a costly stalemate which lasted for months because our side failed to stake out a large enough patch of land before the opposition stiffened.

N Commando was given the task of running an operation in which large numbers of DUKW amphibious trucks were used to unload ships anchored in the bay. We directed them over a small beach on the Netuno side of Anzio, but as this only required one of our sections at a time, N1, N2 and N3 took turns to do a week or ten days in Anzio followed by a spell in Naples. I think Lt Turton discovered and got the use of Nisida. This was a tiny island off the North end of Naples joined by a causeway. It had been a prison, and still was in parts but we were able to occupy what had been a reform school and it suited us very well.

Our worst moment in Anzio came when "N3" under Lt Turton was in the act of relieving "N1" under Lt Russell our CO. I had gone into the rather battered building which we inhabited. N1 was just outside loading their gear into an army truck for taking to the LST hards when there was an almighty bang. A long range shell one of "Anzio Annie's" bricks pitched into the road just outside our front door killing several of N1 and two RASC men, Lt John Russell had a leg blown off but

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survived. Later Lt Turton took command as acting commanding officer.

Later at Anzio, probably March some time after the initial assault I saw the familiar “Black Cat” divisional sign of the 56th (London) Division coming ashore. As soon as I could get some time off I borrowed a bicycle and pedalled up the road until things started to get noisy. Then I dumped the bicycle and walked up a valley, with self-propelled “Priest” field guns blasting away over my head, until I found my brother at the HQ of the 9th Royal Fusiliers. I had an hour with him before he had to depart to go up to the front line. I made contact again in late 1944 when he was able to spend a night with us and even more surprisingly we managed to get a weekend leave at the same time as each other and spent it in Rome. The only time I have ever been there.

At one time “N” Commando was being considered for the landing on the Island of Elba in 1944. Then the job was given to another Commando, perhaps because we were still tied up with Anzio. As it happened we were well out of it, as the landing did not go very well.

During one of our spells of being “off duty” from Anzio a senior naval officer in Naples wanted to check up on various islands including Monte Christo. He took me and a handful of our men to form a landing party, by chance we travelled in the same LCI (L) now repaired in which I had got away from Salerno.

Monte Christo is a small rocky island, the only dwelling was a Hunting Lodge belonging then to the King of Italy. We felt very vulnerable paddling ashore in a small rubber boat and were relieved to find that the small German garrison had left a few days before. The only inhabitants were five old people, gardeners and house keepers for the royal lodge. They had very little food and showed us a pathetic box trap in the garden with which they caught small birds for the pot. We left them what food we could spare and promised to report their plight to the authorities in Naples as they had no boat and no phone.

For us it had been a very pleasant cruise, visiting also Corsica, Ischia and Ponza.

The Adriatic Coast 1944-45

The break-out from Anzio began at the end of May 1944 and early in June “N” Commando was transferred to Termoli on the Adriatic coast of Italy. On the way we stopped for a break somewhere in the middle of Italy and it was then we heard on the radio that the Normandy landings had begun. It was of course June 6th 1944.

We then followed Eighth Army up the Adriatic coast but there was little for us to do. I think the root of the trouble was the insistence by the American's for a large landing in the South of France, for which most of the Med's landing craft and seven divisions were withdrawn from the Italian front. This was an invasion many of us felt contributed little towards defeating the Germans in France, while slowing down the rate of advance on the Italian Front which in turn allowed the Russians to occupy more of central Europe than they would otherwise done.

For Eighth Army it meant a shortage of landing craft both for offensive operations, as there were occasions when the army would have liked to throw in a force from the sea to turn a river mouth or whatever and for forward supply for the troops as the very few landing craft on that side of Italy were busy running arms and supplies to Tito's partisans in Yugoslavia, so the Eighth Army was supplied for all intense purposes by a single not very good road, Highway 16.

So from June 1944 “N” Commando progressed by fits and starts up the Adriatic coast of Italy. At first we were in tents at Termoli when Eighth Army was on the River Sangro. Porto San Giorgio was our second camp, we then moved to the north of Ancona, Fano and Pesaro come to mind.

Eighth Army laid a pipeline to bring petrol up to the front. This lay along the beach close to one of our camps. The locals had discovered and perhaps encouraged a drip and were collecting the petrol and storing it in large glass jars stacked in a store shed full of the local wine. One of our lads went to buy some wine, knocked over a lamp and whoosh! Quite a fire, no one was hurt but the Military Police were very interested.

For most of the time we were in tents, but as winter approached we looked for a little more comfort and when it came to finding houses we quickly learnt to get as close behind the infantry as

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possible as the line advanced. Leave it too long and all the best billets would be taken by somebody else.

When we moved into the Riccioni house close to Rimini, there was still a battery of I think, 7" howitzers in the garden, possibly of 1918 vintage which absorbed their recoil by rolling up portable ramps and down again and occasionally falling over on their sides. We were glad of the peace when they moved on and from Riccioni onwards we managed to find fairly complete houses for billets.

We were given a few odd jobs, one of the most "odd" consisted of interviewing men who had come through the allied lines and claimed to be escaped prisoners of war. This was a time when the coastal sector was held by two Polish divisions, who could not be expected to tell the difference between an escaped British prisoner and a German imposter. Tom Turton and others soon sorted them out.

Tom Turton had made me 'Transport Officer' which initially meant struggling to maintain a motley collection of trucks etc. mostly salvaged from the 'crash dump' in Naples. Then somehow the official penny dropped and somebody realized that naval units ashore needed the same mobility as an army unit. Suddenly I was faced with an order to collect three 3 Tonners, four Jeeps and three motor bikes. Also I had to find enough people to drive/ride them, not as easy as it would be today.

This was the period when I got to know Tom T. fairly well. He of course had one of the Jeeps, but he always preferred to be driven and usually with me as his chauffeur!

Often our three sections would be in different places along the coast, running small harbours etc. and Tom T. and I did quite a lot of travelling between them. All the roads were potholed, narrow, and full of diversions and temporary bridges and also with endless columns of ammunition and ration trucks. The occasional staff car with General Alexander or some other big wig would be waved through by the Military Police and was always followed by a motley collection of trucks and Jeeps, ours sometimes among them hurtling along determined to stay on the staff car's tail.

Tom T. was referred to as "Uncle Tom" by many of our sailors, I grew quite fond of him, he had many stories which might or might not be true. One was that he owned a chain of petrol pumps selling "T.T." Petrol, you were meant, of course to think it stood for Tourist Trophy rather than Tom Turton! However he was a steady and unflappable Beach Master, worth a lot in the chaos of a beach.

Able Seaman Adams, Scouse (Liverpool Irish) was I think Tom T.'s bodyguard at Anzio and later. He certainly ruled the little collection of bodyguards who doubled as batmen in N3, though the Navy never recognised the existence of batmen.

Adams was the sort who would disappear for an hour and come back with a couple of chickens, one for N3's officers and one for himself and his pals. He belonged to an enormous family, and once told me that his Dad reckoned he could feed a kid on a few pence less than the child allowance paid to poor families at that time. And therefore the more children he had the more money was available for beer.

I make Nan sound like a bunch of pirates and crooks! This was not really the case but I think it must be said that in those months from June '44 what was needed was a chance to do our job denied us by the lack of landing craft.

I do not recall the exact date when Lt Cdr Alexander RN appeared as our Principal Beach Master and CO, it was towards the end of 1944 I think when we were in Riccioni. I suppose Tom T's appointment had only been "Acting PBM" but I don't think that worried him unduly. We didn't see very much of Alexander.

One of the last trips I made with Tom T. was to the HQ of colourful crowd officially called "Popski's Private Army"! Tom had already been there once, discussing possible operations around Lake Commaccio but a day or two before our second visit Popski, Lt Col Peniakov had been wounded.* So his second in command, Jean Caneri, a French man known as "Major Canary", was considering using new amphibious vehicles called Buffaloes to cross Lake Comacchio which was a large shallow lagoon, a mixture of mud and water lying between Ravenna and Venice.

Our house in Ravenna had no running water or window glass. Its basement was flooded to a

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depth of some inches but there was a copper, the grate of which was just above water level. Lt Pat Ward and I were determined to have a bath, the first for a year or two. We filled the copper with clean water from a well, got a fire going, and eventually had it hot enough to rush upstairs with the water in buckets to the bath room. We had also jacked the bath up on bricks and had a Primus stove underneath to supplement the heat, though it also made a rather dangerous hot spot!

In January 1945 "N" Commando was involved in an operation using amphibious vehicles around Lake Comacchio south of Venice though I never took part in the operation.**

One day a Sub Lt appeared saying he was my relief. I have a letter I wrote to my parents dated January the 25th 1945 from Ravenna so it must have been shortly after this. It appeared I had been overseas longer than any other ABM in the Med. So I was free to wind my way back via Florence, Rome, Naples and after a slow sea voyage to Liverpool I arrived back in the UK in March 1945. Two years and eight months after I had left it having been overseas without a break since July 1942. I was also free to leave "combined ops" and return to General Service, where I went back to sea in a worn out French Torpilleur until the war ended.

* Lt Col Peniakov recorded in his book Popski's Private Army being wounded on the 9th of December 1944. (GJT)

** The 21st of December saw the end of Eighth Army's winter battles apart from some attacks to clear the area between Ravenna and Lake Comacchio.

The main Comacchio Operation started on the 1st of April 1945 with a successful assault by 2 Commando Brigade on the spit on the eastern edge of Lake Comacchio. This was the beginning of the final Allied offensive in Italy known as the Battle of the Argenta Gap, codename Grapeshot.

On the 29th of April the Germans in Italy signed an unconditional surrender at Caserta and this came into effect on the 2nd of May and marked the end of the war in Italy. Source the Imperial War Museum book of "The War in Italy 1943-45" by Field Marshall Lord Carver. (GJT)

Postscript

One last observation, I always had a feeling that we should never have been called Commandos, Naval Beach Parties described our function. Any ordinary infantry unit was exposed to the same dangers as we were but for far longer periods. My own brother in the Royal Fusiliers landed at Salerno. His Battalion suffered over 50 per cent casualties in the first three weeks but they were still in the line for crossing the Volturno, the Garigliano, and Monte Cassino and from there were pulled out to re-enforce the Anzio Beach Head. Then after a very short break they were transferred to Eighth Army with whom they served until the end of the war. Our contribution was very very small compared to theirs.

Sources

Notes and supplementary notes written by Hugh Birley spring 2003

Letter to Paul Seaton from Hugh Birley 25th November 2007

Letter to Griffin Turton 27th of April 2008

Letter to Griffin Turton 12th of September 2008