

THOUGHTS ON "D" DAY - 6TH JUNE 1944

FACT NOT FICTION, I HOPE!!

By James H. Speed

Some Background

Naval Commandos were a section of Naval Special Units. We wore the standard army uniform with an R.N. COMMANDO flash on each shoulder and naval hats with white tops. The Commando when formed consisted of three sections. Each section had two junior officers and a Lieutenant. I was the youngest and therefore the most junior officer in the Commando unit. I was 19 and 6 months when we landed at Normandy.

The three sections each trained separately until December 1943, then we came together and were joined up with our assault group. (We were then based at Strathpeffer in the Highlands of Scotland and it was here I had my 19th birthday.) The largest part of the assault group was made up of the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry. Having now formed as a Commando unit, we were appointed a CO. – Lt. Comd. Joe Darcy, an old married man of 31. Joe brought with him another young officer as his assistant. Now we were fully formed we were designated as "Roger", or "R" Commando and wore a Red Lanyard.

Each section of the Commando had two Petty Officers (Sargents), two Leading Seamen (Corporals), and 16 men. Therefore a complete Commando had 71 personnel, all officially volunteers. Almost all of the sailors in my section were recruited from the naval prisons. They were the only sailors who would volunteer, because if they did, they had their sentences squashed. I was 18 ½ when I joined the Commando, a very nice and innocent young man. I was definitely the sheep thrown in amongst the wolves. Somehow I gained there respect and ended up leading them. We now also wore on our uniforms a Combined Operations badge on each shoulder, a Division sign (we were in the 4th Division), a Red Lanyard, and I had Midshipman flashes on each collar and Black blank Epaulets on the shoulders. Whilst under training we wore white belts and anklets (obviously not whilst operational). We really did look like the "Dogs' Dinner"!

We were allocated double rations of food; because of the type of energetic work we were doing, and double pay to cover the risk factor. This didn't make much difference to me, as a Mid. pay was not very much, but there was nowhere to spend it anyway – except on your Mess Bill.

Naval Commandos were expected to work between the sea and the land. We all had to be strong swimmers and very used to being in the water with all our clothes on. We were to assist the army in getting ashore and then help the Landing Craft get off the beach when they had unloaded. I was chubby and not very athletic, but I was a very strong swimmer and had lots of endurance and determination. I quickly became a qualified Sniper and was very good with explosives.

"D" Day

We now know that D Day was due to be the 5th June 1944, however, due to the unseasonable weather we were experiencing at the time, it was delayed by one day. The strong gale force winds and heavy continuous rain were not good for either small flat-bottomed landing craft, Paratroopers or Gliders. It was believed that 6th June would have a short spell of fairer weather. The rain actually did stop and the wind dropped a bit, however it was still fairly high and a considerable risk. They took a gamble and won.

(Red Beach.)

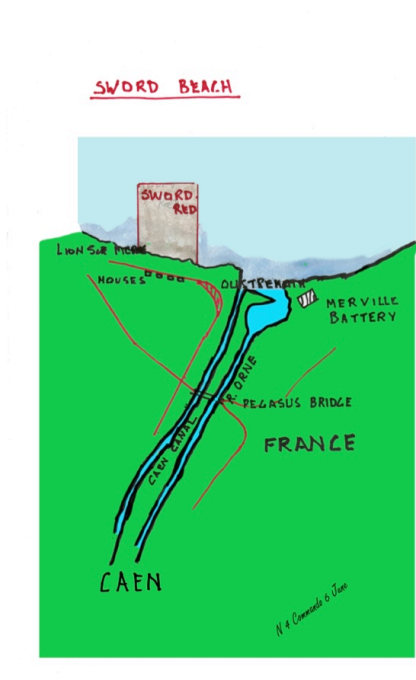
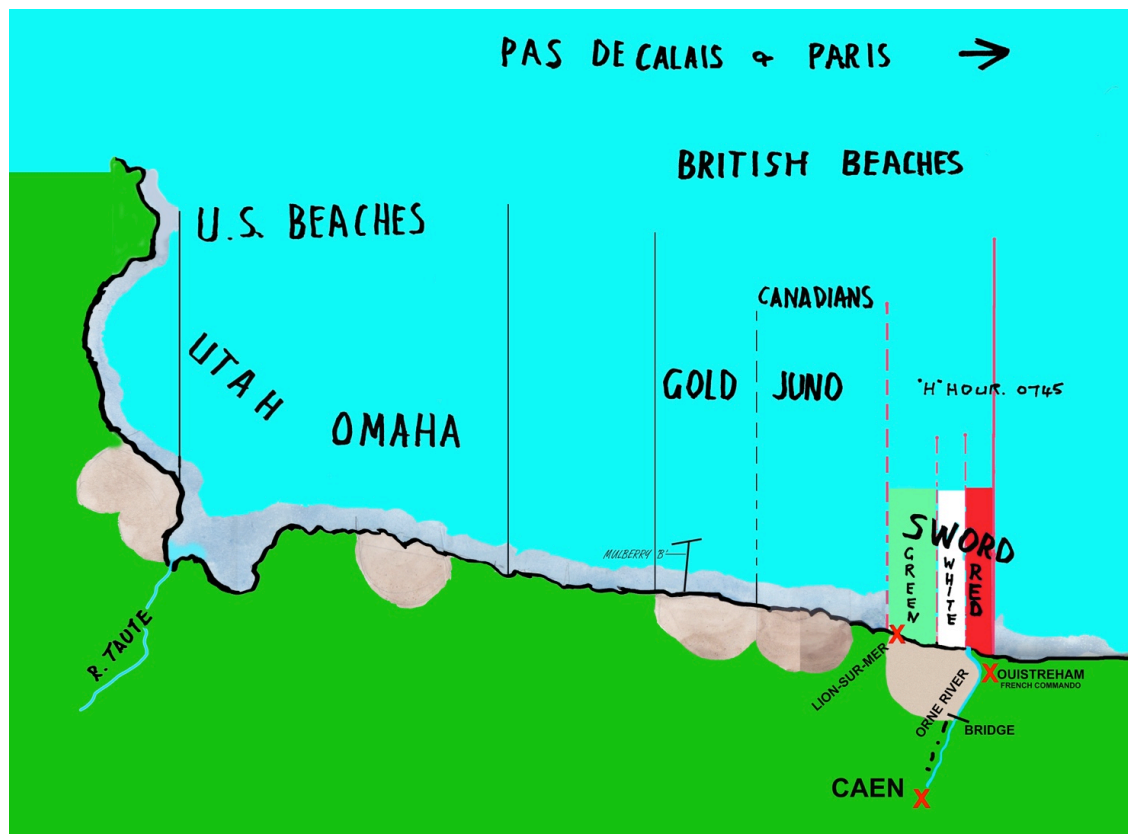
They knew that there would be many obstacles on our beach, which was "Sword". Most, if not all would be under water to enable them to "hole" or blow up the landing craft before they reached the beach. It was planned that groups of Frogmen would go in before the assault, blow up some of the under water obstacles and make a safe lane for the landing assault craft. To enable the coxswains of the landing craft to know where the Safe Lane was (as it was all under water), they decided to send four young men in with the Frogmen. The two officers and two sailors would continue on to the beach. There, they were to set up signs to show where the Frogmen were working. It was a wonderful idea, undoubtedly thought up by some bright Think Tank person safe behind a desk. Those who actually managed to erect their signs had them shot down in the first minutes and to make it worse, the first wave of landing craft came in too soon and sailed right over the top of the Frogmen, none of who survived on our beach.

The Main Event

As you read this, you must remember that it is now 2004. 60 years have past and so has some of the memory.

To go back a bit, on Christmas 1943 we were at Strathpeffer in Scotland and had finally formed as a Commando. On my 19th birthday, I was issued with a driving licence. Around April 1944 we moved to Whitby on the east coast of England. We were slowly starting to filter south. We stayed at Whitby for about a month. Then in slow stages we moved to Cowplain Woods, which is just over the Portsdown Hills and about 10 miles from Portsmouth. There we were locked up in a Top Secret Zone and had our first briefings. It was there we were also told what our chances of survival were, "not good". We were also told what we were going to do, but we weren't told where. I was told here that I was designated to be one of the officers going in with the Frogmen, to land on the beach before "H" hour. (This was to set up the signs as previously mentioned).

About D-6, or 1st June, my young sailor and I left the rest of the Commando and joined with another officer and sailor from "F" Commando. (I can't remember my sailor's name - he was called my Bodyguard.) The four of us were going to be the "Marking Team" for Sword Beach - Red. We had now moved to a holding camp on the other side of Portsdown Hills and could look down on the city of Portsmouth. (It was almost a new town to me, but later in my life I lived there and went to University there for one year.)



This camp was where they were collecting all those who would be involved in the initial assault, and here we met the Frogman with whom we would be working. While we were there I remember we had a Church Service. It was out in the open, and it was undoubtedly raining, but I think almost everyone attended.

About D-3 or 3rd June, we moved into Portsmouth and were enclosed in Southsea Barracks. (This is in Old Portsmouth and the centre of much Naval history. Later in my life I spent a lot of time in these barracks). The barracks are virtually right on the seashore. Again, we were not allowed out, so we couldn't see anything. I remember thinking at the time that here we are in a large naval barracks, with only 15 naval personnel and hundreds of army. I was undoubtedly the youngest serviceman there, but I don't remember feeling anything but excitement.

On the morning of the 5th of June, D-1, we were marched under guard along the South Parade to the pier. We were wearing special waist coats with the small pack and ammunition pouches all built in. I remember it had a small area in the small of the back for your socks and underwear. We also carried all our other equipment which was quite a lot. My assistant and I each had a coil of quite thick rope around our waists. We also carried our arms, in my case this wasn't much, just a revolver and some hand grenades. My bodyguard had his rifle and ammunition as well. From the pier I could clearly see the Isle of White, which I had visited during my holidays on quite a few occasions. We could also see rows of landing craft that were loaded and ready to go.

On the pier we boarded our landing craft, which was an LCH. This was an LCI which had been converted to a Headquarter Ship for the assault on Sword beach. LCI's were about 160ft long, and normally carried about 200 soldiers. It had a proper pointed bow, from which they lowered two small ramps, so the soldiers could disembark from the ship. It was however, still a utility landing craft with little in the way of comforts and was flat bottomed so it rolled all the way to France. This LCH also towed a small LCP that was for the use of the Frogmen and us in the assault. An LCP was about 30ft long, looked something like a conventional boat and had a canvas hood. The coxswain sat inside. It was quite fast, and flat-bottomed as all landing craft were. As the Frogman and we were just passengers on the LCH, accommodation for us was virtually non-existent, we were allocated the Tiller Flat. This was where the rudder machinery was. It was hot and smelt strongly of oil, a smell I have never liked since. When all the VIPs were on board we slipped and started on our great adventure. We couldn't help thinking that we had just boarded and then sailed straight away, whereas all around us were the hundreds of landing craft, which had had their soldiers on board for a week or more in some cases. We were fortunate in that after sailing most of the officers were fed (not us) and then they moved out of the wardroom and the First Lieutenant offered us its use.

On sailing the weather wasn't so good for a flat-bottomed craft to cross the English Channel. As I recorded earlier, the weather was so bad that they nearly called the whole landing off again due to bad conditions. We sailed in columns of ships. We were leading our column. We could see way out in front the Mine Sweepers doing their job. We now know that Gun Boats and fast Torpedo Boats were in front of them, and Destroyers and Cruisers were on both sides, but we didn't see them.

I remember that evening, the 5th June very well. It was windy and I thought rather rough, but I expect that later on in my life I would have considered it a light chop. But the sky was clear and I remember we were in double summer time, it didn't get dark until about 2300 (11pm). Also we were just about at the full moon. It has always been amazing to me that the enemy didn't see the flights and flights of bombers going over, and as we got closer to the beach we could see the effects of the bombs dropping. Then sometime after midnight we saw the gliders going over. We had been briefed as to what they were going to do. They were to hold the bridge over the Orn River (now known as Pegasus Bridge). This was of course to protect our flank against the expected German counter attack. This was important to us as we were the first beach they would get to.

Sometime during the night the staff officers decided to go closer to the beach to make sure we were in the right place. I now understand that there was actually a midget submarine there as a Path Finder. I can understand them wanting to make sure we were in the right place, as one of the American beaches was landed on a mile and a half out of where they should have been. On our beach however, they hadn't considered how far the tide went out, so we went aground. We didn't stick on the sand for long, although we were all called to stand on the stern to lift the bow. We made quite a noise getting off, but still they didn't spot us. They must have been asleep. (It is now known that they didn't expect us to land where we did and due to the bad weather, didn't expect us to come at all. Maybe they were all asleep after all.)

When the dawn came up, I expected us to be almost on our own, out in front. No way, there were landing craft and ships everywhere. The first to pass us in line were the Landing Craft Rockets. These were converted Landing Craft Tanks (LCTs). Instead of tanks, their holds were full of row upon row of small rockets. These were supposed to blast the land mines, the barbed wire on the shore and any other obstacles in the area. Also of course it made the enemy keep their heads down. Then there were the LSTs carrying the "floating tanks". These were normal sized tanks with what appeared to be a flimsy canvas screen around the upper part that they could erect when they wanted to enter the water. I had seen them in the water before and they always looked as if they were about to sink at any moment, especially when they were leaving the landing craft. They had very little freeboard, and in clam weather it didn't look enough, but when there was a lop on, as now, they looked positively disastrous. I understand that very few reached the beach.

Also around us were the LCAs, these were the small assault craft that were to carry the troops to the beach. They were about 30ft long, low in the water and were driven by two very powerful engines. The coxswain was right up in the bow so that he could see where he was going and how the troops were disembarking. There was a very small ramp door, through which only one person could go at a time. This of course was very dangerous for the troops, but convenient for the defenders (enemy). We were taught to jump up and go over the side. But then the idea of landing in deep water didn't bother us as it did the average soldier. They also had an anchor on a long line astern to help in pulling off the beach. In fact all landing craft had them.

Whilst we are talking about the goings on before the landing, we mustn't forget the enemy's guns. They had very heavy long-range machine guns, which could and did a lot of damage to the smaller craft. They also had a battery of heavy guns on a high point just the other side of the river Orn, and in this early period they were causing a lot of havoc. Sometime during the morning they were nearly all knocked out by ships and aircraft fire. All but one, a howitzer (a short squat gun mounted on a tank chassis) that lived in a cave in the lower part of the cliff at ground level. It would come out onto the sand and blast away a few shells before a ship came in and chased it away back into its cave. No matter how they tried, they never hit it and even on the last day (a month later), it was still blasting away.

Well the moment had arrived for us to embark on our little LCP, with all our equipment and head for the beach. As well as the equipment described earlier, we also had our sign which was about 9ft long, and the necessary guys and stakes to hold it up, and most importantly, an entrenching tool. Whilst we were making our move, and a LST loaded with floating tanks that was close along side us, had its door hit by a small shell. This meant that it couldn't carry on unloading its tanks. So it headed for the beach. On the way it hit one of the mines on poles, which blew a hole in the engine room. Somehow it managed to make the beach and unload the remainder of its tanks, but it never got off the beach again. (I mentioned this incident, as it was very important to us later.)

Having loaded up we started on our way to the beach. Fairly close to the beach we had to stop to unload the Frogman). I don't think the enemy thought we were big enough to worry about as they left us alone. Then we proceeded. For a year or so I had been preparing for this moment. I had always jumped off the landing craft into water, sometimes quite deep. Today, the BIG DAY, I jumped onto dry sand. The coxswain had brought us in very close to the beached LCT, on the side away from a nearby Pill Box. Then having pushed the LCP off, we ran around the bow of the LCT and close by was a Tank that had been knocked out. Using this as further cover, we then ran a short distance and dived under a small hump of sand at the high tide level (otherwise it was a dead flat beach). There with the aid of our entrenching tools, we dug a quick trench, which was just deep enough to hide us a little. But we didn't have long to mess about because we had to get the signs up to show where the Frogmen were working. My sign was the vertical one. I am not sure how tall it was, I have said about 9ft, but it had to be high enough to be seen from the sea. It didn't make much difference because as it was raised, it was almost immediately machine-gunned down. We repaired it as best we could, but it was shot down again as soon as we put it back up. Unfortunately, my assistant was shot as well. He was the first dead person I think I had seen. It was quite an unpleasant shock however; I didn't have much time to think about it as the first wave of Landing Craft was approaching the beach. They were early and had gone right over the Frogmen (as mentioned, none of whom survived on our beach).

We were now expected to go down and assist the landing craft staying "bows on" to the beach, then when they were unloading, to help them to get off. (But I can say that I sat on the sand and watched the first wave of the landing come in to the beach.) This job of helping the landing craft on and off the beach was one of the principle tasks for which we had been trained. The slightly crosswind and the waves made it impossible for the coxswain to keep his craft bows to

the beach, and this made it very awkward for the troops to disembark in a hurry, which they wanted to do. The craft's stern anchor was supposed to help this, but as the stern lifted in the waves the anchor dragged. So we passed strong rope lines to the craft, and they were slipped over the stern bollard. By pulling at an angle we were able to help keep the craft straight. These lines we had also carried to the beach wrapped around our waists. This was hard work at any time, but as there were only three of us to start with, it was quite an effort. Also to add to the troubles, we were being quite heavily shelled and machine-gunned. It was all quite unpleasant. The soldiers of course couldn't help as they had their job to do fighting the enemy. Predominantly the machine-guns were aimed at them and not at us.

Eventually the remainder of the Commando arrived in a Duck – floating lorry. I don't know how long after "H" hour it was, but I don't think it would have been very long as they were supposed to be taking charge of the landing craft arrivals and of course helping with the on and off the beach situation. My CO was quite surprised to see me fit and well. I think he was even happy about it. *Not so at first with the Beach Master on the beach*

By now the tide was going out and the under water obstacles were starting to appear. There were mines attached to long poles, similar to telegraph poles at a 45-degree angle. They were to hit the bottom of the landing craft and sink it before it could reach the beach - many did. Then there were the standard steel structures, huge tripods of railway line steel, which could jam into the bottom of the craft. Closer to the shoreline, there were smaller steel structures right along the beach. But by far the worst, were the three rows of barbed wire that were under the water to catch the soldiers themselves when they waded ashore. When they came to light, they were covered with dead bodies. It was an awful sight. One of the things that we couldn't help wondering, was how we had managed to sail through all that lot without touching anything. It was probably because the coxswain of our LCP had followed in the wake of the damaged LCT, and it had dealt with the obstacles for us.

From my memories of that first day, when we weren't helping landing craft, I at least was involved in helping the removal of the obstacles and marking where the sunken landing craft were. Some of the Commando, including the CO, carried out Beach Master Duties but I didn't. As mentioned, the low tide uncovered the sunken landing craft, tanks and other vehicles that hadn't made it. In one case there were two LCM's, one on top of the other. It was really rather depressing to see all these sunk craft spread out on the beach. For us it meant quite a lot of hard and dangerous work. Not only did we help remove some of them, but we had to mark them with buoys and lights to warn the craft still coming in, especially during the nights. This task we had to do most of the nights we were on the beach.

After the initial assault, the LCA's were fazed out. A great number of them had been sunk or damaged. Bigger LCVP's and LCM's replaced them. LCVP's were a much more solid vessel. Whilst still relatively small, they could carry a small vehicle like a jeep. They could also carry quite a large number of troops and had a reasonable sized ramp door, which was big enough for the vehicle to drive over. The LCM's were bigger still. They could carry a lorry or something similar in size and also carry a larger number of troops. In both of these craft the coxswain stood up in the stern and didn't have much protection. Their ramp door caused a lot of trouble for the disembarking troops. They were heavy (necessary to take a lorry) and at the outboard

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942 -1945



The photograph above and the two photographs on the next page belonged to Arthur Frederick Bennett of R1 section of Roger RN Beach Commando and are reproduced here with the permission of his son Trevor.

The photograph above shows Commandos of 1st Special Service Brigade approach Queen Red beach, Sword area, c. 0840 hours, 6 June 1944. Sherman DD tanks of 13th/18th Royal Hussars and the specialised armour of 79th Armoured Division can be seen crowding together on the beach ahead. (The IWM have this pictured catalogued as IWM B 5102)

The top picture on the next page shows troops wading ashore from an LCI(L) on Queen beach, Sword area, 6 June 1944. (The IWM have this pictured catalogued as IWM B 5092)

The picture below on the next page appears to be elements of the British 1st Special Service (Commando) Brigade moving inland.

[Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942 -1945](#)



end they had a grating. This caught in the feet of the troops leaving. Also as it was moving up and down in the waves, it trapped many men underneath. We also had to help these craft in and out, and they were big and heavy.

I would like to describe the beach area where we had landed. As we approached, we could see it was a very pleasant sandy beach, curving away to the left towards the river Orn. As you came off the beach, there was a line of nice but not very high sand dunes. Not far behind the dunes was a row of fairly modern two story brick houses. We discovered that this area had been a very superior holiday place for the wealthy of the City of Caen (about 12 miles inland on the river Orn). This was the main objective of the troops who landed on Sword Beach. In the four years that the Germans had to prepare for this invasion, they had carried out a great deal of work. In the nice looking sand dunes, was a very well constructed line of deep trenches. They were about 10ft deep. The top half was well packed with dirt and turf, with a slight slope outwards and the bottom half was concrete and wide enough for ammunition trolleys to travel down. At intervals, completely hidden in the sand, were PILL BOXES, similar to the one just behind us where we landed. I believe ours had a small anti-tank gun. The upper stories of the houses were converted into machine gun positions and were safe places for the numerous snipers.

On the beach itself, above the high water line, they had spread their special barbed wire entanglements. These were not coiled wire like ours. They had constructed a ribbon of interlaced wire, about 1 ft. to 18 inches above the ground. It held onto thousands of strong wooden or metal posts. It was intertwined in such a way that you couldn't step through it and it was about 20 ft. wide. It went the total length of the beach. To add to this problem, there was another ribbon ~~to~~^{of} the stuff, exactly the same, 20 ft. shorewards. There was the occasional gap, but these were well mined. Fortunately, the Rocket LCT's and gunfire had removed a lot of it before we landed. Field Marshal Rommel had set up the German opposition in this area, and his intention was that the invading force would not get off the beach to progress inland. They really had worked very hard at it, and almost succeeded in one of the American areas.

I think it was by the end of the first day they had brought in a line of old ships (naval and merchant naval), which they had sunk out at sea to act as a breakwater. They were about a mile off shore and I think the larger ones were used as rest places for the landing craft and transport barge crews.

That first night, and the two after, we had to man the perimeter trenches in readiness for the expected counter attack. There was still a lot of the enemy not far away. This was my first experience of being in a trench, with a gun in my hand, waiting for the enemy to attack. It was very dark, I was expected to act as an Officer taking charge and I was very tired. I personally hadn't had any sleep for about three days and the excitement was making me feel even more tired. The Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, which was the main part of our beach group, quickly set up a kitchen, so when the opportunity was granted we could at least eat and drink fresh water.

On "D" Day, the French Commando crossed our beach. They were heading to capture the town of Ouistreham. To get there they had to cross a boggy area just behind the houses. The Germans, with their usual efficiency, had cut lines in the reeds, and moved in machine guns to

shoot them down. The French were caught in a terrible cross-fire. We heard they were all killed, but I have since read that they did capture the town. We had a French Naval liaison officer. He was very young, almost as young as me, and I got to know him very well. When I asked him about the French Commando and if he knew any of them, his reply was that he knew them all, as his father was their Colonel. His father died crossing the bog. He was a very tough young man.

On Day two, I am not sure what especially took place. I know we did have to participate in a patrol along the beach towards the river, to see if we could extend the beach. There was a Major in charge of the patrol. After a while he decided to have a look over the sand dune to see what the land was like. He saw a lot of boggy area, but also saw chaps in funny helmets with their guns pointing in the wrong direction (away from the beach). We dropped back and hurried for home.

Also during day two, all the barbed wire was removed, with the aid of tanks and schemal repair vehicles. We were getting a lot of stores in now as well. Some of the stores came ashore on flat barges, made of square tanks bolted together. They were driven by two big outboard motors, and they could carry two or three lorries as well as lots of stores. The stores were mainly the responsibility of the beach group. Sometime in the late afternoon, we were asked to assist in removing the snipers from the houses. They were causing quite a lot of damage. We had received extensive instructions in this activity. They were always in the upper floor or roof. You had to go into the lower floor and spray the ceiling above with machine gun fire, then climb the stairs and toss in a hand grenade or two. The trouble was of course, you weren't sure whether you had killed or even wounded the sniper. He might not have been where you were shooting, or more likely, the floor was reinforced. However, we did the job without too much trouble and I ended up with two beautiful .22 rifles with telescopic sights. Unfortunately I had to leave them behind.

I think it was on day three that they decided they needed a lot more troops for the fight against Caen. Things in that direction weren't going too well. Not that on the beach we knew much of what was going on in our war. Our only information on the progress we read in English newspapers handed over from the returning landing craft. Anyway, as I said, they decided to bring in a lot more troops quickly. This meant we had waves of LCI's coming onto our beach. I have mentioned LCI's before; they carried about 200 troops each. They were flat bottomed so they could get well up the beach, and they dropped two ramps down, one on each side of the bow. In theory the soldiers came down these steep narrow ramps and into waist high water. Unfortunately we had things called RUNNELS OF SAND, on the beach. These were little hills of sand built up by the movement of the water, caused by the waves and tides. It meant that the landing craft rode up on these, and the water on the shore side of the runnel was usually quite deep – certainly over 6 ft. When the soldiers came to the end of the ramp, instead of waist high water, they were in over their heads. These soldiers had been told they were assault troops and they were expecting enemy opposition. They were uptight to start with. On top of that, they were carrying a heavy pack, ammunition and a blown up life belt around their waists. As soon as they hit the deep water, many of them turned upside down. That was bad enough however, a lot of them couldn't swim and were afraid of the water. This was what we were there for. We went out and attached lines to the bottom of the ramps for the men to hold onto, until they

reached the shallow water, which wasn't far. Those that did turn upside down, you had to remove their rifles and their packs (sometimes cutting them off), then get the chap the right way up before he drowned. That quite often wasn't easy, the non-swimmers often struggled and fought and had to be dragged almost up to dry land. For us it meant working in quite deep water for long periods of time and there weren't many of us. There were only 24 sailors in the section, who had to have relief periods. We were also under almost continuous shellfire from our favourite gun. Our men got tired and afraid. We lost some men through them being wounded or killed. It became harder and harder to muster a full team each time a wave of craft came in. It went on for three full days and nights. As officers, we had no sleep and little food. I, a 19 year old, was issued with a box containing 100 Benzedrine pills; these were to keep us awake. Occasionally some of the officers began to drop out when the men did, owing to tiredness and fear. It made it very hard work for those left. There were only three officers in the section to start with. When it was all over, our section was beginning to dwindle, but I can't say how many had died.

It is hard to remember what we did during the remainder of the three weeks, so I will just remember some of the things we did. Firstly, after about a week, we began to relax a bit and catch up on sleep. By now it was not expected that the Germans would seriously counter attack and send us back into the sea. The local natives, knowing that their friends the Germans had gone, were looking for new friends. The Germans had treated the locals fairly well. They were mainly small farmers and the Germans had needed food and had been prepared to pay for it. After the first few months of occupation, they had weeded out the Jews and local troublemakers. The Germans used quite a lot of forced labour to start with to build the defences, but after that they got along quite well. The local hostelry flourished and the brothel did extremely well. The locals frowned on any kind of Resistance Movement in the area, as this could only upset their profitable existence. They were very upset when we arrived and drove our tanks through their cornfields, and killed some of the cattle. But when it became fairly obvious that we were there to stay, loyalties changed quickly. We could now visit the local towns. I know their names but I am not sure which one we went to especially. The nearest was Ouistreham and Lion-sur-mer was not far away. We visited the Mayor of one of them, in his home, on at least a couple of occasions. He had a very large family, all of which smoked our cigarettes. They drank Vichy water, which was lightly alcoholic due to the local water being unfit for consumption. All our water was delivered to us in Jerry Cans. Being a relatively shy person, I didn't visit on my own, but went with the other officers. My friend Don Blackmore was much more of a people person however, I could speak a little French and our Liaison Officer usually came with us. I don't think the local shops had much to sell by the time we got there. I used to borrow a vehicle and travel into the local countryside to see what I could find. Usually this was eggs and Camembert Cheese.

I also did a visit to the local Naval HQ, which was now situated in the old German Gestapo HQ. It was just like something out of the movies. A huge high building, which you entered by mounting a set of long stairs. Then through two massive doors with the German insignia on them. Then into a very long high room, with what looked like a marble floor and right down at the far end was one desk. It must have frightened the life out of any poor local that had to visit there. I have just remembered what I was sent there for. I wanted to see the cellars. Gestapo cellars are famous for all the horror that went on in them, so naturally I wanted to have a look.

Well there were no signs of horror. It was all clean and tidy and the cellars were being used for what cellars should be used for. They were full of booze. I had been sent to collect some for the CO.

My travelling around the countryside had another turn; my Petty Officer was taken prisoner by the Germans whilst on yet another patrol. So I borrowed a motorcycle and went looking for him. I considered that as he wasn't in the scheme of things a Very Important Person, and taking into account the current conditions, they wouldn't have had time to take him far. Remember the uniform that I wore wasn't very different from some worn by the Germans. This area was a kind of no-man's land. Our troops had quickly passed through it, but there were lots of German troops still around. I found him held in a Pill Box. I dealt with the two sentries and brought him and another officer back on the motorcycle. My CO was not impressed by what he considered my stupid action, but by now I had begun to get the name of being that Mad Speed, instead of Jim Speed. Earlier on some local VIPs visited us. One of them was an attractive woman, at least in the eyes of my CO and he escorted her all around the place. Our young French Liaison Officer wasn't impressed at all with her. At the time we thought it was because she treated him as a rather young boy however, he eventually reported her to the local security people and she was found to be an enemy agent. We lived in the sand. At first we only had to just dig a trench. But after a while we paired off and started to make something more permanent and water proof, as it rained a lot).

Also if possible, we made it shrapnel proof. Don Blackmore and I dug a big hole; the sides were lined with ammo boxes and compo boxes. On the roof we had the poles that had held the mines, and we covered them with Summerfield Tracking that had been used during the assault. It covered the bare wire and helped vehicles driving on the soft sand.

Over the tracking we put lots of sand. This became our home for about two weeks. We washed in the sea using special salt-water soap and I think we heated fresh water for shaving.

The CO insisted that the Officers looked after their appearance. I don't remember what we did about washing our clothes, but we must have done something. I only had a couple of pairs of pairs, socks and shirts and we were there for a month.

The Beach Group staff provided food. They used the Comp rations for the basic meals and anything we could find was added. These compo rations were delivered in cardboard boxes with wooden frames. They contained enough food for a whole day for 8 men or one man for 8 days. They contained everything that was needed: biscuits, tinned butter, jam, toilet paper, the hard brown type to minimise usage, cigarettes, sweets and a varied assortment from meat and veg to corned beef for lunch. There was also a typically English sweet like Duff or Rice Pudding. The Americans also put out compo rations, but theirs were much better than the English rations. They had things like; tins of peaches, soft toilet paper, chocolate, fruit drinks and lots of coffee. Everything in the compo rations came in tins except the toilet paper. The American rations were obviously in greater demand. The cooks had a machine that could grind the biscuits to make flour and a cookbook to tell them what to do with it. They ended up making good bread and rolls, which were a lot better than the biscuits. The food that the field

kitchen turned out looked and was quite appetising, and was served on a plate. We could only get to the Officer's Mess occasionally, but it was much enjoyed when we did.

As I have said, the American rations were in much greater demand than the plainer English ones. Therefore, stealing them became quite a business. Some also started stealing petrol and selling it to the locals. It became such a problem that signs were put up warning that anyone caught stealing or looting would be shot. Eventually two were caught. They were tried on the spot and we had to send representatives to witness their execution. Fortunately, I was not one of them. But the looting quickly stopped. The compo rations, or "K" rations were often damaged in transit or whilst being unloaded. The damaged ones became the perks of the beach group, of which the Commando was a part. In this case, a very important part as we were right there at the waters edge where they were unloaded and usually helped with the unloading.

The local water was undrinkable, even the locals didn't drink it. All our water came ashore in Jerry Cans and was rationed. A Jerry Can held about 10 gallons. After a few days when the LCT's started to return with a second load, we managed to scrounge real bread, milk and newspapers. This is how we found out how the war we were involved in was progressing.

So life went on: we helped the landing craft on and off the beach and helped unload the cargos. The supplies once landed became the responsibility of the beach group. They built small mountains of ammo., petrol, medical supplies, clothing, food and water just beyond the sand dunes. In fact everything that was needed to fight a war was neatly stacked in this huge supply depot. We also had to mark all the wrecks that remained and see that they had identifying lights on at night and we had to run night patrols to see that all kept running smoothly.

HIC-JP

Every now and again, there was a 'hi up' on the beach to make life more interesting. One day, 6 big LST's came in. These were landing SHIP tanks. They were quite big ships that could come onto the beach, open their doors and lower their big ramp, so that trucks and tanks could drive off. They could also carry hundreds of troops, for which there were shipside tier bunks. (We returned to the UK in one). They were American and we thought they had come to the wrong beach. This would have been about two weeks after 'D' Day. They had actually come to assault the coast. They came ashore with their guns blazing, and the ships' and tanks' guns firing as well. It was really quite dangerous. After waving a big white flag, we managed to convince them that the front line was about 10 miles inland. They were quite amazed. The ships of course became stuck on the beach and had to wait for the tide to come in before they could get off. Not surprisingly, out came our gun. Five shots, the usual, and they all hit the ships. You have never seen crews leave ships so quickly. To be fair, not all the crews left. Almost immediately there were two or three crewmen over the side on stages welding the holes. Fortunately our gun wasn't very big.

Well now I had better tell about our big action that took place. One thing that I haven't mentioned is enemy aircraft, because after the first day we didn't see any. Therefore, on about D plus 21, or the 27th/28th June, we were rather surprised when the Air Raid Siren went off. It had sounded occasionally before, but that was usually when some American A.C. flew over. (One day they shot one down, I don't think we had any more after that.) Anyway, this was a German and it carried a bomb. All the guns blazed away and they hit it. Down it came and on

the way down it dropped its bomb. The bomb landed in the great pile of ammo., and the aircraft landed in the pile of petrol cans. There was an enormous explosion. All our supplies had vanished in a minute and we were the supply area for the push to capture Caen.

There are some things that you can't do without if you are fighting a war: Ammo for the guns, petrol for the vehicles and tanks, and water. Food you can go without for quite a long time, but water you can't. What were we to do? Petrol wasn't a great worry because PLUTO was due ashore on the next beach in a couple of days. Pluto was a large pipeline, laid out on big cotton reels covering the 120 miles from the UK to us. When it came in, it was connected to an already constructed point, and within four hours they were pumping petrol. Until that time, we could live off the next beach's supplies. Barges loaded with Jerry Cans of water cruised along the beach and tossed them over the side. We had to go out and collect them and stack them on the beach for transportation. Ammunition however was a real problem. We needed it now. They came up with the emergency idea of beaching a small ship full of all types of ammo., including bombs for aircraft. Once stuck on the beach, DUCKS (floating lorries), could go alongside and be loaded directly. Then when the tide went out, lorries would be able to go alongside as well.

In she came. She actually was what was known as a Scottish Coaster. (These craft went around Scotland and ran up the highland lochs, then beached to take on cattle and unload local supplies.) As soon as she was stuck on the sand, the Ducks went out with the Stevedores to commence unloading. All went well for about half an hour, but they had forgotten about our gun. Wham, Wham, and four shells hit the ship. To our surprise it didn't just blow up, (possibly because the shells were too small) but it did set the boxes of small ammo. on the upper deck alight. It began to look like Fireworks Day. The fireworks however were red-hot pieces of bullets. The fire got a strong hold and the cases of shells for the bigger guns began to blow up. The stevedores that could swim jumped over the side and we brought them in. But the non-swimmers were forced to the stern and eventually the few that were left lowered themselves onto the propeller and rudder. Another officer (Lt. Bendel) and I tried to make our way out to them with a line, but we were forced back by the intensity of the continuous explosions. Lt. Bendel gave up and left but another officer arrived. I think he was CO of the next Commando (f) Lt. Cmdr. Guritz (later he was badly wounded, but he ended up an Admiral with a DSC and bar). He suggested that we tried using an amphibious jeep to reach them. (I describe these vehicles at the end.) I knew where there was one, so I collected it. We drove out in a big curve around to the stern. It was very hair raising going through the exploding ammo., but we made it and collected one or two. I really can't remember how many, but by then it would have been only one or two that were left, and the craft wouldn't have carried many more anyway. We did however get back to the beach and somebody had sent an ambulance to collect the wounded. A major met the Lt. Cmdr., and me, there seemed to be nobody else around. We were taken up to a big Pill Box overlooking the ship and introduced to a General. I don't know his name, but he was in charge of the whole area, with him was a Vice Admiral. They congratulated us on our brave try and having given a few particulars to the Major, we went on our way. When we got back to our area, there was nobody there. They had decided that when the fire reached the bombs in the hold, it would all blow up and flatten everything and everybody in the area, so they had all been evacuated. It was very lonely as I couldn't see anybody at all, and certainly not the one who was supposed to be looking after my jacket and watch. It was late and getting dark. I also realised that I was tired, so I thought I might as well go to my trench for a sleep. It

was the safest place I could think of if there was going to be an explosion. So I did, and I awoke the next morning without any great bang. It appeared that the tide came in and flooded the hold through the shell holes putting out the fire. The ship however, was still a total burnt out wreck. Just above my head where I had been sleeping, were my swimming glasses and they had a piece of shrapnel through one of the glasses. When we looked around, we found quite a few pieces of metal around our trench. Eventually the CO arrived on the scene. He had come to see if I was alive and look over the situation. He told me the Commando had been evacuated to a Rest Camp that was being built about three miles inland. We were to wait there whilst they decided what was to happen to the beach.

So I took a few personal things with me and ended up at the rest camp. As I have said, it was still being built. The accommodation was Bell Tents, which were tall conical tents, supposed to sleep 12 officers. I don't know how many sailors were squeezed into there, but the officers with very little baggage were cramped. Because of the possibility of shelling and maybe bombs, they had dug a trench inside the tent down about three feet and the centre pole was supported in a column of dirt. This wouldn't have been too bad, except the ground here was clay and we had a lot of rain. We had about a foot of water to bail out before we could get in. Many others and I decided to sleep outside the tent on the open ground. After all, we had done it often enough whilst under training. The food in the camp however was good. Some bright spark then decided that somebody would have to go back to the beach and make it look like we were still using it. They thought that if we didn't the Germans might sneak across and attack the other beaches on the now unprotected flank. Volunteers were called for and not many leapt forward. The CO thought that as they had now been off the beach for three days, they were beginning to feel how lucky they were to be alive and if they went back they would once again be putting themselves in the line of fire. Needless to say, to the obvious relief of the others, I volunteered. When I did, my Petty Officer did and we got together eight other sailors. The CO said we would only be there two or three days and if it was to go on beyond that, he would send reliefs.

Back we went to the beach. There were some soldiers there and they had made vehicles to work. When they had evacuated the beach they were told to drop everything and run - -so they did. Therefore, many vehicles and cranes had been flooded when the tide came in. Some of these were now running. They had mocked up tanks and guns as well. By day soldiers were around, but by dark, everybody except us left the beach. During the night we were expected to rev the vehicles up, move some and show some lights etc. We also had to keep all the lights on the beach going, including those in the water marking the wrecks. Every hour during the night,

I had to send out patrols to check everything and to make sure that the opposition hadn't entered the area. The first night went well. I went around with each patrol to make sure that they knew what to do. I wasn't certain of what that truly was myself. During the day we slept, cooked up food and ate. I went and had a look at my old trench to make sure that everything was OK. During this time we were living in a very superior dugout that I think was built by the army engineers. The second night started well, but about midnight the shelling started again. I sent the PO and one out to check that all was well. Then the shelling really intensified, they obviously had more

than one gun now. My Petty Officer didn't come back when I expected him and I started to get worried. Eventually I reported to the operation centre that the shelling was heavy and I thought that we could expect an attack. But where was my PO? He was my friend by now we had been through a lot together. I went out to look for him. The shelling was very heavy and I couldn't find them. One shell landed so close that I was tossed up in the air and landed on my chest very heavily. Fortunately it was soft sand, so the shell went into the sand and most of the explosive part went upwards. I wasn't hit by any shrapnel, but I did crack two ribs. I kept looking and eventually found my two lost people sheltering in one of the German deep trenches. The problem was that it was too deep to climb out of, so I pulled them out despite my painful ribs.

The next day an army detachment arrived to defend the flank. We were taken back to the camp and told that they had decided to close the beach for a while. We were to be sent back to the UK until required. I had to visit the First Aid post to let them look at my ribs. All they did was strap me up with a large piece of plaster and I was expected to just get on with life. I did wonder what would happen when they pulled it off.

The next day we were loaded into lorries and transported to the Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches. There we boarded an LST and were transported to Portsmouth. It was a much more comfortable trip than the trip the other way. From Portsmouth we went by bus to Hayling Island, which was only about 14 miles from my home in Southampton. After about a week we were told that we would not be going back to our beach as they had decided to close it permanently. It meant that all our personal things were left behind. I did end up with a Bergen Rucksack, which was one of the first with a metal frame. I kept it for years. I also came back with an American 45 automatic pistol, which I had to turn in soon after the war. I couldn't really say that I would have had much use for it.

So ended the great adventure.

NOTES FOR NONO FAMILY READERS:-

AWARDED D.S.C 1944 FOR INVOLVEMENT IN NORMANDY LANDING 1944

DISCHARGED ~~RA~~ RNR 31. Dec 1946.

RE ENTERED RN. AS. AB JUNE 1954. COMMISSIONED SUB/LT. (SD.B) SEPT 1957.

TRANSFERRED TO RAN. MAY 1963. AS S/O. SD. DISCHARGED. CMR. D.S.C. PAN. 19.11.84. AGED 60.

Whoever reads this must remember that it is the story of Me. I was just one of the eleven officers in the Commando, the youngest and therefore the junior. The others also did the same jobs as did in most cases. Some lost their lives and some were wounded doing it. For some reason God spared me, but I was 19 and you don't expect to be killed at that age. It was all a great adventure.

Also, it was 60 years ago and I have tried for quite a lot of that time to forget some of it. I may have missed a bit here and there and even stretched some of it to fit the few remembered facts

For all that, it is as true as I could make it.

Royal Naval Beach Commandos 1942 -1945



Special thanks to Mr and Mrs J Speed for giving permission to publish Jim's 'Thoughts on D-Day 6th June 1944', associated maps and the photograph above of the officers of 'Roger' RN Beach Commando and also many thanks to Rick Smallman for acting as intermediary and obtaining said permission.

Finally thank you to Trevor Bennett for giving permission to use the photographs from Sword Beach, which belonged to his late Arthur Frederick Bennett, who was a member of R1 section of Roger RN Beach Commando.