

A lecture by Captain Ian Hamilton Bockett-Pugh, D.S.O.**, SOFC Sword beach.

"D" Day, 6th June 1944

When the full story is written, several volumes will be required. The whole conception of "D" Day embraces a complete study of combined operations in all its elaborate detail. I propose today to talk to you about the preparations and successful execution of that greatest ever combined operation which was fitly named "Overlord".

When I left Normandy on July 8th, I did not bring away a single record. My facts therefore may be inaccurate, but I hope that in the main, I shall be able to give you a fair idea of how the landings were planned and effected.

I shall talk but little about the RAF. Their part was of the utmost importance and commenced 6 months before "D" Day with systematic softening of the communication system of the enemy. This required most subtle planning lest our beaches should be disclosed to them; their tasks were performed magnificently.

I was recently talking about this subject to a very distinguished Merchant Service captain. When I mentioned "D" Day, he asked me to which "D" Day I was referring. He himself had taken part in as many as 5 "D" Days in the Mediterranean. Such previous experiences, including the raid on Dieppe, were of inestimable value to those who had to plan and carry out "Overlord".

When considering why invasion was not carried out earlier, it is well to remember that no one else had ever set out on so stupendous a task. Hitherto, other countries had been unable to invade Britain purely because they had not command of the sea. Military strength and superior air power were insufficient after Dunkirk. Similarly, superiority by any two of our three services would not have sufficed in June 1944. History will probably recall that the delay in carrying out the operation was purely due to lack of material by all our three services. Without the material with which to train, training could not be commenced on the thorough scale required. General Montgomery said in March 1944, invasion would not be started until he was satisfied that not a single item of equipment would be lacking.

Ever since the Dardanelles this problem of landing large numbers of military has been under constant review by the Navy, but I well remember achieving a certain notoriety at Malta in 1928 in a combined exercise because I not only managed to put ashore a Ford motorcar but did so without drowning it and it was able to proceed off the beach under its own steam.

During this war, the Combined Operations Headquarters has been set up to control the many outlying experimental stations where ideas were put into practice and it was as a result of these that the various types of craft were evolved and put into production. This production was in full swing long before the famous Teheran Conference which took place in the autumn of 1943. It was there that Joe Stalin bluntly asked our Prime Minister whether or not he seriously intended to open up a second front. The Prime Minister as bluntly replied, "Yes" and guaranteed to do it before the end of June 1944.

By this time, the Navy had already trained a vast number of junior officers and ratings to handle landing craft. We were therefore ready to commence the formation of the three assault forces which were designed to carry over to France one assault division each. These forces were called Force S, Force J and Force G and were destined to land in areas Sword, Juno and Gold respectively. Two American assault forces – O and U – were also employed.

In the main, all these forces were organised in the same manner and I therefore intend to concentrate on Force S in which I was the Training Commander and which was married to the Third British Infantry Division.

As early as October 1943 our Admiral and the Divisional General set up shop in Inverness, the remainder of the assault force and assault division being housed all around the Moray Firth.

Right early we were told to carry out our training on the assumption that the landings would take place about dawn on a rising tide and with a full moon. It may be as well to remind

you that at the time of a full moon, the spring tides occur. Such tides have a very high water and a very low water, which means that the strength of the tidal current and the rate of rise and fall are greater than at the Neaps¹. There is a certain disadvantage therein, but it is outweighed by the advantage of a moonlight night which makes the task of the Navy so much easier, by which I mean that ships can see each other and therefore can be sure of keeping station throughout the night.

In Inverness we carried out a variety of exercises from single vehicles embarking in and disembarking from landing craft on the beaches, to the embarkation of two whole brigades which were carried round the Moray Firth throughout the night and landed at Burgh Head Beach shortly after dawn. This beach and its gradient were as near as could be found to the beaches which we were to use on "D" Day. They were, however, more difficult because at high water the space between the water line and the cliffs was almost negligible and this caused much congestion and drowning of vehicles, whereas our "D" Day beach provided ample room for the parking of vehicles above high water level. My own job at the time was to arrange the weekly programmes in conjunction with my opposite number in the Army and my shadow appointment was that of Chief Principal Beachmaster, i.e. in command of all R.N. personnel on our own beaches. It was necessary for me to proceed to the beaches by land during these exercises so as to be right on the spot in order to take notes of mistakes and lessons learnt. However, when the big two-brigade exercises took place, I thought I had better play my proper part. It was January in Scotland. The exercise on the whole was a very fair success but when things began to quieten down after 18 hours on the job, that is to say at 0200, we sought our foxholes, and that night I thanked God that I was a sailor and determined to give up living in the discomfort of a foxhole at the very first opportunity.

At this time, another commander joined the forces and he had very great experience of beach work with the 8th Army in North Africa and I therefore persuaded the Admiral to give him this job of Chief Principal Beachmaster. He accordingly got the job and on "D" Day received a severe wound in the neck within the first half hour. I am glad to say that I later heard from him that he could swallow comfortably again and expected to be on the Japanese beaches before long.

About March 1944, the final planning was carried out, every man and every vehicle being allotted a special place in a special ship or craft. It was during this planning stage that we were told our actual destination. We were shown plans and maps and landscape models were made. The beaches selected had been chosen because of their apparent unsuitability and therefore it was to be expected that they would not be as strongly defended as the more suitable beaches. Our own beach was quite narrow, only about three quarters of a mile of firm sand with a quicksand on one side and rocks on the other. These quicksands were at the mouth of the river Orne. Our own General begged us not to land him on the eastern side of this river under any circumstances. He much preferred to take his chance on a rocky shore and he warned his brigade commanders to be prepared for such an event and to be "pleasurably surprised" if landed in the correct spot. This expression caused us much amusement and almost became a slogan. When the time came, I am glad to say we effected the landings absolutely where required. This was made possible by a great many technical devices, but even so, one peep is worth two finesses, and a midget submarine was therefore sent in to take up station by day and to act as a lighthouse for us.

In April, the whole assault force steamed south to the harbours of Newhaven, Shoreham and Portsmouth. The division proceeded by land to their various concentration camps in Hampshire and Sussex. Forces J and G also assembled in the Portsmouth – Southampton area. One large three-divisional exercise was carried out early in May and proved of extremely good value as an embarkation exercise, and also in our gaining experience of the difficulties of all three forces leaving harbour and forming up at sea. Many people were quite convinced that when we set out on this exercise it was "D" Day itself.

¹Neap tides have the smallest distance between high and low water.

About this time it was observed by reconnaissance that the beach obstructions in Normandy were being rapidly increased and we viewed with some concern that they were even being constructed on our own beaches. These obstructions were for the most part strong iron girders all welded together in the centre and trials were actually carried out by us to see the effect of a loaded landing craft charging such obstructions. The results of this trial were most encouraging because the obstruction more or less disintegrated without causing great damage to the craft. The craft used were of course L.C.T.² and it was obvious that a small craft such as an L.C.A.³ would have no chance against the obstructions. It was for this reason that H-hour⁴ had to be rearranged to coincide with low water springs; it was highly improbable that obstructions would be laid below low water. The plan was therefore to land special obstacle clearance units right in the forefront. Such units were trained to tow away up the beach all these iron obstructions; alternatively to blow them up. This latter proceeding was naturally unpopular with the assault infantry because of the fragments flying about. In any case, we had to be prepared for underwater obstructions and plans were therefore made for the L.C.A. to follow close in the wake of the L.C.T.s who had to rely on their momentum to crash through such obstructions. It was also unreasonable to expect that the obstructions would be cleared for the whole length and breadth of the beach before the tide rose. Very careful arrangements had to be made to mark the cleared gaps so that later craft would not run over the remaining obstructions. This was the task of the R.N. Beach Commandos.

The loading of coasters and barges had commenced early in May and by June all was ready and on the first, second and third the assault divisions and all their paraphernalia were embarked in their now familiar ships and landing craft. In order to emphasise the fact that Force S and 3rd division were one unit, all ships and craft had painted the divisional sign on their funnels.

As luck would have it, the 4th June proved unsuitable on account of the weather, but the whole expedition sallied forth on the fifth. I personally felt convinced that we should be recalled before dark, because the weather was still quite unpleasant. However, General Eisenhower and Admiral Ramsay had sufficient faith in their weather prophets that it would not get any worse and that an improvement would soon take place.

Now for the actual assault. Our own beach as I have told you was on the extreme eastern flank and was very well protected by enemy batteries so much so that it was found necessary to stop the big landing ships eight miles off the beaches and there to lower the assault landing craft. I really must say that when one looked at the chart on this part of the world and saw marked on it all those circles so dear to gunners showing arcs and ranges of all the various batteries, one felt rather like a fly in a spider's web, and it was for this reason that the lowering position had to be so far off the shore. This lowering position had to be very accurately found because it was the point at which all the various waves and flights of landing craft formed up at their allotted time and set off on the last stage of their journey. The procession up to this lowering position had of course been escorted by the Air and H.M. ships of all types and sizes. Perhaps the most important of this escort were 18 large minesweepers which certainly saved the situation for us. Even so, our ardour was slightly damped when a Norwegian destroyer blew up almost exactly at this lowering position. However, I'm glad to say she proved to be the only casualty from mines. The times between flights leaving the lowering position corresponded of course exactly with the time such flights were to touch down. During this last lap everything possible that could fire, did fire, according to a pre-arranged plan. The Air had already taken adequate steps to deal with large batteries. They had been implored not to crater our beaches so as to make them unusable; whereas craters can quickly be filled in by bulldozers, the result is liable to be a quicksand and therefore more of a menace than the untouched crater. As well as the Air, we had: two battleships, 8 or 10 cruisers and a dozen or more destroyers, all closing the beaches and the flanks of the beaches. At the same time, the assault force itself was well

²Landing Craft, Tank with a displacement of 250 tons

³Landing Craft Assault, with a displacement of 4 tons and capacity for 36 troops.

⁴H-hour. The hour at which any major event planned for the future is set to begin, as used in United States military

equipped and the S.P. Guns⁵ had been trained to fire from the landing craft on the way in, firing of course over the heads of the flights in front. The ammunition was of course carried in addition to the full number of rounds that would have to be carried by the guns themselves when they landed. Then there were L.C.G.⁶ which are modified L.C.T. with guns of about 4" in size, and also the now famous rocket firing craft which are capable of losing off about a thousand rockets in a few minutes. The spigots in these craft are all at the same elevation but are splayed outwards so as to give a lateral spread. The spread for range can be adjusted by altering the interval of time which elapses between the firing of the various rockets bearing in mind that the craft is travelling towards the beach at say six knots. The first wave consisted of L.C.T. with special tanks on board. These tanks on arrival at the water's edge were so equipped that they were able to remain almost submerged entirely. They were closely followed by more L.C.T. carrying A.V.R.E.⁷ The tasks of these A.V.R.E. were to flay the beaches for mines; to supply bridging for ditches or as a means to climb over concrete walls; to provide fascines to fill in ditches; to provide explosives and to act as concrete busters. To all these tasks was added at the last moment the all important one of towing away the beach obstructions, thus necessitating the landing obstacle clearance units right close up behind the A.V.R.E. These clearance units were accompanied by the assault companies of the assault brigade and of course they were covered by the gunfire of all those tanks which had been lying doggo almost submerged, that is to say, that as soon as a strong point opened up at the beaches, those tanks waddled out of the water, and as there were about 50 of them on a 1500 yard front, they were able effectively to neutralise the enemy's fire.

Close behind that first wave came Commando units including an inter-allied Commando and Royal Marine Commandos. The tasks of these Commandos were to move along the beaches to east and west in order to capture the various strong points and so to protect the flanks of the beaches. One Commando had the special task of proceeding to Ouistreham to take over the bridges which it was hoped would have been already seized by the airborne troops who had landed close east of the Orne during the night. In point of fact these airborne troops had carried out their task and were duly supported by this Commando. The third wave consisted of the reserve companies of the assault brigades followed by the S.P. guns. It is interesting to note that these S.P. guns towed sledges called porpoises which were laden with reserve ammunition so that the first wave of tanks should be able to replenish before leaving the beaches.

The next wave consisted of priority vehicles of the assault brigade and the remaining infantry of that brigade. Then followed many more waves containing the intermediate brigade and the priority vehicles and the reserve brigade with their vehicles. This procession went on for about six hours and the sight of the beach at the end had to be seen to be believed. There were many craft damaged by enemy shell fire, several had rather unexpectedly been holed by Tellermines⁸ which had been attached to the top of the beach obstructions. Such craft as had not been damaged were nearly all able to withdraw according to plan as soon as they had disgorged their cargoes. This of course was facilitated by the fact that the tide was rising and much practice had ensured that the craft backing off did not foul those coming in.

The whole division had been landed by about 1300 and one could see from just offshore that a grand battle was raging and apparently going well because there was not a great deal of congestion of vehicles still visible on the beaches.

Now arrived the first flight of L.S.T. towing their Rhino ferries. An L.S.T. is a Landing Ship Tank which carries say about 70 or 80 vehicles. The Rhino ferry is an enormous raft with its own outboard motors, and is manoeuvred right up to the mouth of the L.S.T. Where it is held whilst vehicles drive right on to it. As soon as it is full, i.e. with about 37 vehicles, it casts off and finds its own way to the beach. Here, if there is a favourable gradient, it is able to discharge its vehicles within a few minutes and then to withdraw even if the tide is falling. These L.S.T. also

⁵Self Propelled Gun

⁶Landing Craft Gun

⁷Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers

⁸A German anti-tank mine

carried the first ducks⁹ and medical ducks. That same afternoon the first coasters arrived with petrol and ammunition. These were unloaded by the ducks and in one case by a Rhino ferry. A certain reserve of stores had been loaded in four L.C.T.s which touched down just after high water and were allowed to dry out¹⁰ on the beaches, so that some 600 tons of various stores were readily available at call.

Towards nightfall on "D" Day a vast number of minor landing craft arrived off the beaches. These comprised in our sector, 48 L.C.M.¹¹, 96 L.C.V.P.¹², 36 L.B.V.¹³, many of the latter being loaded previously and therefore ready to beach as soon as the tide served after their arrival. We also received from the American sector 12 small L.C.T. and the whole of this unit was called the Ferry Craft Unit of which I personally had command. Our object was to ferry in conjunction with the ducks all motor transport, personnel and stores arriving off the beaches in ships which were unable by virtue of their size to dry out on the beaches. The unloading programme was arranged at daily conferences at the Sub-Area Commanders headquarters on the beach. At that conference, I would be told what priority was to be given to the various commodities. One time it would be petrol at all costs; another time A.A.¹⁴ Ammunition; another time rations, and so on. Often it would be necessary to switch at a moment's notice should any particular dump ashore have received a direct hit from the air or artillery. It is as well to mention here the fact that military personnel had to be taken out to every ship on its arrival in order to work the ships derricks during discharge. This naturally entailed further close liaison between myself and the Army. The small cargo ships, commonly called coasters, arrived on the first evening and I started to discharge them straight away. Thereafter some admirable organization in Britain kept a continual flow of ships arriving so that I was never able to relax for a single moment, until the great gale on "D plus 12" reduced and finally stopped every type of disembarkation for a period of 48 hours. This gale, as you know, was unprecedented in the English Channel. It blew from the north at an absolutely unbelievable strength. Unfortunately it coincided with an exceptionally high spring tide, and a great many craft which were already on the beach dried out were carried up by the gale and incoming tide and left so high and dry that future tides did not reach them. When the tide was at its very highest the craft concerned were blown beam on shore, and in almost every case, proved to be complete write-offs. Some of the other craft simply foundered at sea. Others dragged their anchors and were compelled to steam round in full circles under the lee of our gooseberry. This gooseberry had been placed in position on "D plus 1" and "D plus 2" and consisted of 9 large ships which had been scuttled in about 18 feet of water, by which I mean 18 feet at low tide. They had been chosen by virtue of their high freeboard which was sufficient to ensure that at high water the sea would not completely break over them. Among our nine ships was the French battleship "COURBET", a Dutch cruiser, a British cruiser and the rest were merchantmen. Their placing had been skilfully carried out so that each one lay just touching its next door neighbours and they more or less formed a crescent. If it had not been for this gooseberry there is no doubt whatsoever but that every single one of my 250 small craft would have been wrecked. As it was this enabled large groups of craft to secure on the lee side of these various block ships and so to ride out the gale. There was however no question of unloading ships and even if we had done so, it would have been out of the question to send laden craft inshore. Whilst this gale was raging, a vast concourse of shipping was accumulating, and at one time, I had 26 coasters and 13 large M.T.¹⁵ ships, each carrying 130 vehicles, as well as two store ships with about 2,000 tons each on board. When the gale subsided, I found that I only had about 10 percent of my craft ready for use. Our repair organisation was quite extensive and soon we were able to get about a third of the craft functioning. Probably our most serious loss were the Rhino ferries which had been most useful for landing M.T. Without exception all their engines were out of action, but it was still possible to use those that were structurally

⁹DUKW, a military wheeled amphibious landing-craft

¹⁰"to dry out" means here to land without getting ones feet wet.

¹¹Landing Craft Mechanized could carry a tank or 60 troops

¹²Landing Craft Vehicle & Personnel

¹³Landing Barge for delivering Vehicles

¹⁴Anti-Aircraft

¹⁵Motor Tanker at sea, Mechanized Transport on land.

sound by using small landing craft to tow them. A somewhat tedious business, but one which worked.

After the first 4 or 5 days, we took to beaching coasters and L.S.T. This of course speeded up the unloading generally because vehicles were able to drive straight out of the L.S.T. and when the tide fell, wheel lorries were able to drive alongside the coasters to receive their cargoes direct.

This beaching of L.S.T.s was of the very greatest value for other reasons; namely, the return to England of wounded and prisoners of war. The L.S.T. had all been specially fitted to receive wounded who were normally driven right into the ships in medical ducks. Prisoners of war were of course used to augment the labour on the beaches, mostly clearing away wreckage. Then just before the ships were due to sail, they would be herded aboard. Sometimes at neaps, the coasters did not completely dry out but even so it was worthwhile grounding them so as to shorten the distance for the ducks to swim. The unloading on the Sword beaches continued until about "D plus 30", during the whole of which time we were being pin-pricked by sporadic shelling by the enemy and frequent air attacks by night. I was losing almost one officer and ten men daily through the shelling which came from the eastern flank and Admiral Vian decided to evacuate our beach as he was able to ensure cargo hitherto landed thereon would now be accepted on the other two beaches which had been almost immune from shell fire.

Enemy shelling of the beach and anchorage had of course continued right from the very start. At first we were shelled from the south. Eventually as the Army advanced they brought this to an end. Then however, the Hun found means, probably by some sort of mobile gun, to crack at us from away to the east of the river Orne. This was countered by bombardment by H.M. ships of all sizes including the landing craft carrying rockets. Our own means of defence lay entirely in laying smoke screens from M.L.s¹⁶ and other small craft, and even from the beach when the wind was off shore. This question of smoke is a most complex one, and no smoke whatsoever had been allowed during the assault for fear of interference to our own bombarding units or aircraft. Practically every night from "D" day onwards, air raids on various scales took place. These raids had a very decided nuisance value because almost every merchant ship ceased unloading operations whilst the raids were in progress, added to which the dense smoke which we put up made movements of landing craft almost impossible. I speak feelingly about this because many times I had been caught while going round the anchorage in these smoke clouds and had great difficulty in finding my way back to my ship. This ship, incidentally, was a little yacht called the "St Adrian" and I had berthed her alongside the quarterdeck of the French battleship.

At times these raids had a devastating effect on the beaches. In particular, one raid set alight a petrol dump. As this was before our front line was 4 or 5 miles from the beach it had not yet been possible to indulge in the luxury of distributing stores or even keeping the petrol at a safe distance from the ammunition. I believe that the Divisional Commander really was alarmed at the damage done by the ensuing fire which destroyed much M.T. and, luckily a small, dump of ammunition. At sea, the air raids were often made by minelayers. The spotting of these mines and subsequent marking of their positions proved to be almost impossible. As a result, two cruisers were mined as well as quite a number of M.T. and stores ships. It was a grand sight to see all ships in the anchorage open up during a night raid. Each ship in the gooseberry had an A/A post manned by military personnel. Experience soon showed that very few aircraft were brought down as a result of this firing. In some cases, firing ships became individual targets for further waves of aircraft who were of course guided by the continual stream of tracer. It was for this reason that Admiral Vian gave a direct order to everyone at sea that, in future night raids, ships were not to open fire. This caused much dissension among the merchant ships but in point of fact made the enemy's task much more difficult as he no longer had a clearly defined area in which to drop his mines.

¹⁶Motor Launch

Individual incidents I can remember included the hitting of a fully laden Rhino ferry during an air raid at night. This ferry was the foremost of two lying alongside a very large M.T. ship. When hit, the front vehicles were set alight, and several men on board were wounded. There appeared to be very great danger that all the vehicles would catch fire because the ship was lying hard to the wind, and therefore the front vehicles would ignite those immediately behind them and so on. Should all these vehicles catch fire whilst still alongside the ship, there was a further chance that the ship itself would be set alight. It was therefore decided that the first thing to do was to tow this burning ferry away from the ship and from the other ferry. The only craft available was one L.C.V.P. which had rushed to the rescue without waiting to embark its full crew. A great deal of shouting was going on between the ferry and the ship. The ferry were trying to evacuate their wounded up the ships side and it was quite some minutes before the officers on board the ship realised that the ferry really must be cast off. As soon as their ropes were let go, the L.C.V.P. was able to pull the blazing ferry clear. It was only then that attention could be given to evacuating the wounded and the few heroes who had remained to stand by them. It was quite an inspiring sight to see one vehicle after another blowing up with all their petrol and ammunition exploding in all directions. After everybody had been taken off the ferry, it was allowed to drift away on the tide and it must have finished up right up the river Seine near Le Havre. I should think that the Hun must have thought that we were going back to the times when Drake used his fire ships.

Another incident for which I was personally responsible occurred when an ammunition coaster beached on the wrong beach, particular orders being given for it to go to Peter Red, but unfortunately I allowed it to go to Queen Red which at that time was receiving most attention from enemy shell fire. In due course it was hit, and I am told that all the soldiers found urgent business in the front line which was then some seven miles away. The Naval beach parties disappeared into various foxholes, and the ship blazed merrily but for some reason did not actually explode. Seeing this, and feeling somewhat guilty, I took a small craft over to the edge of the cascade of sparks to see if there was anybody wanting help. All I found, however, was one of my own barges anchored quite close with apparently no one on board. Knowing it was full of petrol, I went alongside it and slipped its cable and started to tow it away, chased by all sorts of flying debris from the burning coaster. Having got her into safety, a few very sleepy men came up on deck from out of her bowels to know what the hell we were doing moving their ship. I did not see fit to put them on the mat because I could see their astonishment was quite punishment enough.

In conclusion, I wish once more to emphasise the wonderful work by the R.A.F. before, during and after the assault.

For ourselves in the Navy, it is sufficient to repeat that during the assault and ensuing months, the the work off the beaches proceeded unharassed by the enemy naval vessels. Our outer defences saw to that.

For the Army, our Divisional General was unfortunately killed later when leading the 51st Highland Division in Holland. I had much looked forward to meeting him again in order that I might tell him how much we of Force S admired the prowess of the 3rd Division and of the whole Army, I might even have added that seeing that we were no longer working with them, we viewed their progress with the most pleasurable surprise.