

SURVIVING D-DAY AND RECEIVING FRANCE'S HIGHEST HONOUR

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Born: 1924

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RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

I was 19 when I enlisted in the army, in the RAOC or Royal Army Ordnance Corps in August 1942. I went in as a private and ended up a sergeant. After 6 weeks training at Hulsea Barracks, Portsmouth, I was posted to the RAOC Training School and then to the Armaments depot at Greenford, Middlesex. In March, 1943 I was posted to No. 12 Ordnance Beach Department at Aldershot and in mid April we was moved to the west coast of Scotland. We then finished up in a village called Alness, which is the very north of Scotland before going to the grounds of Petworth House in May 1944. We went to the outskirts of Portsmouth, before we embarked for Overlord.

The RAOC supplies everything to the army, except food, water, medical supplies, petrol and oil. It's divided into separate sections: you've got the Ammunition Section, Armaments Section, Military Transport, Clothing and general items. Each section had its own depots throughout the country and after passing out of the training school I was sent to the Armaments Depot and trained as an armaments man. I had a mentor to look after me, and he showed me what to look for when you received a gun barrel from the manufacturers. You used to inspect it to see there was no hairline cracks in them or things like that. Or perhaps part of a base plate for a mortar was missing. After three months, more or less, I could spot anything that was wrong.

The Ordnance Beach Department was a special unit, specifically for the invasion. There were five officers, and seventy other ranks. We had two cooks, one driver and one office clerk. Of the remaining sixty-six, thirty-three were what you'd call the Stores Section, and thirty-three were Ammunitions Section. I was armaments trained so I was ignorant of all the other sections, so from April, May 1943 to November 1943, in between beach rehearsals, I went on a course for small arms, ammunition, clothing, general and military transport. That meant we could all do each others job and we had to pass all these courses we went on and come back with a 'distinction'. If you didn't you was out. Every time you came back with a 'Distinction' you got a sixpence increase, which was good on nine

bob a week. We got nine shillings, or forty-five pence a week. I was stopped five pence for savings, and five pence went home to my parents. That's what I was worth to them.

During 1943 we were doing several rehearsals, to make sure everything went smoothly. We did the last exercise in March 1944. Everything that was sent over, stores and ammunition, all had a code. We got this list of codes and we had to try and remember what everything was.

The last Sunday in December 1943 we set off at 8.15am on a full day's map reading exercise and we had to be at a certain point at 5pm, and it wasn't all smooth walking. It was through forests, up hills, down dales. Just after we set off it started snowing, and then it became a blizzard which lasted all day. We reached the last point at exactly 5 o'clock. Our two cooks and the driver were waiting for us with hot tea, but also waiting was a party of what we call 'Top Brass' - a General, Brigadier, Colonels and Lieutenant Colonels. On Monday the unit was divided into sections, and each one of these 'red caps' took us, asking questions etc, then we had a group lecture, then a test on these codes.

There were four Ordnance Beach Departments being formed and trained. At the end of January the results came through that of these four OBDs in the country, we got top marks, so of course we were the top dogs - laughing like hell at the others, but the grin went off our faces when we realised we'd drawn the short straw. We were top in the country, so that's how they decided that we were off to SWORD Beach.

Working in a depot you do no physical training, no parade ground work, no route marches, you're just in there working. But now they said we'd be trained to be first class soldiers, and that meant plenty of parade ground bashing, and the rifle range. Really we were store men, but we had to be fully organised. The Physical instructor said, 'I know you're not fit, but within a month you'll be so fit you'll wonder what's happened to you. Reveille is at 6 o'clock. At 6.15 you'll be in your P.T. kit, everybody, officers included. You'll do an hour's P.T. training. You'll be back at 7.15. You'll shower; dress and breakfast at 8, and you're on parade again at 9 o'clock.'

He told us he'd take it steady, because he knew we weren't absolutely physically fit. We worked up and up, and within a month every man was absolutely physically fit, and some of them had lost some weight. We could fire a rifle, Bren gun, Sten gun, and throw hand grenades. At the end of 1943 we were all first class store men. If anybody failed, they were sent back to the depot and replaced.

EQUIPMENT AND WEAPONS

When we landed on Sword Beach, we were in what they call 'battle order'. That's steel helmet, gas mask and your small pack, fifty rounds of ammunition, your Sten gun or rifle and your webbing belt with your pouches, you have two pouches on. Your bayonet was on and your water bottle attached to it. I had to carry six pouches, 3 Bren gun magazines in each pouch. On the morning of the 5th June, round about 9.30, we all had to have our arms inspected, by a drill instructor, to make sure they was clean and your bolt in your rifle was immovable. We were given a waterproof pad to cover the mechanism, fifty rounds of ammunition, and then half an hour later we were given rations.

DAY TO DAY LIVING AND ROUTINES.

The emergency rations were dried stuff. It contained a tin of corned beef, four small packs of very hard biscuits, some milk and tea powder, a couple of sachets of sugar, a bar of plain chocolate, and (how they worked this out I'll never know), eleven sheets of toilet paper.

We slept in a slit trench and got whatever we could. For the first forty-eight hours we never stopped, it was non-stop. Then after that you were trying to sneak half an hour here, half an hour there, if you could. You'd got aircraft flying over every night. You were cold, you were miserable, and you were wet through. But, I'll give the unit its due; we were like one big family - all for one and one for all.

The food we had on that landing craft was disgusting, and I mean it. Thinking that it's going to be our last meal, and some of them won't be coming back. You knew that. The food was atrocious, thick greasy stew, mashed potato, and a rice pudding that needed a knife and fork to cut it. That was supposed to be our last hot meal.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO BATTLE

On the way over to Normandy, I had a walk around deck to stretch my legs, and when I came back I stood and looked over the side of the Landing Craft, and then I started to think. What would my parents and

the rest of the family think if they knew where I was now? What's it going to be like when we get there? Is it going to be rough? Is it going to be very bad? You just couldn't imagine what was happening, and then I'm not afraid to say this, I said a few prayers, like everybody else was doing, because on some of the big Yankee boats they were holding church services.

I've been back to Normandy several times. It always brings back sad memories, as I say, we only lost one person, but you stand on the promenade at any of the beaches, especially Sword Beach, you stand there and look at it. Beautiful golden sands and your mind goes back all those years, and you remember what it was like then. It's hard to describe what it was like. It's just impossible to describe what it was like. As I said it was absolutely littered. You've got wounded, you've got the dead lying there, you've got all types of equipment.

When you see some of the photographs of these metal tripods that Rommel had put in, and I always think, when I look at that beach, did they get all the land mines up that he planted? You never know because he planted thousands of them, all along those beaches.

What I remember of it, it's all gone now. Those fields have gone. The orchards have gone. It's all new houses. Ah well, sixty years ago. Progress.

EXPERIENCES BEFORE AND AFTER D-DAY

We moved to the outskirts of Portsmouth on Friday, which was the 2nd June, and on the Friday night it started pouring with rain and it never stopped 'til Sunday, and that's why it was put off on the Monday, on account of the weather conditions. We sailed across the River Hamble, and anchored off the Isle of Wight.

When we left at about six in the evening on the 5th June, we sailed out from off the Isle of Wight into the Channel. That's when I saw the most glorious sight... it's indescribable. The English Channel was absolutely packed. There was warships, cruisers, corvettes, destroyers, landing craft of all different types, and there was also a Landing Craft Rocket, firing about a hundred rockets a minute. Once in the Channel you got into lines. We moved off, and it was a very slow rate, and the further you got into the Channel the choppiest it got.

We'd no real idea about what we'd find when we got there. We knew the Normandy beaches had been mined by the Germans, and there were these metal tripod obstacles with a bomb on top, but if we went in at high tide the bottom of the Landing Craft would hit them, and explode. In the very first wave was a group of engineers, and it was their job to take the mines off the tripods, and have a lane for the tanks and infantry to go through.

We were due in on the second wave. We arrived off Sword Beach roughly about half past ten, quarter to eleven, and we just sat there. We couldn't think why. We were a good hundred yards off the beach itself. And then about half past eleven, twelve o'clock we saw them fix a rope to the landing craft, and the idea was that one of the landing craft crew swam to the shore, and fastened this rope to one of the metal tripods. Half way there he got swept away. This happened three times. Three members of the crew were drowned.

A bit later on, the fourth member of the crew, we watched him, and he did eventually make the beach. He was absolutely worn out.

The rope was securely fastened to one of these metal tripods. The ramp went down, and of course, the idea was that you took hold of the rope and worked along it 'til your feet felt the sea bed, then you let go and you walked off, waded off.

And it was unbelievable, because you stood there, and you watched the first party go off, and as they got hold of the rope, and with all the weight of the kit they just sank down. We were in eight feet of water! I looked across at the beach and there was one German aircraft, flying along the beach, dropping a string of bombs. Then he turned, and came out to sea, and let go with his machine guns. He was flying so low that the ack-ack couldn't get down to protect us. As we saw him turning in, and starting to open up, everybody went under the water again, 'til it passed over. Well of course, as you were moving along in the water, you kept feeling things hitting your legs. You didn't know whether it was kit or bodies.

When I reached the beach, this lad was in front of me, and he was moaning and groaning he could go no further, so I'm behind him, I kept saying, 'Come on, you can make it'. I kept urging him on and we're slowly making our way up the beach. We were coming to these metal tripods. I'd

seen him about ten yards away from it, and I happened to look down the beach, and it was absolutely littered with injured. There was Sten guns, rifles, steel helmets, you name it. Chaps had been hit etc, then all of a sudden there was a cry, 'Everybody down!' And it shook me and I looked, and there's this lad in front of me, he's just about to put his hand on this metal tripod that still had a bomb on it. Now it only needed the slightest touch and it would've gone off, and this brought me to my senses. When I looked he was just about to grip it. Without thinking or anything I made a rugby tackle on him, just about as his hand was about to touch, and dragged him off it, which of course saved his life, saved many lives. So we reached the sea wall.

As we were waiting by the beach wall on SWORD beach for the rest of the unit to arrive an officer called me over and said, 'I want you to go and do a reconnaissance. Make sure the site isn't mined, and it's clear of all Germans and don't be too long about it'. So we went on to the beach down to the promenade. Just before turning into this side street to the main road, I looked along the beach, and believe you me it was horrible. I've never described it to anybody, the sight I saw, and I never will. That's firmly in side my head. But nobody knows. I've never told a soul what it was like and I've no intentions now.

We'd only gone about 150 yards, and all of a sudden I heard this metal ping, quite close to me, on the roadside, and then we heard the rifle shot. A sniper. So we dived through the hedge and under one of these British wagons that were parked up and waited two or three minutes. Then I thought to myself...we'd better get out of here - all these wagons are loaded with ammunition!

So we made our way very cautiously, found the two fields that were going to be the site for our supplies. There were no pockets of German resistance, and there were no mines. Within fifteen minutes of being there, the first stores and ammunition started arriving by these Ducks (DUKW vehicles which could also double as boats).

Once you'd unloaded the Ducks, everything came off, it was just piled up, and everybody got stuck in, knew what the codes were, and where they wanted to go. This went on until seven o'clock at night. At nine o'clock our Sergeant Major had drawn out a roster for guard duty. This was cancelled because we got the order to 'stand to' - we had to form a defensive line, because they were expecting Jerry's armour to break out at night, and there was a gap between Gold Beach and Omaha Beach so that if the Germans broke through there they could get in behind us.

We all had to take turns doing an hour's Bren gun duty. I was on eleven while twelve, and I thought, 'That's alright. An hour's rest on this Bren gun'. Round about quarter to twelve I'm thinking, 'Ah well, another fifteen minutes and then I'm off'. But then we got the signal; three loud blasts on the whistle, which meant enemy aircraft. I took the Bren gun off the tripod. I looked round and saw where the ack-ack was coming from. One aircraft. So I tried to get into firing position, well, a Bren gun's pretty heavy, and I waited for him coming in, He was coming in very low, just above house top, and as he's coming in I saw an object leave the plane but I didn't connect it at the time. I thought no more about it at the time, and I waited and waited, and then I said to myself, 'You're going to get what you gave us yesterday.' And he got a full magazine poured into him. Every one went into him, and as I'm firing there's this terrific explosion, and I'm watching this plane and as he's going away we see the black smoke pouring out of him.

Just before he'd come over, they'd unloaded a Duck of ammunition, and it was all in a big pile, and the object I'd seen leave the aircraft was a bomb, and it hit this stack that was waiting to be moved away. So you can imagine!

There was shrapnel being showered everywhere. There were fires. Luckily that morning, we'd unloaded a lot of spades so they could use the fine soil to start to put the fires out, but at the same time, with the fires spreading and the hot metal flying around it's setting stacks, 'cause all the ammunition was in wooden boxes, so of course it's setting on fire. Everything was going up.

We was detailed, some of us to go and relieve the Ammunition Section, so they could have a break. We set off with a spade and as we were walking along, all of a sudden this Brigade Ordnance Warrant Officer gets it in the face from a large piece of shrapnel. All his right side of his face is split open. He just collapsed, all his face had been smashed open.

Two or three minutes later I turned to this sergeant and said, 'I've been hit'. He replied, 'Your face is all right. Is your hands all right?' 'Yes'. 'Can you feel anything running down your legs?' 'No'. 'You're all right.'

But it was such a thump. I thought no more about it after that, and we're going along and this Sergeant gets hit right across his right wrist, and his hand's hanging off. We sent for the First Aiders again and they took him away. We'd only had one casualty on the landing. Sergeant William

Jenkinson, and they found his body on June 7th in the River Orne. He'd been drowned, and he's in Bayeux Cemetery. We were damned fortunate.

We'd been trained to dig a channel to stop fires spreading so I set to digging a channel to try and save our supplies. And all the time I've got ammunition going off around me. You've got hand grenades, .303 ammunition, 9mm ammunition, you've got mortar bombs still going off, and when you've got stacks of them it's no fun. I got the channel dug, and when I got back to my own section, one of my comrades said to me, 'What's happened to you?' 'Why what do you mean?' He said, 'Well have you seen your tunic pocket?'

I took my tunic off, and there was a hole that had been burnt, about the size of a fifty pence piece. This is what the thump was I'd felt, but just before we'd got off the landing craft I did something I shouldn't have done. In your left breast pocket, what you're supposed to carry was what you call your AB62, and that was your identity, and I put my cigarette case in that pocket. When I took my jacket off and saw this hole, I took my cigarette case out, and there's the dint in the cigarette case. If it hadn't been for that, whatever hit would have gone right through, and I should have been another casualty. I was a pipe smoker but just before I left I broke my pipe, so I bought some cigarettes, and the cigarette case was in my trousers, in what you'd call a map pocket. When I saw what was happening disembarking I thought, 'Right, Ill try and keep my cigarettes dry'. Up and into this pocket, and that's what saved me. My parents bought me this cigarette case for my twenty first, it was initialled and I've still got it today.

Every morning from D-Day +1 to D-Day +11 one of the German's big guns, that were inland, fired one shot into the town of Lyon Sur Mer, where we were. Every morning at eleven o'clock.

We sent a patrol in, and they searched each house one by one, and underneath was a big tunnel, so they could come up to any house they wished. I think it was in the second house from the end on the second storey they found my sniper. He was sixteen and a half years old, and the reason why he'd missed me was he wore glasses, and his lenses were real thick. If he'd been of perfect eyesight he'd have hit me. But that's why he missed me. And then when they went onto the next floor they found another German with a radio set, binoculars, everything he required, two months supply of food. And every ship of size that came in, near to the beach, he was monitoring it and radioing through to one of the batteries.

Experiences After D-Day.

I ended up in a hospital in the north of Belgium in April 1944. I was classed as walking wounded and when VE Day came I was sitting in the grounds of the hospital, and as soon as it was announced all the civilian staff all started singing and dancing, and I felt so elated, and 'This is over!' Then I went back into the hospital and saw the Airborne lads that were in there after a drop on the Rhine. The elation disappeared when you saw these Airborne lads, some with legs missing, arms missing, blind. That brought it back to me what they'd given for this to happen, and then you think back and there's all these cemeteries in Normandy. They've given their life for this. I'm lucky at the moment.

I was discharged from hospital about the third week in May, and after three weeks posting in Germany, I was posted back to Donnington in Shropshire, the RAOC depot. We were going to be made up and trained for landing on the Jap mainland, and when that was happening, of course they dropped the Atomic bombs.

I sailed for India on 5th November 1945. In India I was assistant to the Sports Officer. I finished up as Fire Officer. While I was out there we played a lot of sports. I was selected to represent the British Army at cricket against India which was getting its test team back together. This match was going to be on the test ground in Calcutta and started on the 26th December. The Admin. Officer sent for me and told me about it but said, 'You're due for embarkation, then?' I said, 'Yes Sir, and I'm going'. Well when the CO got to know about it he sent for me. Now the CO was six foot eight in his stockinged feet, and he was as broad as... well. 'Straighten yourself up!' He then told me I was going to play cricket. 'No, I'm still going on this embarkation. Demobilised, and I'm off.'

Well the temper, he tore a strip right off me. I've never had such a rollicking in my life. Then he turned round and he said, 'Get out of my office!'

When I got back I was told I was being recommended for this action I took on the beach, saving the lives. I got nothing. It didn't bother me in those days, you just carried on, and I thought no more about it. I got my service medals through the post, the France and German Stars.

On Monday 24th May 2004 though the National Secretary of the Normandy Veterans Association rang me up and said, 'What are you doing

on June 1st.' I replied, 'I'm off to a meeting'. 'Forget it', he said. 'I want you to be at 17, Kensington Palace Gardens, no later than 11.15. It is the residence of the French Ambassador. You have been awarded the Legion d' honneur. Be there'.

And so I got this medal. The highest military award that the French can present to anybody. I can use it as a title like MBE or OBE.