



# MANX PEOPLE & D-DAY

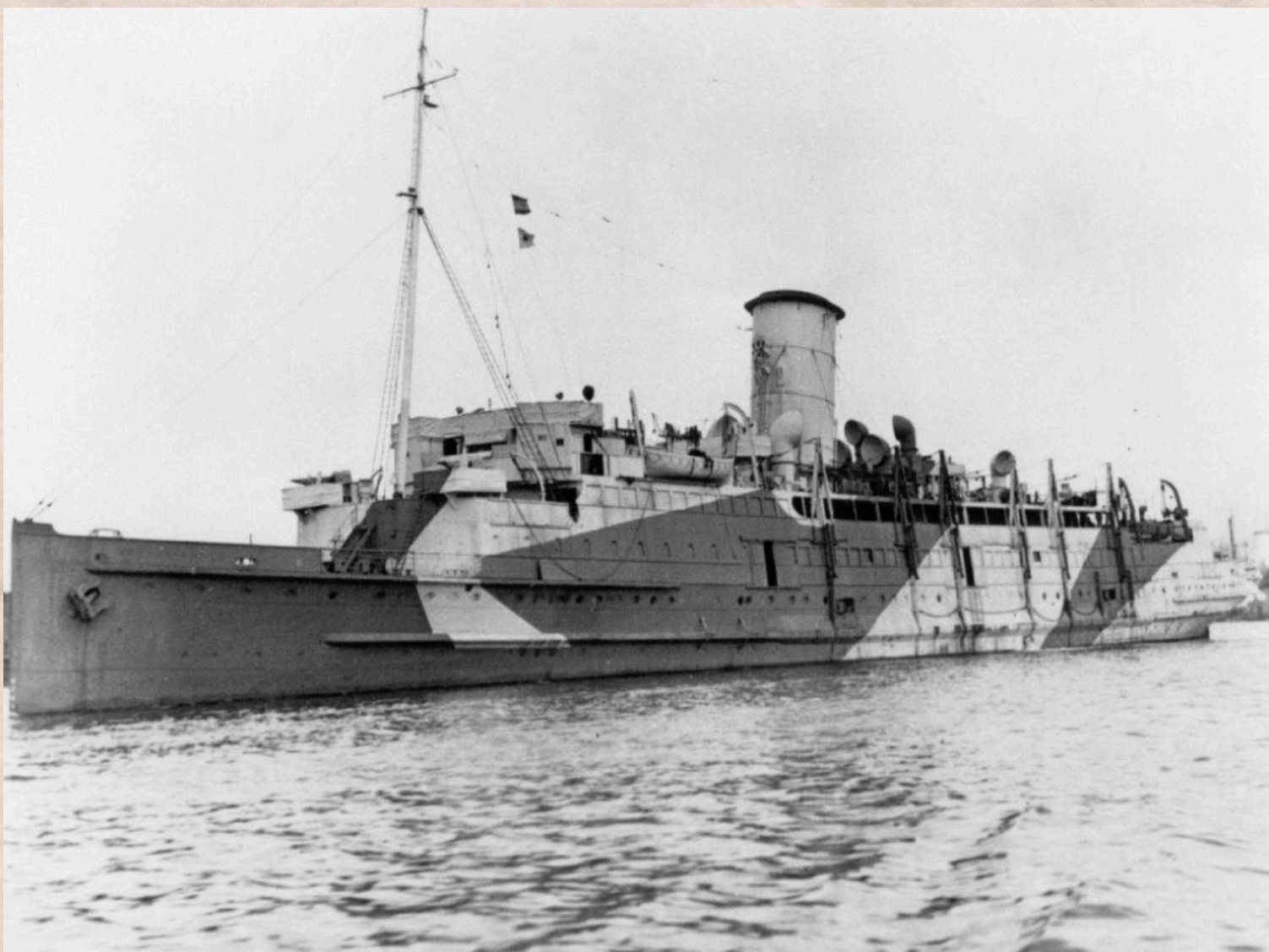
## Extracts from the archives of the Manx Aviation and Military Museum

Compiled by Ivor Ramsden MBE, Museum Director, May 2024.

For further information please contact [airmuseum@manx.net](mailto:airmuseum@manx.net)

# BEN MY CHREE ON D-DAY 1

**Captain Radcliff Duggan**, who had been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his service during the evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940, was in command of HMS Ben my Chree, the former Isle of Man Steam Packet vessel which had been taken over by the Royal Navy and converted into a carrier for landing craft. His task in the early hours of D-Day was to land the American 2nd Rangers at the base of steep cliffs at Pointe du Hoc, a promontory which gave a commanding field of fire over the invasion beaches to German guns which were mounted on the top. Despite a heavy swell, the landing was successful. The Rangers scaled the cliffs only to find that the guns had been moved inland and were no longer a threat.



### The Full Story...

When orders came for the actual D-Day assault, the American 2nd Rangers boarded the Ben My Chree which joined the great armada of convoys knifing across the cold, dark English Channel from the Isle of Wight to an unknown fate that waited them along the German-held Normandy coast. One the fateful morning of June 6, Rudder's 225 soldiers of the initial assault parties were treated to a breakfast of flapjacks and coffee. They carried minimum loads, with heavier weapons amounting to four Browning Assault Rifles. Each company also had two 60mm mortars). Shortly before 0400, they were loaded into LCAs (landing craft, assault) departed the huge transport ship and headed out in two columns of six boats across a very rough sea still churning from a vicious storm the previous day. Ten of the small landing craft carried Rudder and his men, while the other two carried supplies (packs, rations, demolitions, and extra ammunition for the three companies). The small flotilla was accompanied by four DUKW's that carried the extension ladders. Each DUKW was topped by twin Lewis machineguns to provide some firepower for an anticipated contested landing.

### WATER CONTINUED TO GUSH INTO THE BOATS...

Immense waves were smashing into the sides of each craft, engulfing the small vessels and drenching the anxious rangers. Shortly after the flotilla had left the Ben My Chree, one LCA sank in the heavy seas, drowning everyone except one fortunate man. Soon, another landing craft became swamped, adding the commander of Company D, Capt. Duke Slater, and his twenty Rangers to the number of soldiers already out of the attack on Pointe-du-Hoc. Water continued to gush into the boats, rising quickly with every new wave that slammed into the sides. Seasick Rangers desperately began to bail with their helmets as they continued their perilous run toward the shore, and possible death from enemy firepower. Within fifteen minutes after leaving the Ben My Chree, one of the supply boats sank and the other jettisoned all its packs in order to stay afloat. One DUKW was sunk by 20-mm fire from a cliff position near the Point. The 9 surviving LCAs advanced on a 400-yard front on the eastern side of the Point.

### BULLETS STRUCK!

As the Rangers closed in on their objective, they could see and hear the thunderous blasts from the battleship USS Texas as it shelled the fortifications on top of Pointe-du-Hoc for 35 minutes. The planned landing was delayed by 40 minutes, as the boats were off-course, initially heading due east of the landing point. Rudder noticed this aberration and ordered the helmsmen to correct their course to the right direction. German opposition on the ground was slight until the first pair of LCAs came a mile from shore, when the Nazis opened fire with mortars and machineguns. The Rangers finally touched down at 0710 on at Pointe-du-Hoc with only half their original three companies remaining, a troublesome start to an already challenging assignment. Companies E and F deployed to the eastern side of the point, with Company D to the west.

From a position 300 yards on the Rangers' left flank, German machine guns strafed the heavily crated landing area, just as Rudder's men began placing the fire ladders in position. Bullets struck about fifteen of the Rangers. Gene E. Elder, a member of the Second Ranger Battalion, remembered the landing, "We found that the cliffs were higher than the ones we scaled in Cornwall [England, during preparation]. These were 115 to 125 feet high." The extension ladders would only reach 100 feet. As soon as he had landed, Lt. Colonel Rudder sent the message 'tilt,' which told the floating reserve to land at Omaha Beach, and then fight their way to Pointe-du-Hoc as soon as possible due to the delayed landing time schedule.

### A SPECTACULAR DUEL IN THE AIR

As the waves of DUKWs and LCAs landed on the small 25-yard strip of beach, soldiers raised one of the London Fire Department extension ladders to its full height. Sgt. William Stivison of the Second Rangers labored to the top carrying twin Lewis machineguns. He drew counter-fire from the Germans above him as his comrades watched the amazing spectacle. Amazingly, not a single bullet even grazed the lucky Stivison as he single-handedly attacked the enemy on the crest. Fighting to keep his balance, he continued firing even as the ladder weaved from side to side in a dizzying arc almost 90 feet in the air. The spectacular duel in the air finally ended due to the ladder being forced to retract by the rumbling seas under the DUKW. His performance was exactly the kind of courage and innovation that Rudder had hoped for when he had selected his elite team.





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# BEN MY CHREE ON D-DAY 2

### **SURVIVING GERMANS CUT THE ROPES!**

The Rangers were briefly pinned against the side of the prominence, taking cover from the Nazis above, who tossed down "potato mashers," their distinctive grenades. Bobbing in the boiling surf, the destroyer USS Saterlee saw that Rudder's Rangers were now fighting the Germans without any gun support. The captain decided to steam in close to the shoreline, where he opened on the Germans on top of the cliffs. As the ship blazed away, the Nazis scattered, allowing the Rangers to begin their ascent. Each of the LCAs had been fitted with 3 pairs of rocket guns. These could fire grapnels, which pulled up  $\frac{3}{4}$ " ropes, toggle ropes, and rope ladders. In addition, each landing craft carried a pair of handheld rockets, which could be carried ashore to fire small ropes. Each craft also carried tubular- steel extension ladders made up of light, 4' sections suitable for quick assembly. Quickly, crews began firing off the rockets. Some of the landing craft had trouble firing their ropes, either firing them too early, or in some cases, the ropes had become too saturated from the pounding salt water, making them too heavy to get enough elevation to properly catch on the cliffs. Other ropes did land on the cliff-tops, but were not secure enough, and they and the Rangers using them fell to the ground below. However, all but one LCA managed to properly position their ropes and ladders. In a few cases, surviving Germans cut the ropes.

Still, enough ropes were in place to allow the remaining Rangers to scale Pointe-du-Hoc and complete their mission. Robert Kerchner of the Second Battalion recounted that the Germans had scarcely touched the ropes that were being used by his company. The enemy had never seen the rocket launchers used to propel the ropes, and when the nine remaining LCAs fired their six rockets, each trailing smoke and fire, it appeared to be a new sort of weapon. Several Nazi soldiers hit the ground, taking cover from the incoming "weapons." In some cases, Americans GIs had tied pieces of fuse to the end of the grapnel to fool the Germans into thinking the strange weapon would explode at any minute. Hence, most did not bother to approach the ropes to dislodge them until it was too late.

### **"PRAISE THE LORD!"**

As Allied warships and airplanes continued to attack German positions on and behind Pointe-du-hoc, dirt, clay, and shale cascaded from the cliffs. Soon, the first 25 feet or so of the ascent was walkable as Rangers used the resultant mounds as stepstools. Within five minutes after the Rangers had landed on the beach, their first men had fought their way on top of the cliff, assembled in groups of three or four, then moved out on prearranged missions toward the gun positions. Some Americans, covered with mud from having fallen into the water-filled craters on the beach, had trouble in climbing. However, within a half-hour, all of the front-line soldiers had scaled the point. They found themselves in a no-man's land of incredible destruction with all landmarks now gone and the ground so cratered that if men got 15 feet apart, they were immediately out of contact. Only a few Germans were initially seen, and these were quickly driven to cover in a network of ruined trenches connecting deep dugouts and emplacements. The Rangers soon found that they had no radio communications, as all of the devices carried upward were now malfunctioning. Rudder called on his communications officer, James "Ike" Eikner, to descend the cliff and use a working radio on the beach to send headquarters the code phrase "Praise the Lord," a signal that the initial attack had been successful in securing the heights.

### **DESPERATE FIGHTING ALONG THE BEACH HEAD**

Rudder established his command post in the safe haven of a large shell hole on the edge of the cliff. However, due to his inability to immediately communicate his success in reaching the top, his support force (Companies A and B of his Second Rangers, as well as the entire Fifth Ranger Battalion) did land on the crimson-stained and still chaotic Omaha Beach. These men soon became embroiled in the desperate fighting along the beachhead and did not move into their assigned position to support the Pointe-du-Hoc assault. However, they became critical to the eventual success of the Americans in seizing Omaha Beach. The battalion's chaplain, Father Joseph Lacey, had landed with the supporting forces, where he spent his day pulling out the wounded from the water and tending to them. Father Lacey also took the time to say the last rites for those brave young men who had laid down their lives in an effort to stop Hitler's regime. He would be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his priestly actions.

Pressing inland, Rudder's seasick and weary Rangers started gaining ground against the German forces, despite being outnumbered in many sectors. In some cases, progress was measured yard by yard as close order combat ensued between the desperate defenders and Rudder's attack force. According to Ranger Leonard Lomell, his Company D depended upon "a lot of speed. We went into the shell craters for protection, because there were snipers around and machine guns firing at us, and we'd wait for a moment, and if the fire lifted, we were out of that crater and into the next one." Fighting continued to be fierce as Rudder pushed southward. At one point, a German crew turned a 40mm antiaircraft gun at charging Rangers, who continued onward like "possessed banshees." By 7:40, they had captured this position and killed the German crew.

### **A GERMAN COUNTER ATTACK!**

A few minutes later, a German counterattack emerged from tunnels and nearby trenches and overwhelmed and captured all but one man in an advanced Ranger position. The command post, in a crater only a hundred yards away, was unaware of what had happened until the survivor raced back to safety. Another assault was hastily improvised, consisting of a dozen riflemen and a mortar section. They got halfway to the strongpoint before being swept by artillery fire, which killed or wounded nearly every man in the party.

Pfc. Carl Weast and Capt Pfc. Carl Weast and Capt. George Whittington circled a machine gun nest manned by three Germans. Seeing the Americans approach, one enemy soldier screamed "Bitte! Bitte! Bitte!" Whittington's tommy gun soon killed all three Nazis, and Whittington turned to his partner to inquire, "I wonder what bitte means?" Not far away, Gene E. Elder set up his mortar squad in a 13-foot deep crater. By ten o'clock, he was able to dispose of a German counterattack that was being launched against his fellow Rangers. For his good marksmanship and his heroic stand against the enemy attack, Elder was awarded the Bronze Star.





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# BEN MY CHREE ON D-DAY 3

### KEEPING THE GERMANS AT BAY!

The combination of naval guns from the pounding surf and Royal Air Force spotter planes over the target areas now began to punch out the remaining German strong points one by one with precision gunfire. The Saterlee and HMS Talybont spent the day pounding the top of Pointe-du-Hoc to provide fire support for the Rangers. At times, the Saterlee was able to drive off counterattacks, helping keep the Germans at bay while Rudder slowly advanced. By nightfall, the Saterlee had expended all of its ammunition and had to steam back to England for replenishment.

The Germans answered with supporting batteries located near Grandcamp, raining shell after shell upon the advancing Rangers. After much fighting, and with a growing casualty count, Rudder's men finally fought their way to the six heavy 155mm gun emplacements, expecting them to be operational. However, they found that three of the concrete gun casements were still under construction, while the other three, although finished, were empty as the Germans had not yet positioned any guns inside. Disappointed that there were no guns to destroy, the Rangers moved on to their second major objective to establishing a roadblock along the coastal road, setting up a defensive position cutting that main route between Vierville and Grandcamp. There, they were to await the arrival of the 116th Infantry from Omaha Beach

Ranger companies D, E, and F had pushed the Germans back shortly before midnight, and now the enemy formed a straight line directly in the path of Rudder's weary soldiers, pinning them for two hours under ferocious small arms fire. The Nazis launched five futile counterattacks, hoping to scatter the Americans during the evening. By morning, the Rangers entered the key coastal road. However, a skilled sniper killed six of Rudder's men before finally being located and shot to death. By June 7, all three American company commanders had become casualties. Lt. George Kerchner, the only surviving field officer in Company F, assumed command of that company. Lieutenants Armen and Lapres now led Companies D and E, respectively. Each company was also now short on manpower. Sgt. Leonard Lomell reported to the new command post on the road, leading only a dozen survivors of his unit. The three lieutenants decided to establish a perimeter around the captured road, where they would await the landing force from Omaha Beach.

### THUNDEROUS BLASTS BELLOWED THROUGH THE AREA!

Soon, thunderous blasts bellowed through the area as Sgt. Koenig blew up important telegraph poles, cutting German communications along the coastal road. A large group of Nazis approached the new Ranger position, but they were quickly disposed of during a brief, but violent firefight. After driving off the remaining Germans, Lomell, Sgt. Kuhn, and one Ranger infantryman decided to patrol the area to watch for yet another counterattack. About 8:30 a.m., the trio headed off the coastal road, and had traveled no more than one hundred yards from the American perimeter when they discovered the missing 155mm German guns, with ammunition stacked next to each one. The guns were serviceable, but they had apparently been abandoned before firing a single shell. Ironically, these deadly weapons were found in a farmer's field less than 550 yards from their casements, where they might have destroyed part of the Allied fleet before the invasion could be launched.

### A MASSIVE EXPLOSION!

Acting quickly, Lomell ran up to a pair of the guns and placed two thermite grenades into the traversing mechanisms. The silent grenades melted the gears of the guns, knocking them out of action. The sergeant broke the sites on the remaining three artillery pieces, assuming that the Germans would not be able to accurately range their fire should they retake the position and eventually re-crew the massive guns. Lomell and his two comrades raced back to the road and collected all the other incendiary grenades from the Rangers manning the roadblock. Rushing back to the trio of remaining guns, the Americans placed these grenades in the traversing and elevating mechanisms, and soon rendered them inoperable as well. They banged on the sites, destroying them. As Lomell emerged from the hedgerow in front of the guns, a massive explosion just to his left obliterated a nearby German ammunition depot. Sgt. Rupinski had led a team from Company E on this mission.

### SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED THEIR ASSIGNED MISSION

As news spread among the surviving Rangers that the 155m guns had been located and destroyed, Rudder's men basked in knowing that they had successfully completed their initial assigned mission. By 9:00, the guns were out of commission, the paved highway cut, and a roadblock established. The artillery had been so well camouflaged that the Army Air Force and its photo reconnaissance planes could not detect them from above. Lt. Kerchner and Sgt. Lomell would receive the Distinguished Service Cross for their heroic actions during the fighting.

The remaining Rangers of the Second Battalion stayed at the roadblock, most surviving two and a half days of continued German counterassaults, until relief came. Companies A and B and the Fifth Ranger Battalion had planned to meet them within three hours of the initial landing on Pointe-du-Hoc. Instead, it took them three days to fight their way across Omaha Beach and inland before making the junction.

Rudder counted his loss in taking Pointe-du-Hoc. Capt. Walter E. Block spent the entire day ministering to the 130 Rangers who were dead or dying near the cliff's edge, as well as to the wounded before their evacuation

Still, Rudder's Rangers had accomplished their difficult task - Pointe-du-Hoc was in American hands, the feared 155m guns were out of commission, and the road along the coast was severed. However, the fighting was not over - the road to Berlin would take thousands more lives before the penultimate mission was completed.

