



# 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)

### PERSONAL MEMORIES OF CAPT M B MACPHERSON FROM CROGGA, PORT SODERICK 1

**Commander of "A" Troop, 1st Battery, 15th Light Anti-aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery (The Manx Regiment)**

**Code named "Overlord" the great invasion of Normandy on 6th June 1944 as recalled fifty years on by Capt M B Macpherson of 15th (IOM) Light A A Regt R A (TA)**

I was one of about five officers ordered to form the Regimental Advance Party led by Major Henry Kelly. None of us knew exactly where or when the great invasion, for which we and many thousands of all arms, had been carefully preparing, was to take place.

#### **CODE NAME GOLD BEACH**

We left our Regimental area in Norfolk to assemble in West Ham stadium London where we, together with a few hundred other troops of 7th Armoured Division (Desert Rats), were camped immediately prior to embarkation. Our Armoured Division would be following up immediately behind the 50th Infantry Division with 8th Armoured Brigade under command, who would first assault the beach in our sector - code named "Gold" beach.

For two or three days we were allowed 'exits' into bomb-scarred London which we made the most of thinking they might well be the last few days of life for many of us. Then the order came to seal the stadium and we were confined for security reasons to camp.

Amongst the troops there was a general air of anxious anticipation, many were highly keyed up for the immediate task which lay ahead and after a couple of days closely confined as we were, some obviously became irritable. A gale in the English Channel had resulted in General Eisenhower, unknown of course to us, ordering a twenty four hour 'hold' of invasion plans. So secret was the whole operation that even we were not informed of the date of the assault but we knew it could not be far off.



**Captain Macpherson when he first joined the Manx Regiment. He was a Second Lieutenant then.**

There occurred a few incidents which revealed some indiscipline amongst a few less reliable soldiers, not of our Regiment I must record. Some barrage balloons were shot down by rifle fire from our camp on one occasion; and on another some soldiers found a huge iron roller which they used as a battering ram to burst open the high doors of the perimeter fence, much to the terror of a local Home Guard soldier who was apparently on duty in the street outside. He fled at high speed pursued by the great roller! Within hours we were visited by the General commanding our area of London who called a parade to address us concerning the need for calm, patience and good discipline etc and he emphasised the need for our close confinement on grounds of security. He then arranged for the London Palladium Show, with Tommy Trinder and Company, to come down next morning and put on a performance specially for our benefit. This seemed to calm things down and there was no more trouble.



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Later that day I wrote what I thought might well be my last letter ever to my parents in the Island. No hint could I give of course of our whereabouts or of what was going on. Our letters were held for six or seven days by the army authorities as well as being read by the Censor, such was the secrecy imposed. It was dated 5th June 1944 and is now in my possession again!

That evening we embarked aboard a "Landing Ship Tank" or LST - two main decks full of vehicles, some tanks and guns as well as various other advance parties and their equipment and arms. On the troop deck below we lay in rope hammocks slung close to the deckhead and crammed in side by side touching; below us on the iron deck lay soldiers on palliasses closely packed and likely to be trodden on by those who descended from the hammocks above.

#### "WHAT A POWERFUL & DETERMINED ENEMY"

Darkness fell and I could tell that our ship was underway down the Thames estuary. It was difficult to snatch even a short sleep as one wondered what lay ahead and what the beaches would be like - would the mines have been cleared - would the first assault be successful and able to advance off the beaches? Etc etc. And the hammock was unfamiliar too! We knew well from experience in the Western Desert and again in Italy what a powerful and determined enemy we would be fighting.

By dawn we were passing the North Foreland and soon after passed Ramsgate. It was "D" day 6th June 1944 and the infantry divisions and airborne troops were by now fighting their way ashore. I don't recall breakfasting but was summoned with fellow officers on deck. The sea was pretty choppy and the wind fresh from the west, we were amongst a large convoy proceeding very close to one another and close in-shore. There was a naval escort of corvettes ahead and on our exposed port side also. I climbed a steep companionway to a cabin near the bridge where we officers were given a final briefing as to our exact landing beach and where other Divisions would be to our flanks etc; we marked up our maps and hoped we'd find the rendezvous areas inland as instructed. As we descended the companionway again, I noted the white cliffs near Dover and Folkestone on our starboard hand and looking towards the French coast on my left side I could hear the distant rumble of heavy bombing - the RAF and USAF were continuing their great saturation effort on the enemy shore defences, railways and road bridges. 6,000 aircraft were in operation to assist the assault. I turned to my fellow officer on the companionway and pointed out what I took to be Cap Gris Nez just visible in the far distance.

"That is where the shells are fired from - to Dover, I hope the RAF has dealt with those guns" I said. He followed my gaze nodding in agreement; but even as we looked there was a star-like twinkle from Cap Gris Nez over twenty miles distant followed immediately by a noise we recognised well of heavy shells fast approaching.

#### Crash-crash! Crash-crash!

Great spouts of water right amongst our closely moving ships. A direct hit on the vessel in-shore of us started a fierce fire in trucks paced on the wooden hatch covers; we could see the frantic efforts of fire fighters trying to contain the damage. Our own ship had sustained a hole above the waterline near the bow, but the rest seemed to have escaped narrowly. A second salvo followed missing the ships by yards. At last the naval vessels and some of the merchant ships made smoke and we proceeded in a thick black cloud unable to observe where further shells hit.

As we proceeded the smoke blew away and Cap Gris Nez did not trouble us further, but the ship afire was in great difficulties. I heard the Commodore of the convoy, who was in our ship, order the Master to continue with us and try to get the fire out. It was not long however before the hatch covers gave way and the remains of the blazing vehicles fell into the hot fumes by now generated below. There followed a great explosion as petrol- and ammunition-laden vehicles blew sky high. The stricken vessel turned slowly and having lost power drifted towards the white cliffs to beach itself and get rescue for all aboard.

We steamed on south-westwards and soon saw that the whole Channel ahead was a mass of shipping all going our way. They had come from many Channel ports and were accompanied by naval ships of every description.

#### THE ROAR OF MULTIPLE ROCKET LAUNCHERS...

Overhead the RAF and USAF filled the skies with bombers and fighters of all available types. I felt overawed by the mighty fleets which came into view as we got nearer the French coast between Le Havre and Cherbourg. The sea was still very choppy but nothing was going to stop this great invasion - I could see that! The noises of battle became evermore close as we proceeded, the thunder of huge naval gunfire from eight great battleships which assisted the assault on shore, the roar of multiple rocket launchers and the sharp ear-splitting cracks of high velocity naval shellfire from cruisers and destroyers by the score surrounded us as we approached the shore within about a mile.

The Luftwaffe made only occasional raids by fighter bombers and were unable to do much destruction due to the constant umbrella of Allied fighters ever watchful overhead.



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#### GUNS CONTINUED TO ROAR

Our ship, like many others, anchored amidst the furious activity of smaller craft plying between ship and shore or simply discharging troops and fighting vehicles. Some lay beached awaiting the next tide to float them off again, others had become wrecked ashore. We signalled the Beach Master of our area and awaited his order before we could charge the shore. He it was, with his salvage teams, who had to try to avoid chaos on the beach and keep ways clear for incoming troops. Fortunately our sector seemed fairly well organised, the assault had gone well and apart from odd shells landing the enemy had been cleared away by the troops now a few miles inland. It was not so trouble free on the far right where one of the American beaches was well defended and the invaders were suffering terrible losses as we heard later.

By evening the Beach Master ordered us to stay afloat for the night and come ashore in the morning. We were sorry not to have got ashore and made progress that day and we hoped the great mass of shipping would not be heavily bombed or shelled during the night. Meanwhile the noises of battle ashore could be heard and the great guns behind in the naval ships continued to roar as and when requested by the forces on land.

#### THE SHORE WAS LITTERED WITH DEBRIS OF WAR

June 7th, D+1, we were ordered to beach that morning. I recall the ship sliding aground and the bow doors opening, the ramp going down in fairly shallow water probably about three and a half feet at first shelving gradually. The iron girder sea defences had been removed by our sappers in sufficient places to allow gateways for ships, mines had mostly been cleared, but the shore was littered with debris of war including the dead. Many damaged small craft lay askew bashed by the incoming waves. Vehicles had all been "waterproofed" and hopefully should manage four feet or so of water.

I watched as the first vehicles left down the ramp and into the water and we were much relieved to see them keep going to dry land and proceed up the beach ways - all was going to be all right. Immediately before our truck there was a young Lieutenant in a small Jeep with his driver. Having cleared the ramp by a few yards they began to go down into deeper water - probably a shell crater not yet filled in with the sea sand - the Jeep disappeared except for the two pipes leading up from the engine intake and exhaust and their two heads, steel helmeted, just showing above the water. We smiled approval as the Lieutenant held his revolver up at arm's length, muzzle in the air, "keeping his powder dry" as it were!

They kept going and were soon ashore to a cheer from us! It was then our turn and it all seemed so easy - "A piece of cake Sir" the driver observed as he drove us up that beach without trouble or enemy interference. We headed for our map reference rendezvous through the shell torn hinterland. We were in Hitler's "Fortress Europe" at last. Now we were to prepare for the arrival, during the next few days, of the Regiment with our Ack Ack artillery which would have to be de-waterproofed and made ready for immediate action. Months of hard fighting over hundreds of miles lay ahead for all arms before the final victory in Nazi Germany.

**No-one who was present off the beaches on "D-Day" will ever forget the sight and sound of the greatest invasion armada the world had ever known to-date.**

