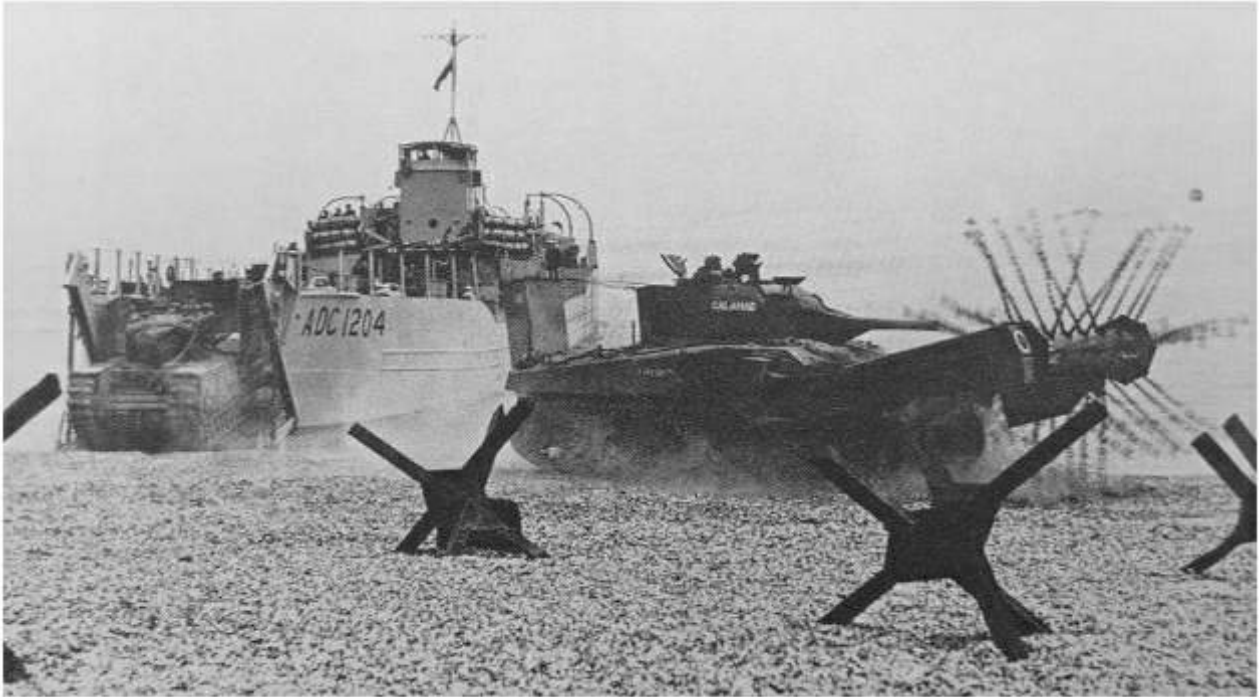


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# The Westminster Dragoons In Normandy June - July 1944

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# Introduction

The story of the Westminster Dragoons on D-Day is worth telling. Few know it.

The allied assault 70 years ago today was made in Normandy on a front of five divisions which landed between Varreville and Ouistreham. Along this coast the Germans had built a strong crust of defences with guns of all calibres, under concrete – up to 10 feet thick and heavily reinforced – anti-tank ditches and walls; minefields and wire; and beach obstacles carrying mines, both above and below water. Natural obstacles such as cliffs had been fortified and the maximum use made of promenade and normal sea walls in the general coastal defence plan.

The British plan to deal with these defences was novel. This would be the first amphibious assault led by armour, not infantry. Specially-adapted Duplex Drive swimming tanks would hit the beach first. Five minutes later, armoured breaching teams comprised of the Westminster Dragoons and 81 and 82 Assault Squadrons Royal Engineers would smash through the defences on the beaches and provide fire support for the infantry following immediately behind. Tactical surprise would be achieved by landing enough armour sufficiently quickly to overwhelm the German defences - to breach the Atlantic Wall.

Things did not work out as planned. The seas were too rough for the swimming tanks of the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards and the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, so they were held back. And so it was that the very first landing craft to hit the beach at GOLD were those containing the Westminster Dragoons and Royal Engineers. They did their job without conventional tanks in support. Indeed, at GOLD KING, for the first 35 minutes after H-Hour, it was the guns of the WDs' Sherman mine-clearing flail tanks which provided the intimate fire support needed by the infantry assaulting alongside them.

At the eastern end of GOLD, codenamed JIG, the swimming tanks of the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards were delivered directly ashore shortly after the WDs and fought alongside them as planned - although it was the 75mm gun on a WD flail tank (fired by Tpr Jim Smith, who died last year) which destroyed the 88mm PaK cannon covering the beach from Wiederstandnetz 33 at La Rivière, sparing the assaulting troops even more carnage.



A Sherman Crab flail tank in training in England, 1944.

The courage and resourcefulness of these men were astounding. Already knowing that they were the very tip of the spear, it surely needed absolute resolve to press on after seeing the landing craft containing the 30 or so tanks that were intended to protect them receding, leaving them first to face that beach and a prepared, determined enemy.

The personal recollections of the WDs who landed on D-Day, reprinted in this book, show a coolness and modesty about the achievement which is daunting.

Also included in this book are excerpts from the WD War Diary for June and July 1944. These show, in their calm and succinct analysis, what the WDs did that day. The wider significance of their deeds was recognised by General Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, who said in his 1946 report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff:

*“Apart from the factor of tactical surprise, the comparatively light casualties which we sustained on all the beaches, except Omaha, were in large measure due to the success of the novel mechanical contrivances which we employed and to the staggering moral and material effect of the mass of armour landed in the leading waves of the assault. It is doubtful if the assault forces could have firmly established themselves without the assistance of these weapons.”*

Also included is the 50 (Northumbrian) Division operation order which I believe is the source of the WDs’ Villers Bocage battle honour.

Seventy years on, it is still a staggering series of feats. The invasion of Europe was so successful that today we can scarcely conceive how much was risked on the throw.

Major Conn MacEvilly RY

Chief Instructor (Reserves), Land Warfare School

10 June 2014



## A Note on Copyright and Plagiarism

This book has been produced for the purposes of Exercise YEOMAN LANDING, a battlefield tour and commemorative visit to Normandy on 12-15 June 2014 by serving members of HQ (Westminster Dragoons) Squadron, the Royal Yeomanry, along with members of the Westminster Dragoons Regimental Association and family members of former Westminster Dragoons.

Two things have prevented me from producing this book entirely from original sources. The first is time. The second is the existence of Richard Doherty's excellent and very-well researched book *Hobart's 79th Armoured Division at War: Invention, Innovation and Inspiration*. When I discovered it, the will go to original sources almost left me - he had done all the work, and such an incredible amount of it. I urge you to buy it and absolve my thieving guilt.

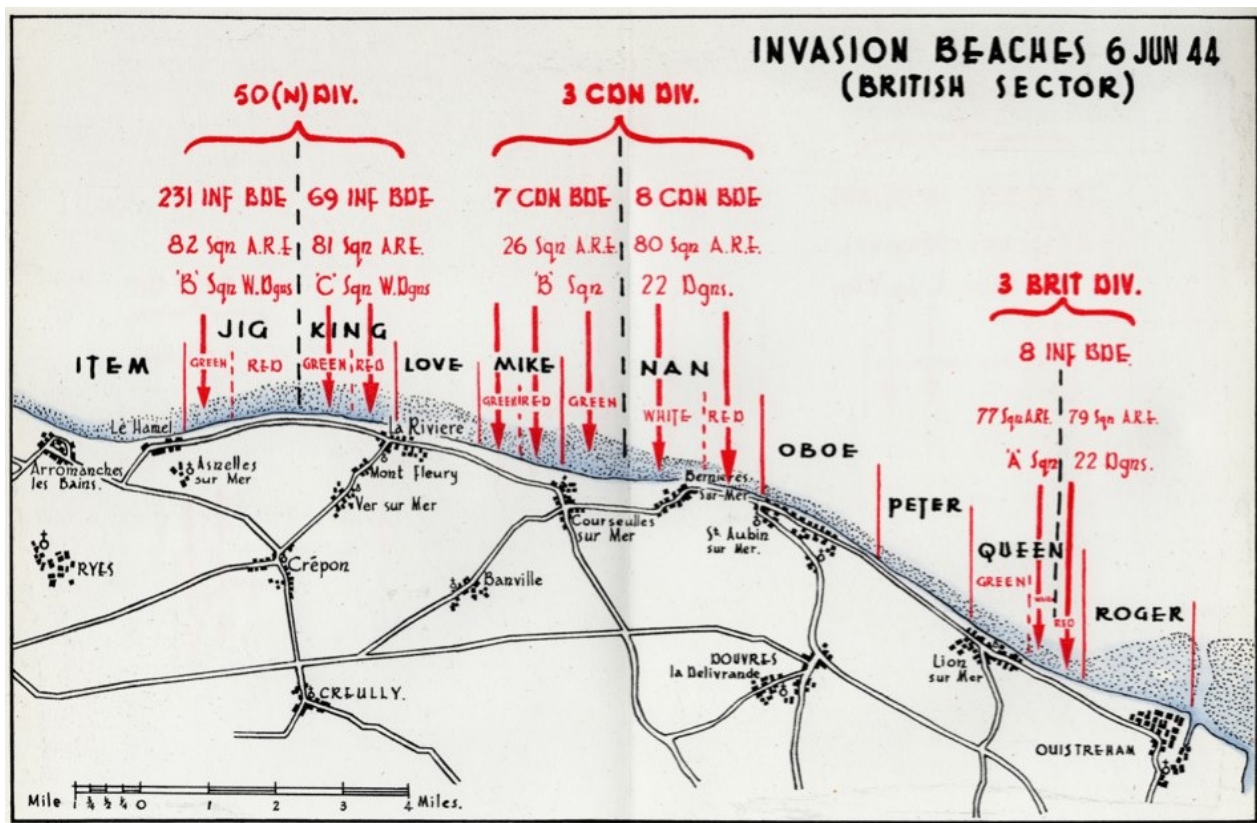
This book also draws heavily on the regimental history of the Westminster Dragoons, *A History of the Westminster Dragoons 1901-1967* by Captain C. C. P. Lawson & Captain N. Huw-Williams.

That is not to say that it is mere plagiarism: I have had regard to (among other sources) the War Diaries of the Westminster Dragoons and of 4th/7th Dragoon Guards, a War Office document entitled *Opposition Encountered on the British beaches in Normandy on D-Day* (DEFE 2/490), a very extensive battlefield tour pack produced by 50th (Northumbrian) Division in 1947, and other sources.

The maps are taken from *The Story of 79th Armoured Division*, published in Berlin in 1946, to which Crown Copyright may apply. Most of the photographs and illustrations are taken from the Imperial War Museum and are identified as such.

Finally, please note that this document has not been proof-read. It is a draft of something much more original and authoritative which I hope to write.

# The Assault



B and C Squadrons of the Westminster Dragoons had been placed under the command of 50 (Northumbrian) Division. The task of 50 Div, as the assault division (and therefore the spearhead) of 30 Corps, was to land between Le Hamel and La Rivière, penetrate the beach defences and secure by last light on D-Day a covering position which would include Bayeux and the area of St Leger on the main Bayeux-Caen road. In addition it was to construct three tracked vehicle gaps 8m wide, two for light traffic and one for heavy. It also had to clear a stretch of beach 250m long per battalion front by H+60 minutes, and to mark gaps through beach obstacles and minefields. It is worth noting that those were tasks to which an entire division's resources were allocated.

B and C Squadrons of the Westminster Dragoons, together with 81 and 82 Squadrons of 6 Assault Regiment Royal Engineers, made up the breaching teams whose task was to make gaps or lanes through the minefields and obstacles on and behind GOLD beach. Through these gaps 69 and 231 Infantry Brigades with their supporting tanks and guns would pass to their objectives inland.

The beaches on the 50 Div front were named, from left to right, KING, JIG and ITEM.

The beach on which C Squadron Westminster Dragoons was due to land in support of 69th Infantry Brigade, with a frontage of some 1500 yards, was just to the west of the village of La Rivière, codenamed KING.

B Squadron, in support of 231st Brigade of 50 (Northumbrian) Division, had an equivalent frontage and were to land at JIG, on the right by Le Hamel.

The breaching problem confronting 50 Div can be summarized under four main headings. Firstly, the artificial obstacles erected by the Germans; secondly, the obstacles presented by the geological formation of the beach itself; thirdly, the seawall or sand dunes at the back of the beach; and finally, the marshland or minefields in rear of the seawall or dunes.

Air photographs received during April and May 1944 revealed that the enemy had started to erect beach obstacles to obstruct the landing of craft at about high tide. The following types of obstacles were observed:

- Element C
- Timber ramps
- Timber stakes
- Steel hedgehogs
- Steel tetrahedra

During the fortnight before D-Day, Teller mines and bottle-shaped objects appeared on the tops of the obstacles. The latter proved to be waterproof shells fitted with press igniters, intended to detonate when landing craft or vehicles brushed against them.

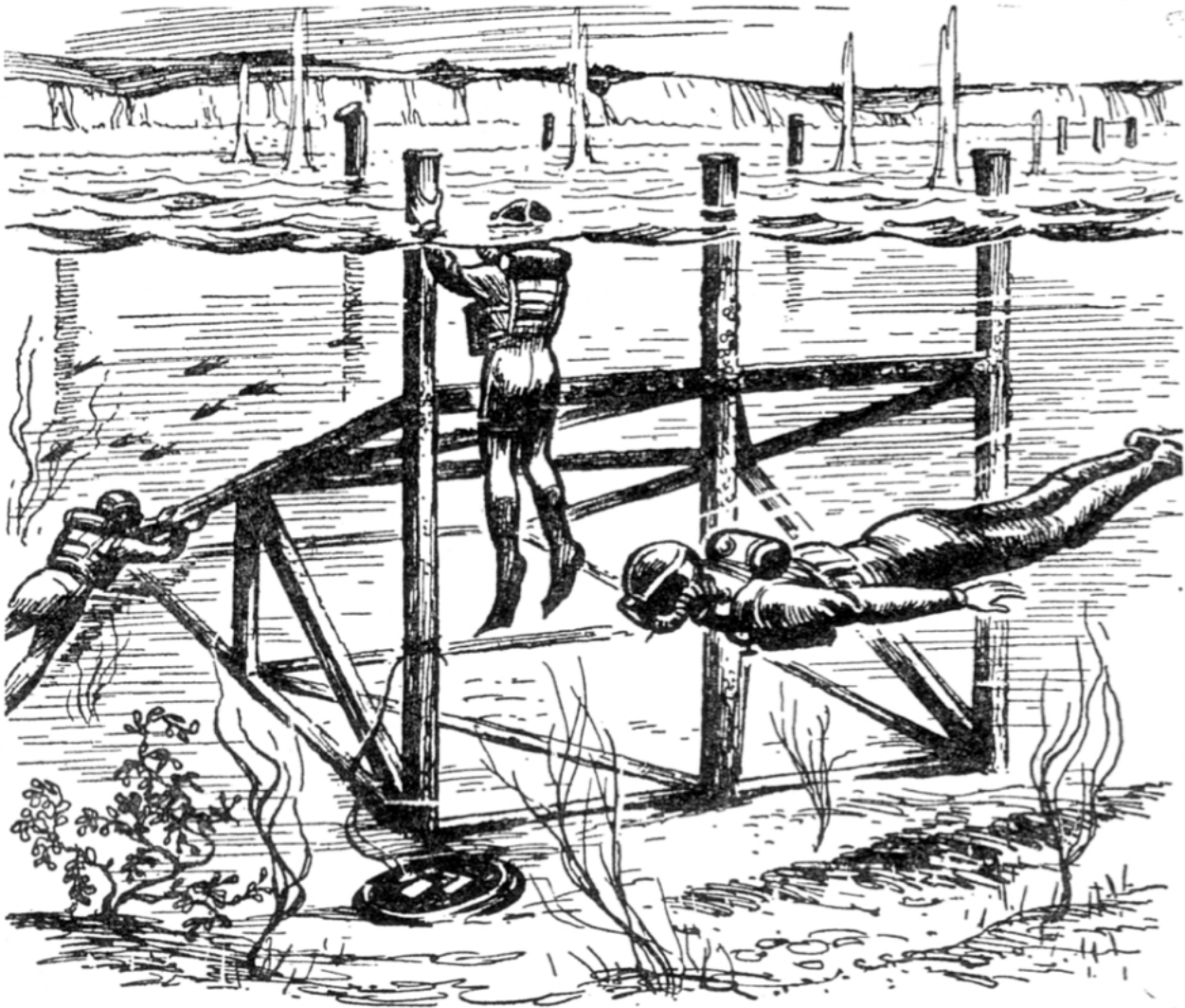
The geological formation of the beaches was firm sand interspersed with strips of peaty clay. The firm sands was capable of taking wheeled vehicles but the clay patches presented a problem. The beach had a very slight gradient and the range of the tide was approximately 8m. The obstacles were in the upper half of the tidal range.

Behind the firm sand was a strip of soft sand up to 7m wide in front of the dunes or seawall. The strong points at Le Hamel and La Rivière were fronted by a seawall 4 to 5m high. Between these two places there was a low line of sand dunes about 3m high and 3m deep. Behind the dunes was a marshland area varying from 15m to 130m in depth. There were a number of exits existing in the marsh which were known to be defended by the Germans and it was anticipated that these exits would be cratered and/or mined.

It was known from air photographs that mines had been laid behind the beaches and work was proceeding on them even at the moment when the Allied invasion force was embarking on its landing craft on D-2. It was anticipated that mines would be encountered everywhere.

H-Hour was fixed so that the tide was rising when the assaulting troops landed and so that the majority of the obstacles would be out of the water. Obstacles found on the beaches below water level were to be the responsibility of the Royal Navy.

Special parties known as LCOCU's (Landing Craft Obstacle Clearance Units) were organized by the Royal Navy for this task. They consisted of one officer and nine ratings operating from an LCA; there were equipped with rubber suits and shallow water diving apparatus and they carried explosive charges. They were able to swim long distances from the parent LCA and were able to operate below the surface attaching charges to demolish beach obstacles.



The clearance of beach obstacles above water level was to be undertaken by 73rd and 280nd Army Field Companies, Royal Engineers, who would land on foot from the LCT containing the AVREs and the Westminster Dragoons, and would carry explosive charges to demolish the obstacles. Their aim was to clear a 250-yard gap on each battalion front before the rising tide covered the obstacles, i.e. approximately H+60 minutes.

The Assaulting Engineers in conjunction with the flails of the Westminster Dragoons were to form three gapping teams on each battalion front.

To carry out their tasks the two Westminster Dragoons Squadrons had combined with their Royal Engineer peers into composite squadrons. Half of C Squadron Westminster Dragoons and half of 81 Squadron Royal Engineers combined to form X Breaching Squadron under the command of Major Sidney Sutton, a Dubliner; the other halves of the Squadrons combined to form Z Breaching Squadron, commanded by Major Robert Thompstone, Royal Engineers, with Captain R.F. Bell as Second-in-Command.

B Squadron Westminster Dragoons and 82 Squadron Royal Engineers combined in the same way, one half (W Breaching Squadron) being commanded by Major Harold Stanyon, the other (Y



Breaching Squadron) by Major Harold Elphinstone, Royal Engineers with Captain B. Taylor as Second-in-Command.

Each breaching squadron consisted of three breaching teams.

Each team was comprised of six armoured fighting vehicles, a mixture of tanks, Sherman Crabs and AVREs: 1 AVRE Roly-Poly, 1 AVRE Bobbin, 2 Sherman Crabs and 1 AVRE Fascine. The craft load of tanks was completed by the addition of either a command tank, or a bridge AVRE, or an armoured bulldozer. Each team fitted onto one Landing Craft Tank (LCT), and each AFV was loaded onto the craft so that they would all disembark in the right order with the right equipment for the task that needed to be performed at their particular landing site.

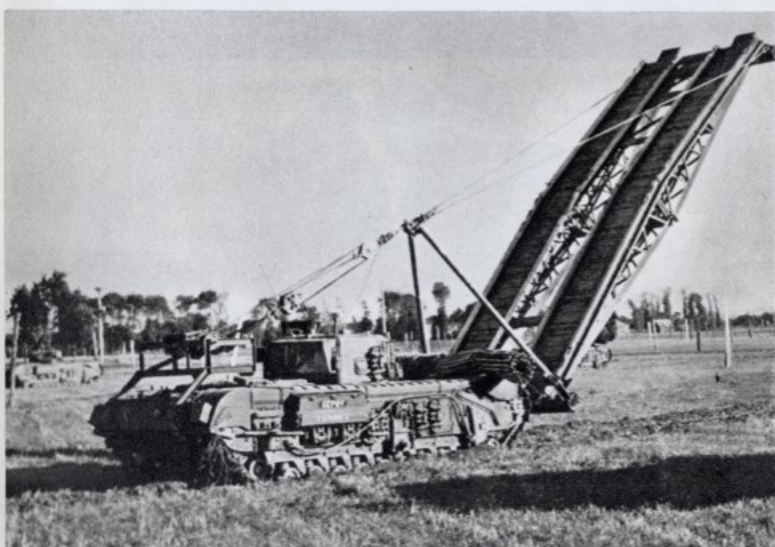
The AVREs were of four types: Bobbin, Robbin, Fascine and SBG Bridge. The Bobbins carried a length of track material wound on a drum which, on release, unwound as the AVRE proceeded and left a roadway over soft sand or mud. The Roly-Polys were designed to overcome clay patches below the high water mark and consisted of a roll of track (either coir or roller shuttering) carried in the bow compartment of an LCT. On grounding, the device, one end



Above: Churchill AVRE (Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers) Type C Mark II carpetlayer for laying tracks across soft beaches (IWM H 37859). Below: AVRE with spigot armament. Bottom: AVRE with SBG.



A. V. R. E.



A. V. R. E. WITH SMALL BOX GIRDER BRIDGE MOUNTED







Above: Rommel inspecting beach defences in Normandy, 1944.

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small ridge overlooking the beach, the top about 600 from it. The ground behind that was not visible to anyone on the beach. On JIG, the ground was flat and thickly strewn with mines.

The enemy on each of JIG and KING were about a company strong, reinforced by certain other troops including the crews of anti-tank guns. There was a platoon position at La Rivière which included an 88mm gun encased in concrete, *Widerstandsnetz 33*, covering the entire beach. On the seaward side the concrete was 17 feet thick. Another enemy platoon with two 75mm anti-tank guns was on the eastern end of the ridge above La Rivière. In the centre of KING, just over the top of the ridge, were four enormous concrete shelters each said to contain a 150mm gun, designed to fire at approaching landing craft. Aerial photos showed some mysterious digging about 500m west of this battery which later transpired to contain machine-gun positions.

The enemy at JIG had was in platoon strength with a 50mm gun in a concrete protective emplacement at its centre, as well as two platoons with an 88mm anti-tank gun in Le Hamel, sighted to fire directly along the beach. Another was sited on the cliffs away to the right and dug in, also with a direct line of fire along the beach.

## Gold Beach



An LCT(R) - Landing Craft Tank (Rocket) - in action off the British sector, 6 June 1944 (IWM A23937)

Before dawn on the morning of D-Day, the tank crews of the Westminster Dragoons were going about their normal morning routine - washing, brewing tea and stowing away their bedding. So rough had been the crossing that many had suffered from seasickness and could not wait to disembark, irrespective of what might confront them. Enemy retaliatory fire was being suppressed by attacks from heavy bombers and by naval gunfire, all part of the Joint Fire Plan, which included self-propelled Royal Artillery and Royal Canadian Artillery regiments firing from their LCTs on the run in to the beaches. As dawn broke, swarms of Allied fighters appeared overhead to support the landings and deter Luftwaffe intervention.

For seemingly limitless miles on every side nothing could be seen but ships and landing craft. The sky was overcast and the sea choppy. As the light improved the French coast appeared - first as a thin line in the distance, but gradually growing in size until, through binoculars details of the beaches and the background could be distinguished.

The final run-in commenced; the chains securing the tanks to the decks were removed; crews mounted; engines started; wireless sets were switched on and tank commanders fastened their steel helmets. On the last two or three hundred yards the landing craft began to open fire with their own 20mm guns.

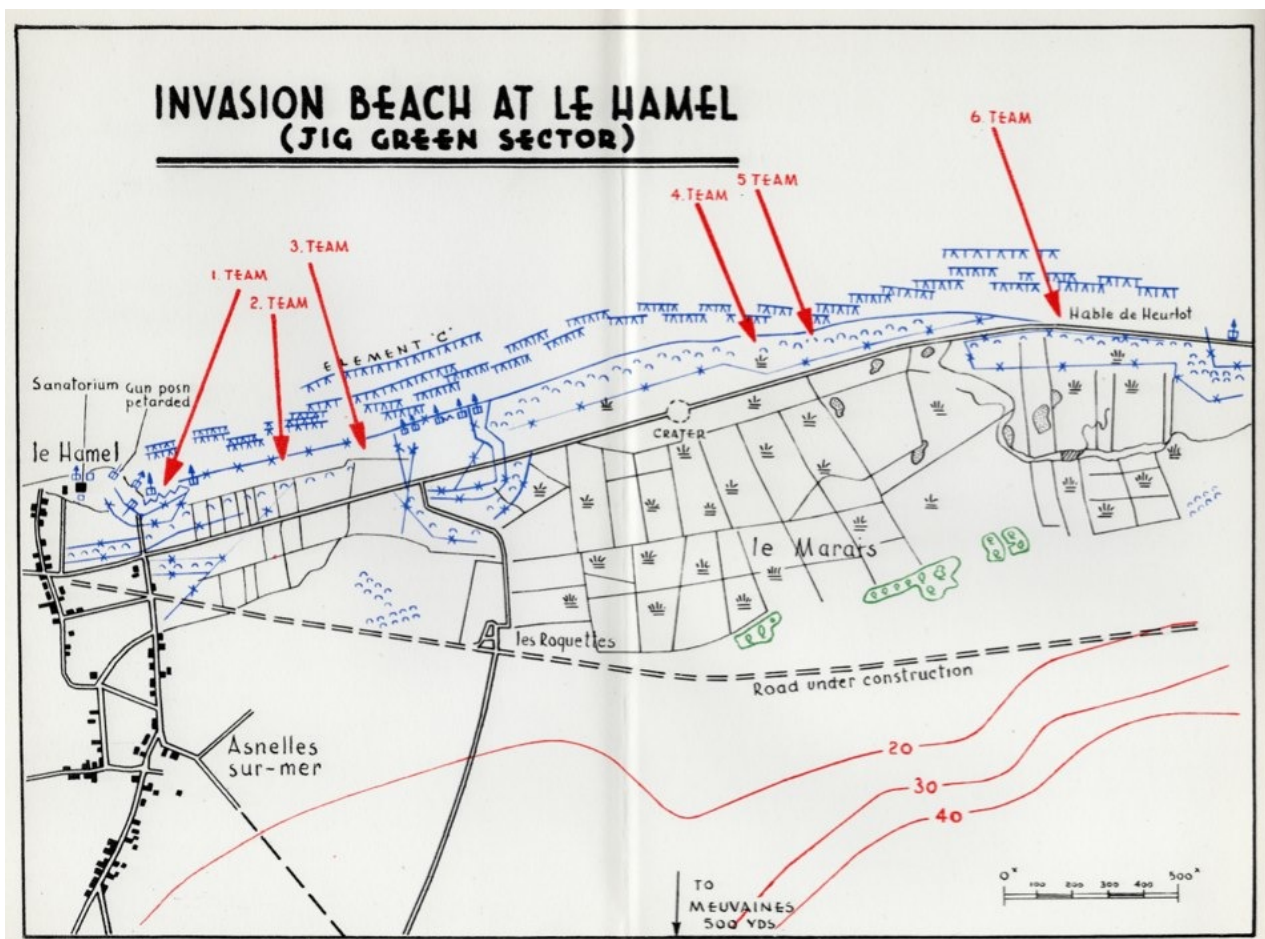
As the first assault wave closed on the beaches, supporting fire lifted to strike the rear and flank areas, allowing those enemy guns that had not been silenced to open up on the approaching landing craft. Their fire did little harm while the attackers were afloat although 'along the fringe



of waves breaking on the shore, craft grounding and unloading in the surf provided the enemy with easy targets and casualties increased'. A miscellany of units and vehicles was scheduled to land within minutes of H Hour; these included flail tanks and AVREs as well as DD tanks, self-propelled artillery, obstacle clearance groups and infantry.

When at the agreed 6,000 yards from the beaches, the Senior Naval Officer advised Commander 8 Armoured Brigade that the seas were too high to launch the DD tanks and so it was decided to beach the LCTs instead. This resulted in the DDs arriving on the beach some five minutes after the first of the assaulting infantry: five minutes after them, in the case of 4th/7th Dragoon Guards, and thirty minutes after them in the case of the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry (some 35 minutes after H-Hour). The breaching squadrons landed in front of the assaulting infantry as arranged. This meant that the AVREs and Crabs of 79th Armoured Division were the first tanks to hit the shores of occupied Europe. They did so, at least initially, without the support and protection of the gun of the Sherman DD tanks which were intended to fight alongside them.

## GOLD JIG (LE HAMEL)



Participating Assault Squadrons: B Squadron, Westminster Dragoons and 82 Assault Squadron, Royal Engineers

On Jig Green, about a mile and a quarter long, Major Elphinstone's Y Breaching Squadron was responsible for Jig Green West. Major Harold Stanyon commanded W Breaching Squadron on Jig Green East. Each was to clear three lanes.

**JIG GREEN West, Major Elphinstone (OC, 82nd Squadron, 6 Assault Regiment RE)**

**Lane 1, Captain K.M. Wilford: UNSUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2025) 2 Flail (B, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine) (lead AVRE drowned, jamming the exit, remaining vehicles did not unload until 1330)

**Lane 2, Major Elphinstone: UNSUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2027) 2 Flail (B, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE, 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine) (two Flails bogged, one of them then knocked out by 75mm shellfire, AVRE (Fascine) hit and overturned, AVRE (Roly Poly) mined, Major Elphinstone killed)

**Lane 3 Lieutenants S.V. Grant and N.W. Greene: SUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2026) 2 Flail (B, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine) (one Flail mined; the other (Sgt Lindsay) flailed through to lateral then west through Le Hamel but knocked out by 88mm; AVRE (Fascine) mined; AVRE left beach via Lane 3 and later attacked Le Hamel Sanatorium with its Petard)

**JIG GREEN East, Major Stanyon (OC, B Squadron, Westminster Dragoons)**

**Lane 4, Captain J.M. Laytham and Lieutenant P. Crofton: SUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2028) 2 Flail (B, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 2 AVRE (Fascine) (one Flail bogged; the other flailed through to the lateral; AVRE (Fascine) dropped fascines in craters)

**Lane 5, Lieutenant G.R. Ellis: SUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2029) 2 Flail (B, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine) (one Flail hit by AT gun and burned out; one AVRE drowned)

**Lane 6, Captain P.J.B. Somerset: SUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2030) 2 Flail (B, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine) (one Flail bogged and hit by anti-tank fire)

Trouble started even before landing. The vessel which was to beach just to the east of Le Hamel was hit several times on the engine room and bridge before it was able to discharge its tanks on the beach. Casualties from the shelling were suffered among the Naval and Royal Engineer personnel on board; the lane commander, Captain Wilford RE, was wounded by a direct hit on

the vessel's bridge. But with the engine room out of commission the Landing Craft could only float with the tide and it was not possible for the tanks to land until 1330 when the tide left the craft high and dry.

The beaching of the other five craft was uneventful and the tanks started their wade ashore at 0725 hours. Major Elphinstone's team was to clear Lane 2 but the LCTs had touched down too far west and the Flails bogged on the beach. At this time a member of the Regiment who was present says -

*"the beach seemed deserted - all the tanks reached dry land without opposition. The whole thing was rather like the exercises carried out at Studland Bay and seemed vaguely unreal. It was broken as soon as the leading infantry came ashore debauching from their landing craft about seven minutes after the tanks. Then the unmistakable sound of machine guns and mortars was heard, gradually at first but riding in crescendo as the infantry scrambled through the water and up the beach."*

Another writer says:

*"The other assault battalion of 231 Brigade, the 1st Dorset, was more fortunate since it landed out of range of the Le Hamel defences and was able to deal swiftly with the opposition on its own front. Here the specialised armour operated almost according to the book, covering clay patches, clearing mines, smashing concrete obstructions and filling craters. Within an hour the armoured assault teams had cleared three exits, and the Dorsets were moving inland, covered by the guns of the Crabs which did double duty in the absence of the amphibious tanks."*

Shortly after disembarking from his LCT, Major Elphinstone was killed by a gunshot to the neck. He had exposed himself to enemy fire in order to direct his machine gun at the German pillboxes. He received a posthumous Mention in Despatches. Captain Taylor of the Westminster Dragoons assumed command.

Out of this confusion came some order as the AVREs of Lane 2 diverted to assist in clearing beach obstacles and, later, left the beach along Lane 3 to help in clearing Le Hamel with Petard and machine-gun fire.

Their operation that morning cost 82 Assault Squadron two dead and five wounded while the Westminster Dragoons had five men wounded; four of the squadron's twenty-one AVREs were knocked out and one Crab, Major Stanyon's, was a victim of enemy fire, with others disabled by exploding mines or by bogging. Largely due to Stanyon's inspiring efforts, the 'tanks were cleared off the beach through a lane which later in the day was to be the main exit for 7th Armoured Division on this beach'. Recommended for the DSO, Stanyon received the Military Cross.

In addition to Major Elphinstone, the other death in 82 Squadron was Lance Sergeant Eli George, commander of a fascine-carrying AVRE. George died when his tank, named Loch Ness, suffered transmission problems and he climbed into the driver's seat to resolve the problem;

having done so, he opened the driver's visor just before the tank received a direct frontal hit that killed him and injured the driver. Although the crew tried to advance, Loch Ness then overturned.

W Breaching Squadron under Major Stanyon (Westminster Dragoons) was more successful. All the tanks safely reached the beach. The right hand team (Lane 6) did not manage to avoid the clay patch on the beach and the leading tank became bogged. The second tank carried on with its task and managed to flail a gap through the minefield between the edge of the beach and the road although patches of the ground were not passable by tanks. The centre (Lane 5) and left hand (Lane 4) teams quickly made gaps through the mines up to the road. The Germans who were not killed made their way to the beach to surrender.



LE HAMEL BEACH FROM GUN POSITION ON RIGHT. HEIGHT OF BREAKERS CLEARLY SEEN



LE HAMEL: SANATORIUM IN FOREGROUND (NOTE HEDGEHOG OBSTACLES)

Major Stanyon, having seen that the centre and left hand lanes were progressing well, took his tank along to see how the right hand team were getting on. His tank was struck by a mortar shell and set on fire, the crew taking shelter in the dunes. As all the tanks had either gone from the beaches or become bogged, Major Stanyon had to conduct the battle on foot, directing Crabs, AVREs and DD tanks, in spite of heavy machine-gun fire coming his way from close range. Reaching the road the flails then struck inland a short distance to carry out their second task of gapping a large minefield which lay on the landward side.

Distinguishing himself at Le Hamel was Sergeant Robert Lindsay, a flail commander of B Squadron Westminster Dragoons. In spite of 'heavy machine-gun, field and anti-tank gun fire from pillboxes and strongpoints in Le Hamel', he completed a lane before turning his attention to the village although by then his was the only Crab of No. 2 Team in action. (The second Crab in the team had been blown up on a mine that its flails had not detonated while the first AVRE, under Lieutenant Green, had also struck a mine.) Nonetheless, Lindsay created a second gap, passed through Le Hamel and 'prepared to complete the task allotted to his team of gapping the



Commandos of 47 (RM) Commando coming ashore from LCAs (Landing Craft Assault) on Jig Green beach, Gold area, 6 June 1944. LCTs unloading priority vehicles of 231st Brigade, 50th Division, can be seen in the background.

minefield on the far side'. The original plan had assumed that, by this stage, Le Hamel would be in British hands but it remained in firm enemy control.

The infantry of the Royal Hampshires were held up on the beach by the determined fire from this village. Captain Taylor tried to contact Sergeant Lindsay on the wireless to tell him Le Hamel was still held by the enemy but was unable to do so due to damage caused to his wireless when his tank had struck the mine. Sergeant Lindsay's solitary tank charged towards the village held by two platoons of German infantry. On entering the village he calmly went to the rendezvous where he should have joined up with the infantry. Finding none, he commenced his second task, that of clearing the road leading from the western end of the village. He was prevented from accomplishing this due to steel rails firmly planted in the road; he was also unable to get off the road due to the anti-tank ditch. So, turning the tank round he rattled back to the village to find a crossing of the ditch elsewhere. This he achieved and so began his third task of flailing a lane through a minefield just beyond the ditch. The tank had barely started its slow flog forward when it received two hits from an 88 mm, gun firing from the cliffs at Arromanches. On the second hit the tank brewed up.

During all this time the tank was alone in this enemy-held village and accounted for a number of their infantry with its gun. Baling out of the burning tank and suffering from burns the crew split into two and hoped to evade detection by crawling into a cornfield nearby. Troopers Gray and



Field were taken prisoner but their period of captivity lasted only a few days. Sergeant Lindsay with the remaining two crew members lay doggo for the remainder of the day in the cornfield and eventually made their way back toward the lines. For this action Sergeant Lindsay was later awarded the Military Medal.

The effect of Sergeant Lindsay's initiative on the battle should not be underestimated. Chester Wilnot reports the action of this breaching team in the following words:

*“Shortly before 7.30 a.m., the leading companies of the 1st Battalion, the Hampshire Regiment, leapt out into two feet of water to find that the specialised armour, apart from the DDs, was already ashore engaging the defences. The bombardment had had less material effect than was expected and on the extreme right the stronghold of Le Hamel was almost untouched. ...*

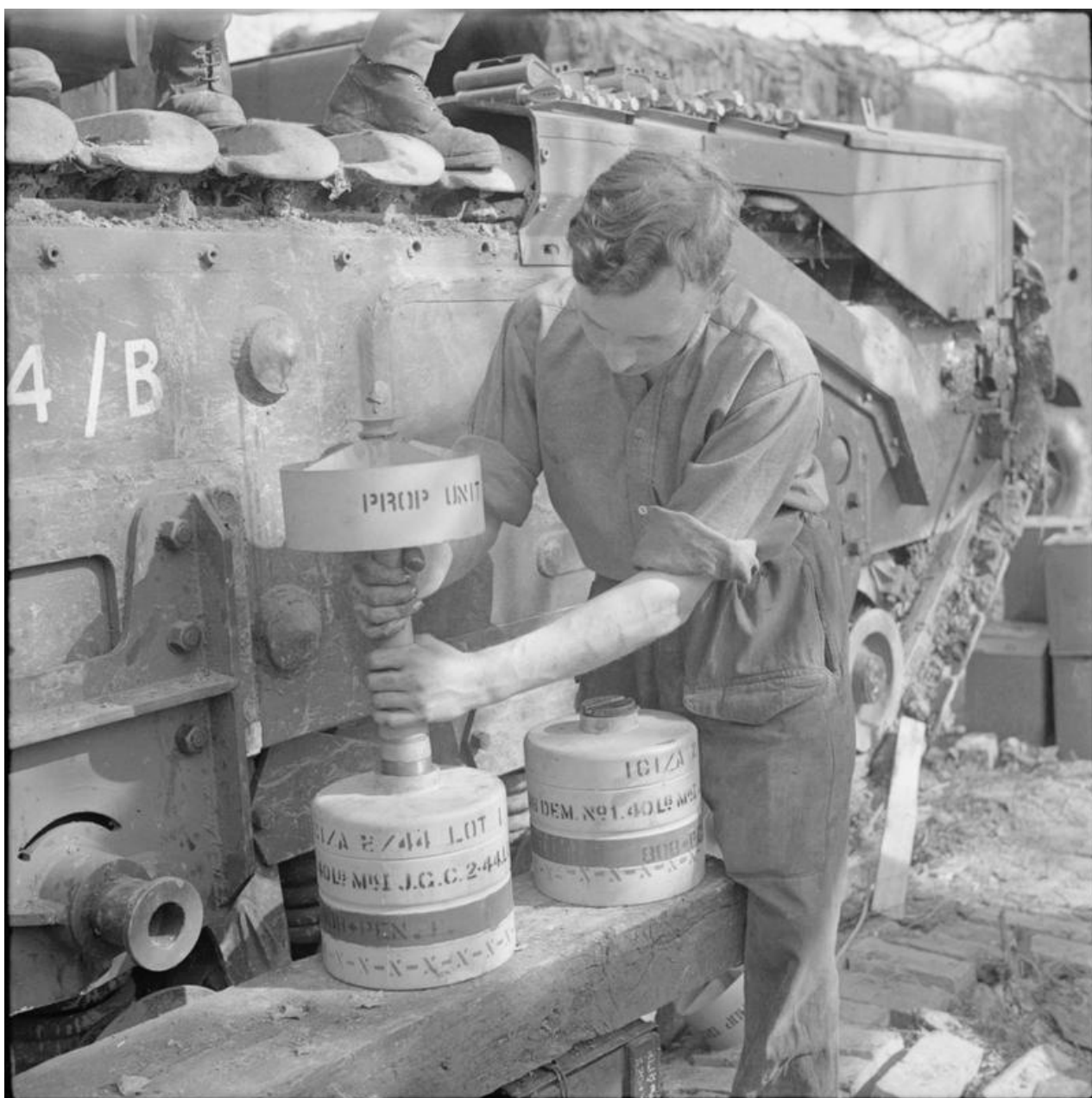
*But in the strength and survival of Le Hamel lay one of the gravest weaknesses of the Atlantic Wall. The Germans had bought this protection at the price of accepting severely restricted fields of fire, for those machine guns and anti-tank guns which were shielded against naval bombardment could not shoot straight out to sea ....*

*First, the Germans believed that the landings would be made at or near high tide and that consequently the main torrent of direct fire should be concentrated on the zone between the high water mark and the sea wall or the dunes ....*

*Secondly they thought that, if the strongpoints were protected against direct bombardment from the air and sea, the assault battalions would have no means of silencing the heavy German weapons in their concrete emplacements. Thus the infantry would be wiped out before any armour could be landed to support them.*

*Those two assumptions were rendered false by Montgomery's decisions to land before half-tide and to bring in the specialised armour ahead of the infantry. And so when the Hampshires touched down east of Le Hamel at H-Hour, they were not exposed to the full weight of the enemy's fire during the vulnerable minutes when the men were wading ashore.*

*Without this armoured support there might have been a repetition of the Omaha crisis, for the fire from Le Hamel was accurate and intense. The first three Crabs (Flail-tanks) which flogged their way through the minefields were either destroyed by anti-tank guns or became bogged in the marsh behind the dunes, but another, more fortunate than the rest, charged off the beach and through Le Hamel flailing and firing. Under its onslaught the main enemy stronghold in a sanatorium on the seafront was quietened long enough for two companies of the Hampshires to move across the foreshore and work behind Le Hamel to the village of Asnelles. But when this Crab was knocked out, the Germans struck back with fresh venom, making the western end of the beach almost impassable.*



40lb bombs as used by the 29cm Petard on an AVRE of 79 Sqn, 5 Assault Regt, RE.

*It took the rest of the Hampshires all the morning to reduce the defences on the dunes and they could make no impression on the sanatorium.”*

As the day wore on, 82 Assault Squadron rallied at CABANE and, having proceeded to Arromanches, harboured for the night at Le Buhot. In the course of the afternoon, at about 3.00pm, Lance Sergeant Herbert Scaife, commanding an AVRE Roly-Poly – which had been abandoned when it stuck at the bottom of the LCT’s ramp – went to assist 1st Hampshires at Asnelles-sur-Mer. The infantry were held up by fire from enemy positions at the top of the beach, especially the sanatorium buildings, which Scaife described as a hospital being used as a German HQ. En route, he realized that a German gun protected by a strong concrete emplacement at the eastern end of the building was still firing. This weapon was enfilading the beach and Scaife decided to approach it from behind. Bringing his AVRE, Loch Leven, close to

the sanatorium's rear, he fired a Petard round at fifty yards range which knocked out a machine-gun post as well as knocking the fight out of many defenders who then chose to surrender. This allowed the Hampshires to close in and mop up. But the gun was still firing and Scaife's task was not yet over. Closing on the emplacement, he scored 'a direct hit through the rear opening with his first shot, completely wrecking the gun and killing the crew'.

With infantry from 1st Hampshires, Scaife then took Loch Leven through Le Hamel where machine-gun nests that threatened the infantry were dealt with by close-range fire. All the while -

*L/Sgt Scaife displayed great initiative and personal courage, in addition to the most soldierly qualities, in thus tackling single-handed and without hesitation a task which had been allotted to three AVRE under command of an Officer. He did so, moreover, knowing that his only offensive weapon was the Petard, only recently issued and fitted to the AVRE, whose potentialities he did not know since he had no previous opportunity of firing it at a substantial target.*

Lance Sergeant Scaife was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

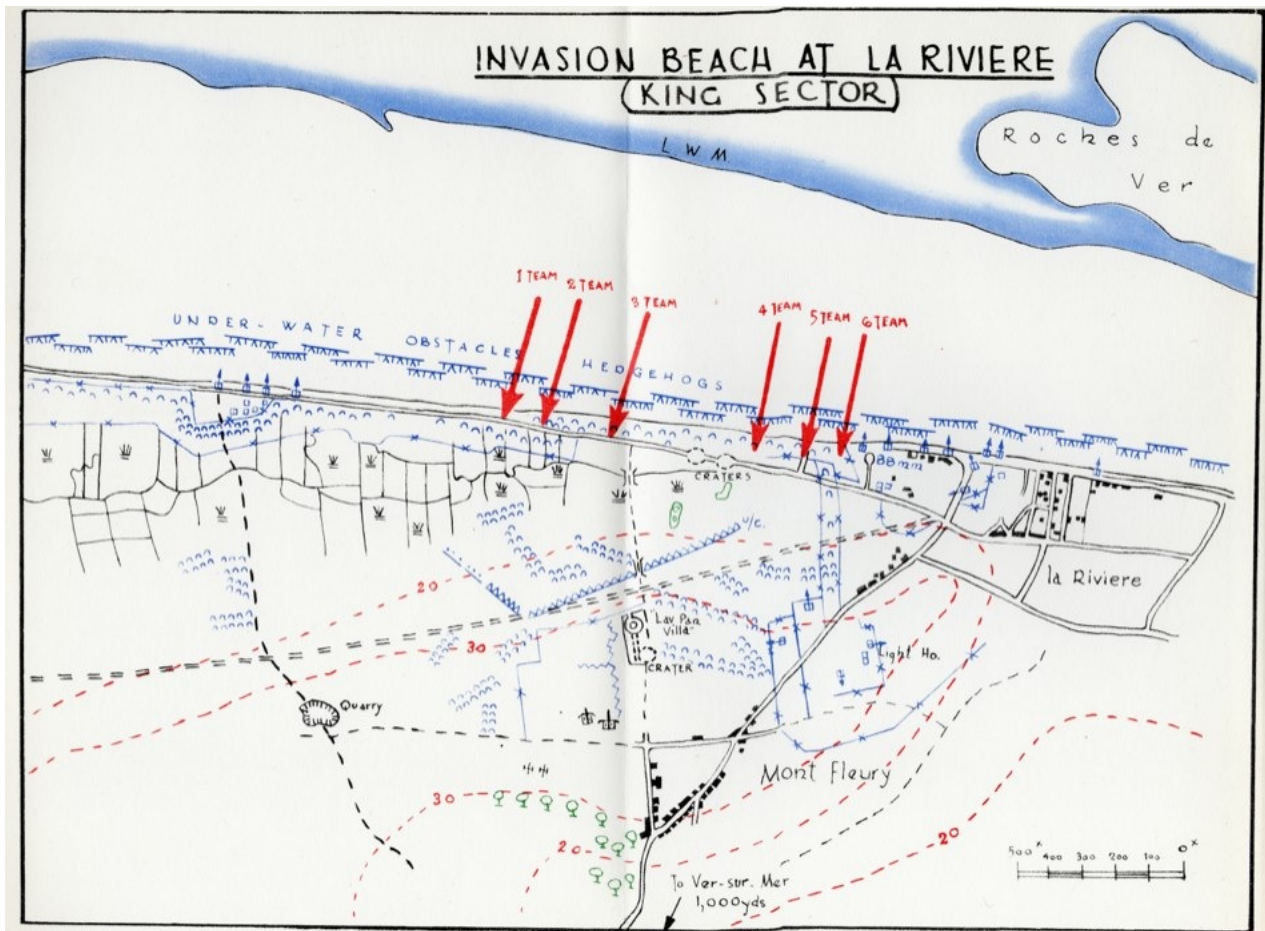
Captain Anthony Poynder, second-in-command of 82 Assault Squadron, also distinguished himself in the landing and went on to command the squadron and earn a periodic Military Cross for which his actions on D Day were included as the first in a long series of actions until May 1945.



Sherman tanks of 'A' Squadron, Nottinghamshire Yeomanry (Sherwood Rangers), 8th Armoured Brigade, come ashore from a landing craft (LCT 1076) on Jig beach, Gold area, 6 June 1944. (IWM B 5259)



## GOLD KING



Participating Assault Squadrons: C Squadron, Westminster Dragoons and 81 Assault Squadron, Royal Engineers.

In the area of La Rivière it was planned that six lanes were to be cleared west of the town for the infantry and armour of Assault Force Gold. Major Sidney Sutton, a Dubliner, squadron leader of C Squadron Westminster Dragoons, commanded X Breaching Squadron which included elements of his own squadron and 81 Assault Squadron, commanded by Major Robert Edward Thompstone RE, who led Z Breaching Squadron. Both were to be decorated for their leadership and actions that day; Thompstone received the DSO and Sutton the MC.

### **KING GREEN, Major Sutton (OC, C Squadron, Westminster Dragoons)**

#### **Lane 1, Captain D.A. King: SUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2412) 2 Flail (C, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine) (Flail commanded by Lt Pear W Dgns flailed to lateral road, turned left then right up to Lav Pan Villa, crossed unblown anti-tank ditch, then flailed to the next crossing; Flail commanded by Cpl McCall W Dgns stuck in clay).

### **Lane 2, Lieutenant J.D. Darby: PARTIALLY SUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2413) 2 Flail (C, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine) (Flails commanded by Cpl Walker and LCpl Sarony successfully flailed through first minefield, turned left on the lateral, then both bogged).

### **Lane 3, Captain T.W. Davies and Lieutenant E.H. Boulter: UNSUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2414) 2 Flail (C, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine), 1 AVRE (Assault Bridge) (both Flails, commanded by Sgt Birch and Cpl Rider, hit by 88mm).

### **KING RED, Major Thompstone, Royal Engineers**

#### **Lane 4, Lieutenant J.C. Skelly: UNSUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2423) 2 Flail (C, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine), 1 D4 Bulldozer (one Flail bogged in minefield beyond the dunes, the other did not complete its lane; AVRE Roly-Poly hit by 88mm at end of wall at La Rivière and blew up – all crew killed and two platoons of infantry who were near suffered heavy casualties).

#### **Lane 5, Major Thompstone and Captain T.F. Croxall: UNSUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2424) 2 Flail (C, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE, 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine) (one flail bogged but gave covering fire to team 4 and supported infantry attack on La Rivière with RE and Smoke; AVRE Roly-Poly hit by anti-tank and brewed up; AVRE Bobbin hit by 88mm near high water mark and brewed up; two other AVREs reached lateral road via Lane 6).

#### **Lane 6, Captain J.M. Birkbeck: SUCCESSFUL**

LCT (Serial 2425) 2 Flail (C, Westminster Dragoons), 1 AVRE (Roly Poly), 1 AVRE (Bobbin), 1 AVRE (Fascine), 1 D7 Bulldozer. (one Flail commanded by Captain Bell W Dgns silenced 88mm in La Rivière which had knocked out an AVRE and two Flails in Team 3; other Flail bogged but lane cleared; AVRE and AVRE Bobbin both went through to lateral and supported infantry with Petard).

Major Sutton's Breaching Squadron had landed on King Green at H Hour to clear three lanes. His gapping teams were led by Captain King (Lane 1), Lieutenant Darby (Lane 2) and Captain Davies (Lane 3). Almost as soon as they landed, disembarking in choppy water about four feet deep, the team realized the truth of Moltke's axiom that no plan survives first contact, as they found that their information on the enemy's dispositions was inaccurate and there were more minefields than had been believed. As X Breaching Squadron also lost two AVREs, blown up soon after landing, plans had to be modified immediately and minor objectives changed considerably. In spite of heavy enemy fire, the breaching team, including Crabs, infantry and AVREs carrying a variety of devices pushed ahead to complete two lanes. One leading inland



Aerial oblique photo of the junction of King Red and King Green beaches, Gold assault area, during the landing of 50th Infantry Div, 6 June 1944. The Mont Fleury battery (WN 35a) and an anti-tank ditch are visible in front of Ver-sur-Mer. (IWM CL 3947)

towards Ver-sur-Mer across an anti-tank obstacle was completed by Major Sutton in his command tank which, by then, was the sole Crab of his team still in action.

Nor was Sutton's courageous leadership confined to D-Day itself. Next day his squadron was in harbour when the Germans attacked, supported by field artillery firing at only 300 yards range. Although wounded in the thigh, Major Sutton commanded C Squadron in an action that was largely dismounted and in which 100 prisoners were taken and six field and anti-tank guns were captured. He continued to lead the squadron for another six days until forced to go into hospital. Not until 17 July, after treatment in England, did he return to the squadron.

When Sutton's Squadron came ashore on D-Day, Captains Davies' and King's LCTs beached exactly on time while Lieutenant Darby's team had arrived five minutes early. As with King Red beach, the sea state was such that 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards' Sherman DDs had not been launched offshore to swim in but drove off their LCTs on the beaches after the breaching teams, all three of which touched down where intended. (The war diary comments that King's team arrived at 'more or less its correct place'.)

Captain Denis King's team included two Crabs and three AVREs, an AVRE Roly-Poly, a Bobbin and a Fascine; they were able to complete their lane and rallied with Sutton. King's AVRE had been the Roly-Poly but this did not go as intended as 'on leaving the craft the roly poly was

swept to one side by the current and began to wrap itself around the AVRE'. Although King made two more efforts to push the roly poly on to the beach, the device remained determined to enmesh the AVRE instead, and he was forced to reverse away from it, before skirting the debris to drive ashore. Once ashore, King was linked up with his other two AVREs and attacked a strong German position.

As King advanced through the beach obstacles, he was under fire from four enemy pillboxes as well as from infantry behind the seawall. Engaging the left pillbox he silenced it with one round from his Petard but, while trying to engage a pillbox housing a 50mm gun, a round became jammed in the Petard's barrel and had to be removed. The AVRE's turret had also seized as a result of a strike from an enemy round but King's crew managed to resolve both problems without dismounting. While the AVRE had been engaged in this skirmish the leading infantry of 69 Brigade, men of 6th Green Howards, had silenced the other pillboxes. There remained the enemy troops behind the seawall who were firing machine guns and lobbing grenades. Although the AVREs tried to engage them with their Besa machine guns they could not do so effectively and so King decided to climb the wall, ordering a second AVRE to follow; his other AVRE had demolished the front of a house within the enemy positions. The two AVREs scaled the wall and enabled the infantry to advance into the German positions where they overcame the remaining opposition, and mopped up. Their task complete, the AVREs moved up to join Major Sutton. Captain King was awarded the Military Cross for his work that morning.

The two Crabs of King's team met with mixed success. Lieutenant Brian Pear got safely ashore and across the bands of clay but Corporal McCall was less fortunate and stuck. However, Lieutenant Pear, carrying on alone, flailed a path through the first minefield and reached the



The flail of Cpl McCall (C Sqn WDgns) stuck in the clay of the beach and abandoned on 6 June 1944. (IWM B 1541)



lateral road safely. Finding the marsh ahead of him an obstacle he turned left along the road planning to turn right up the centre road through the marsh.

Lieutenant Darby's team, including two Crabs and three AVREs, landed at 7.25am. Once again, one of the latter was an AVRE Roly-Poly and lost its roly poly, which was carried away by the current. This AVRE then drove onto the beach and, negotiating the various obstacles, moved to the right to join Captain King. When the remains of the roly poly had been carried away by the current, the AVRE that followed was carrying a Bobbin and laid its carpet successfully although the incoming tide then covered it; it was later destroyed by a grounding LCT.

With the carpet-laying task complete, the tank commander reported to the Royal Engineers beach-clearing party, which consisted of only two men, and took part in clearing obstacles until its towing lines broke, by which time work had to stop anyway because of the incoming tide. When operations recommenced later, it was under the direction of the officer commanding 280 Field Company Royal Engineers and hedgehog obstacles and drowned vehicles were removed from the beach. Darby's fascine-carrying AVRE was the last of the three to disembark and had difficulty doing so as the LCT had swung off the beach and lay parallel to the shore. It took some ten minutes for this tank to reach dry land by which time it was about 250 yards from its intended landing spot. Moreover, its radio was out of action and of the two Crabs there was no sign. Those two Crabs (commanded by Corporal Walker and Lance Corporal Savory of the Westminster Dragoons) had cleared a lane through from the beach to the lateral road, advancing straight up the beach and crossing the clay without trouble, flailing through the minefield as they went. The team's first task on the mainland was complete, although both Crabs soon became bogged endeavouring, in an attempt to carry out their orders to push on the La Rivière, to bypass two enormous bomb craters in the road with marshy ground to either side.

The AVRE commander took his tank up close to the start of the Lavatory Pan Road (so called because of the shape of the circular driveway of the beach house to which it led) where, after a



Aerial photograph of Lavatory Pan Villa (near right) with the village of Ver-sur-Mer at rear.

search on foot, he found one Crab, commanded by Lieutenant Pear, with which he made a lane up towards Ver-sur-Mer, covering a distance of almost half a mile and dropping his fascine in an anti-tank ditch en route.

The team under Captain Davies included two Crabs and four AVREs – a Roly-Poly, Bobbin, Fascine and SBG bridge. Its LCT touched down at 0730 hours and, once again, the roly poly was the first to disembark, being pushed by Sergeant Teanby's AVRE but, yet again, there were problems; the roly poly was swept to port by the current as it entered the water with the result that the first AVRE to leave the LCT landed in water five feet deep with one track on the roly poly drum and the other in a crater. Once ashore, Teanby's tank made for the Lavatory Pan Road and Lavatory Pan Villa, making its way through the intervening obstacles and passing through the mud belt with some difficulty. Finally, it linked up with Captain King to support 6th Green Howards. En route, the AVRE had been hit by a medium-calibre anti-tank round on the left side of the turret. Teanby was followed off the LCT by Lieutenant Boulter's AVRE which was a Bobbin, carrying steel shuttering. Boulter had lost his wireless just before the LCT touched down and when he followed the first AVRE off, the LCT had been swung round by the current by about 35 degrees. Boulter followed Teanby up the beach, negotiating the obstacles, until his driver reported that the first AVRE's tracks were sinking into mud, at which point Boulter turned off and then turned again parallel to Teanby's tracks before laying steel shuttering across the mud. He then moved on to join 280 Field Company in beach clearance but, while waiting for the sappers of 280 Company, the AVRE came under fire from an 88 at La Rivière. Unable to contact 280 Company, Boulter joined the Landing Craft Obstacle Clearance Unit (LCOCU), assisting in their task until the tide had ebbed fully when he was able to link up with 280 Company and start clearing beach obstacles.

The two Crabs of Boulter's team (commanded by Sergeant Birch and Corporal Rider of the Westminster Dragoons) left the LCT after the first two AVREs and, reaching the top end of the beach without mishap, crossed the mud on the steel shuttering laid by Boulter. There the pair began their flailing role – without the support of other Crabs or gun tanks – and very soon met trouble. As the leading Crab began to flail it was struck by a shell that blew off the flail. Fortunately, the crew was uninjured. That shell may have come from the same 88 that engaged Boulter's AVRE. Following in echelon, the second Crab lost a track bogie to a mine explosion just as it entered the minefield. With both Crabs out of action, the lane could not be completed.

Behind the Crabs the next two AVREs had mixed fortunes with the Fascine tank, commanded by Sergeant Houghton, suffering a flooded engine. The crew were forced to bale out as the tank could not move and the tide was rising. Houghton had been hit by a splinter from a shell bursting nearby and received medical attention on the LCT. Following the loss of the Fascine AVRE, the LCT captain pulled out from the beach to come in square on and land the last AVRE with its assault bridge, commanded by Captain Davies. However, the LCT had not grounded at exactly the same spot, smoke was obscuring the landmarks and the AVRE came ashore to the left of Lavatory Pan Road. Davies negotiated both beach obstacles and mud belt but with some difficulty at the latter as he was away from the steel shuttering. At the top of the beach, Davies could not immediately find a gap through the minefield onto the lateral road but, having contacted Major Sutton, learned where he would find one. Moving about 500m to the right, Davies crossed the minefield safely, drove to Lavatory Pan Road and dropped his bridge across

a large crater some 200m inland from Lav Pan Villa. The operation was successful although some brute force, in the form of a pick head, had to be used to free the release hooks.

With the DD tanks that should have preceded the breaching teams still on their LCTs, Thompstone's teams touched down on KING RED beach to be met by close-range accurate fire from 88s. This endangered the operation but Thompstone

*sized up the situation with great promptitude, reorganized what remained of his teams, made personal contact with a party of 5 E. Yorks who were held up by enemy beach defences and took immediate action to neutralize them and assist the infantry forward. Leaving the relative safety of his AVRE on a number of occasions, he cleared obstructions that had jammed the turret and prevented use of the Petard. In spite of these many problems, he cleared a lane to La Rivière and ordered the DD tanks, which had landed from their LCTs, to follow in his tracks, reckoning that if his AVRE did not set off any mines the lane it took could be considered safe. On arrival at La Rivière he took energetic action with his Petard to neutralize enemy posts which were holding up the infantry by sniping and grenade throwing. He subsequently rallied his Squadron in good order to the north of Ver sur Mer. This officer displayed very considerable initiative and leadership and a complete disregard for personal danger.*

Trouble had started early on the beach on which Z Breaching Squadron landed. As the first landing craft touched down Captain Bell's tank refused to start. As the engine covers were sealed down for waterproofing the only solution was to tow the tank off the vessel. To the crew's relief the tank started before leaving the craft - the tow ropes were unhitched and all the tanks reached the beach.

An 88 mm gun behind seventeen feet of concrete was still in action in spite of all the earlier efforts of the supporting fire to destroy it. It soon hit and set on fire two of the Assault Vehicle Royal Engineers. Captain Bell, who saw these tanks hit, realised at once from where the fire was coming. Turning his tank so that he could fire at the aperture in the concrete from which the gun was shooting he sat for a moment in the line of fire at a range of 150 yards on the open beach with no cover. Quickly he brought his gunner, Trooper H.W.J. Smith, on to the target. Five shots were fired, the last entering the aperture and silencing the enemy gun. Had the 88 remained in action there is no doubt it would have had a very serious, or even disastrous effect on the landing of 69th Brigade.

One writer has commented on this action:

*At the eastern end of 50th Division's front, the bombardment was generally more effective than it had been at Le Hamel. Small support craft followed the infantry of 69th Brigade almost to the touch-down, firing over their heads as they dashed ashore. Most of La Riviere was in ruins, but by some freak chance the western corner of the defences had escaped and from it there came withering fire as the 5th East Yorkshires raced for the protection of the sea wall. An 88 mm firing from a massive pill-box knocked out two Assault Vehicle Royal Engineers before a 'Crab', taking advantage of the gun's limited*



LUOCU Commandos examine the 88mm gun and casemate on GOLD KING, WN-33, on the western edge of La Riviere, and which caused lethal trouble before it was silenced by Capt Bell's Crab. (IWM A 23995)

*traverse, moved in at a sharp angle to 'post a letter' through the embrasure at a range of 100 yds. With this stronghold silenced, the defence began to crumble, but for another two hours the East Yorkshires had to fight a sticky battle from street to street.*

Captain Bell was awarded the Military Cross for his part in this action and for his courage and determination throughout the day.

On the beach the dry grass in the dunes was now alight in several places, producing a dense smoke, which whilst confusing to the assaulting troops probably hindered the enemy still more. Z Squadron Breaching teams crossed the beach successfully after these initial incidents but then trouble started again. Captain Bell, Lieutenant Hoban, Sergeant Webb, Corporal Wild and Corporal Moore bogged before they reached the lateral road. Corporal Thorpe managed to cross the road but was blown up on a mine while flailing just the other side. Captain Bell and Lieutenant Hoban were towed on to the road by an Assault Vehicle Royal Engineers and then made their way by road up to Ver-sur-Mer. Fortunately a track was found just west of La Riviere free of mines which was able to be used by C Squadron 4th/7th Dragoons Guards, the path cleared by Cpl. Thorpe being used by light vehicles only due to the softness of the ground.

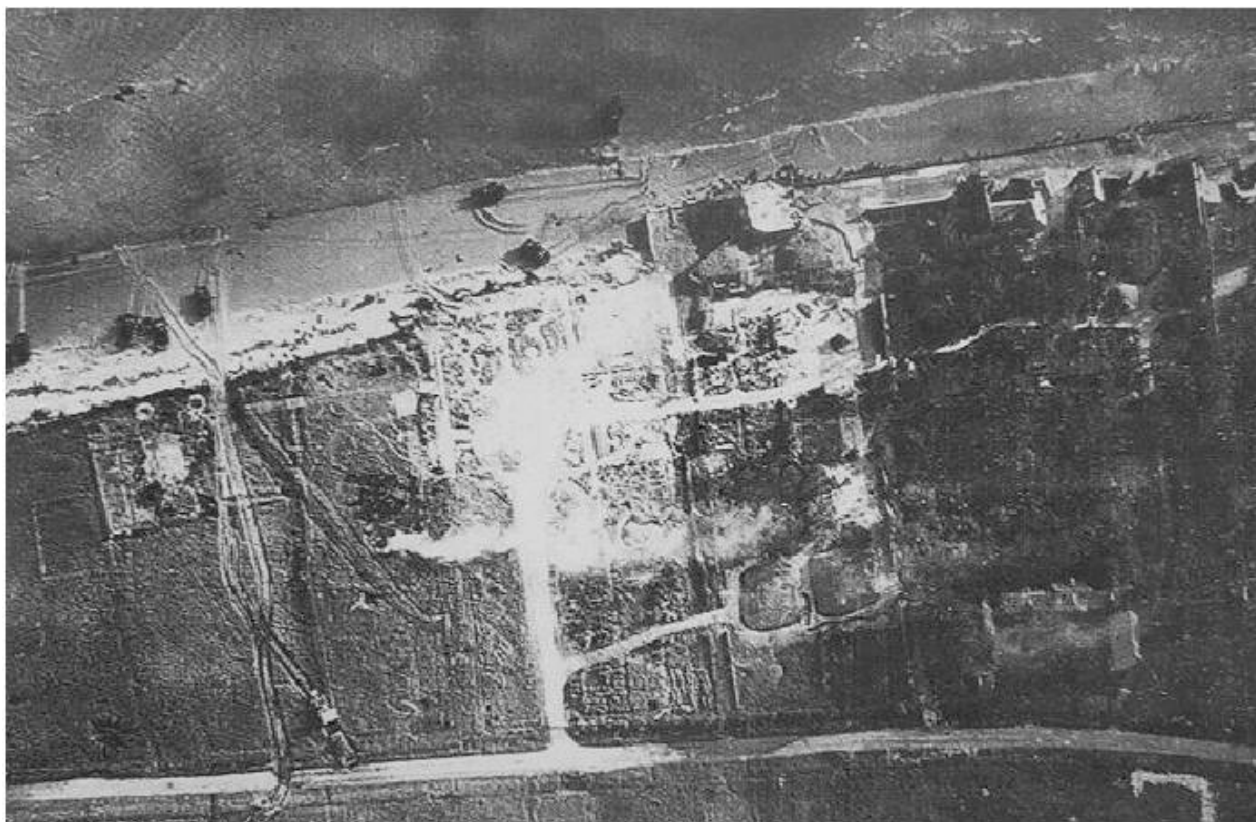


Lane 6 on King Red was completed by Captain Birkbeck's team of two Crabs and three AVREs, a Roly-Poly, Bobbin and Fascine. The Bobbin, under Lance Sergeant Frank Young, was the first up the beach as the DDs had not yet arrived. Young laid the shuttering from his Bobbin but, on reaching the top of the beach, his AVRE was hit by a round from an 88 sited on the western end of La Rivière which enfiladed the beach. The AVRE was carrying a large amount of explosive which ignited and, about twenty seconds later, the AVRE exploded.

Meanwhile Lance Sergeant Young had succeeded in evacuating his crew, two of whom were badly burned, to the shelter of a sea wall, one man being killed by shell fire on the way there. Lance Sergeant Young himself was hit in the neck by a splinter. Shortly afterwards another AVRE was hit by another shot from the same 88mm gun and was similarly destroyed.

*Owing to the absence of DD tanks this gun was not being shelled. Knowing this, and seeing the following AVRE coming up the beach towards the line of fire of the 88mm gun, Lance Sergeant Young left his cover and ran 100 yards under fire to the AVRE of his Squadron Leader (Major Thompstone) to warn him that this gun was still firing and undamaged. This enabled Major Thompstone to take appropriate action without which it is doubtful if any tanks could have crossed the top of the beach. Lance Sergeant Young displayed great personal courage and kept his head in a most praiseworthy manner immediately after experiencing two very narrow escapes.*

Young's courage earned him the Military Medal.



Aerial photograph of GOLD KING on 6 June 1944. WN33, destroyed by Tpr Jim Smith of the Westminster Dragons, is visible at top centre. Failed lanes through the minefields are clearly visible at centre left.



*We Lie at the Beach Dressing Station and Wonder How the Battle is Going- D-Day 6 June 1944, JC Heath. Sketched 6 June 1944. (IWM ART LD 4280)*

It is worth noting that of the six breaching teams on KING, all cleared the beach but the Crabs of four teams all became bogged near the lateral road. Another team had both Crabs damaged by 88mm fire. Only one Crab succeeded in carrying its task through to completion, namely that of Lieutenant Pear. "At one time all AVRE and Crabs in lanes 4, 5 and 6 were either out of action, bogged or employed in trying to recover bogged Crabs which it was anticipated might be badly required to push into a lane somewhere."

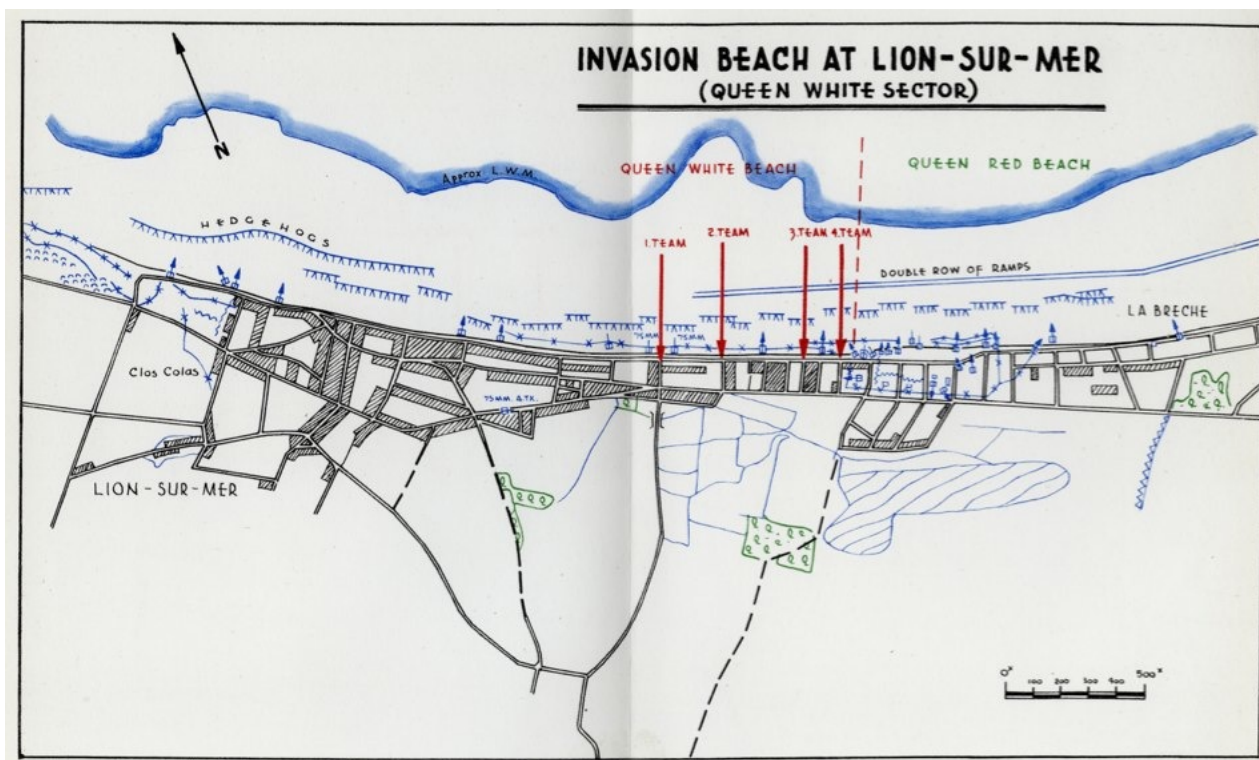
X and Z Squadrons, having completed their tasks, rallied in an orchard about a mile inland on the outskirts of the village of Ver-sur-Mer at around 1400 and reorganized themselves into C Squadron Westminster Dragoons, and 81 Squadron Royal Engineers. Five Sherman Crabs out of the original thirteen that landed arrived in this orchard, one of which, Captain Bell's tank, was still having starter trouble. All the remaining tanks were bogged except the one damaged by enemy action. C Squadron suffered no personal casualtiespg-dday-wet-pows-beside-Crab-622x617 (by contrast 81 Squadron's casualties as at 1600 were one killed, four wounded and 11 missing). On receiving news of enemy tank threat, the Crabs took up positions on high ground south of Créully, where they were joined by more Crabs recovered from the beaches. C Squadron later moved to Crépon to leaguer for the night.

What was left of the flails of B Squadron gathered that evening in the small village of Meuvaines, while at varying intervals vehicles from the echelon with petrol joined them.

B Squadron's Armoured Recovery Vehicle (not to be confused with Assault Vehicle Royal Engineers) had landed one hour after the tanks and immediately started recovery. In addition to its crew, this was the vehicle which had on board the Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. W.Y.K. Blair-

Oliphant, MC. It was a noisy night with German aircraft coming over in a belated effort to bomb the beaches. But the whole of the D-Day operation in this sector although costly in tanks was light in casualties amounting, for the two squadrons of the Westminster Dragoons employed on GOLD, to only four men wounded and two taken prisoner.

# Sword Beach



While the other two squadrons fought their way inland on D-Day, A Squadron Westminster Dragoons under Major Wallace was approaching the coast through choppy seas. The story is best told in his own words:

"H-Hour for the operation on our sector was 7.25 am and at that time we thought of the first wave of the attack just landing some three hours ahead of us. Some two miles from the coast the enemy heavy batteries in the direction of Le Havre opened up on us at long range. One of the landing craft in our convoy was hit and disappeared in a mass of smoke and flame almost before we realised what had happened. Destroyers rushed up on our port side and laid a smoke screen between ourselves and the guns and the remainder of the convoy ploughed on through the swell.

Along the waters edge was a confused mass of assault boats, landing craft and some knocked out tanks and beyond them the battered ruins of a row of sea-side villas.

Suddenly with a slight jolt our landing craft grounded at an angle to the beach and the ramp in the bows was lowered. Once ashore we made at once for the beach exit which was packed tight with tanks and other vehicles. At the top of the beach I saw the first dead German sprawled on his back by the corner of the road. The enemy were mortaring the beach exits and we were glad to be able to drop off safely from our tank a sergeant of the military police and his motor-cycle which had been lashed to the turret for the landing.

Capt Beaumont with four flails successfully landed at H+5 ½ hours with the East Riding Yeomanry in the Third British Division.





An LCA approaching SWORD beach early on D-Day.

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For the actual assault our eight flails were under the command of the Staffordshire Yeomanry, recently returned from the Middle East. I was relieved to see one of their officers at the first cross roads inland who waved us on down the road. We passed through the town of Hermanville-sur-Mer with the French population standing in the doors of their houses and waving. We halted for a short time in some open country south of the town and after going a few hundred yards there were two loud reports by Lieutenant Bullock's tank.

A few minutes later two more flails were hit, one of them brewed up. Luckily the crew including Troopers Woodhouse and Keley, who were wounded, were able to get out. A tank of the Staffordshire Yeomanry and a medical half-track were also knocked out. The culprit appeared to be an anti-tank gun firing from our right flank. We must then have got into dead ground as we had no further casualties and moved inland to a crest ahead of us where we were joined by Lieutenant Hall, the other troop leader, with the remaining two flails. The advance continued and

another flail was fired on, the Commander Corporal Loveday, wounded and the tank damaged when it crashed over a steep bank in taking avoiding action.

We passed through the village of Bieville and took up battle positions just south of the village guarding the left flank with the leading infantry a few hundred yards in front of us. We remained here for some hours, changing position from time to time to avoid spasmodic shelling. About five in the afternoon we saw the most inspiring sight of the 8th Airborne Division in a mass of gliders towed by heavy bombers flying in to reinforce our left flank in the area of the River Orne. Then when we were very tired of waiting a report came over the wireless that enemy tanks were in the neighbourhood. Dispositions were altered slightly as the Staffordshire Yeomanry engaged the enemy tanks, brewing up at least one and suffering some casualties themselves..

At last the long summer day drew to a close. It was nearly midnight when darkness fell and the light from some burning farmhouses and a blazing German tank gave flickering illumination as we moved into close leaguer, parking the tanks in long lines a few yards apart. My own driver was in rather poor shape from seasickness, hunger, general weariness and being confined in the tank for so many hours. We gave him a good shot of whisky and made him turn in at once. The rest of us followed as soon as possible except for those on guard; all had to turn out an hour or so later when the transport echelon arrived with petrol. At last we crawled between our blankets for what remained of the short night. It was an eerie feeling lying there with nothing between ourselves and the German tanks a few hundred yards away, but I don't think it kept any of us awake. It had been a long exciting and tiring day; many of us had been under fire for the first time, but none of us who lay down that night would have wished to have missed that day."



Armour, including an AVRE with SBG bridge, leaving SWORD beach on 6 June 1944.

## Consolidation, Exploitation and Pursuit

On the evening of D-Day most of the squadrons of 1 Assault Brigade went into reserve and the divisional REME Light Aid Detachment (LAD), under Captain W. R. Hughes, began their task of recovery and repair of the Division's AFVs, both AVREs and Crabs. By 0100 on D+1, 24 Beach Recovery Section REME was reporting "plenty of recovery of all types. Most of the work due to vehicles bogging in clay and being overtaken by the tide ... . Over one hundred tanks recovered yesterday."

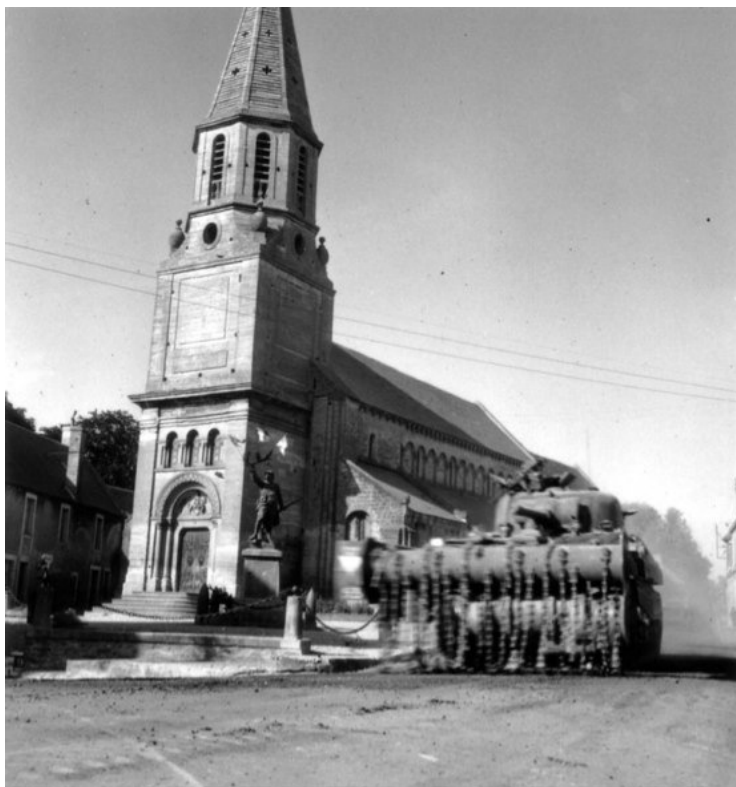
D+1 was also a day of consolidation, the beginning of the phase described as 'the linking of the beachheads' by Montgomery, and one of the first demands made on 6th Assault Regiment on 7 June was from 50th Division, which secured the town of Bayeux that morning.

At Crépon, two miles inland from Asnelles, elements of 79th Armoured Division fought alongside Churchill Crocodiles of 141st Regiment RAC (The Buffs) for the first time. This was also the first time that Crocodiles were used in action, although some had landed on D-Day.

Two Crocodiles under Lieutenant John Shearman of the Buffs were engaged along with C Squadron Westminster Dragoons. Shortly before leaving Cruelly on the evening of D-Day, the Crocodiles had joined C Squadron. At 0530hours on D+1 the Squadron, with the Crocodiles, moved to a new harbor area.

The action began when the new harbour came under shellfire from close range; small arms fire was also directed at the Dragoons. All but one member of the Squadron Leader's tank crew were wounded by shell splinters as they were outside the tank when the shelling began. Trooper Leslie Birch, an ARV crewman, was killed (he is buried at Ryes War Cemetery). Corporals Gillespie and Adcock, Lance Corporal Lennon and Trooper Kirk were wounded. The Squadron Leader was slightly wounded.

Suddenly the source of the shellfire was spotted – no more than 150m away. The gun and the Germans firing it were plainly visible. Lieutenant Hoban's tank, further down the hedge, moved



A Sherman Crab of the Westminster Dragoons advancing through Cruelly, passing by the Eglise-St-Martin.

slightly so that he could see the enemy through a gap. Trooper D Smith, Lieutenant Hoban's gunner, destroyed the enemy gun and its crew.

Among the Squadron Leader's crew, only Sergeant Whybrow, the gunner, had escaped injury. He was quick to climb back into the Sherman and begin returning fire, although he had to load the gun himself. However, Corporal Adcock, the driver, then joined Whybrow and, in spite of being wounded and in pain, assisted with loading the weapon. Corporal Adcock continued doing this until he finally collapsed from loss of blood. It was for his courage and determination in this action that he was later awarded a Croix de Guerre by the French Government.

Lieutenant Shearman was overseeing the maintenance of his troop of Crocodiles when the shelling began and it was he who quickly planned and carried out an attack, leading it himself, having organized a few Royal Artillery and Royal Signals personnel as infantry. In that counter-attack, Crabs from 1 Troop, C Squadron, advanced with the Crocodiles into the enemy locality and fired their main guns on the enemy positions before the Crocodiles flamed the area while the Royal Artillery and Royal Signals soldiers put down small arms fire. This prompted a German surrender at which point the strength of the position they had held could be assessed: as well as the 150 prisoners and the destroyed guns, a 100mm field gun, an 88 and four 75s were captured. This was the first of two actions that earned John Shearman the Military Cross; the second occurred a month later, on 9 July. Major Sutton, OC C Squadron Westminster Dragoons, was awarded the Military Cross for his part in this action and those of the previous day.





At around noon B Squadron, which had spent the day recovering as many tanks as possible from the beach, was ordered to move to Brécý, a village some seven miles from the coast. At that time, only four Crabs out of the original 13 were available.

During the day, C Squadron's 3 Troop cleared up two more suspected pockets of resistance. One of these was a false alarm and no enemy were seen but the other produced 15 prisoners. It then moved to Brécý to join with B Squadron and Regimental Headquarters.

D+2 brought more action for elements of 79th Armoured Division with A Squadron Westminster Dragoons involved in operations at Lion-sur-Mer while elements of 79 Assault Squadron also deployed for these attacks on enemy strongpoints. Operating under command of 8th Brigade of 3rd British Division, four Westminster Dragoons Crabs, under Major B. A. Wallace, cleared a lane through barbed wire and mines and closed on the German positions near the gasworks to engage the defenders with both their main guns and their Browning machine guns while infantry of the South Lancashire Regiment attacked. The German strongpoint at that location was holding up the build-up of supplies and the development of the bridgehead in this sector. No casualties were suffered by A Squadron, British infantry losses were light and about 80 German prisoners were taken.

The same day, Hobart had insinuated a small tactical HQ onto a DUKW for which he had managed to obtain space on a ship bound for Normandy on 8 June. Refused shipping space for his HQ, he had plagued the movements staff until they gave in and allowed him to take the DUKW, on which he loaded a jeep, a motorbike, much radio equipment and personnel for a skeleton HQ. He made his presence known to his units quickly: at Brécý, on the 11 June, he visited the Westminster Dragoons.

On 9 June A Squadron Westminster Dragoons was in action alongside 79 Assault Squadron Royal Engineers for 9 Brigade's attack on the village of Cambes-en-Plaine. Both Crabs and AVREs acted as infantry support tanks for the attack by 2nd Royal Ulster Rifles. Two days earlier the Rifles had made their first attempt to take the village with a company-strength attack supported by tanks of the East Riding Yeomanry but had suffered heavily and been forced to withdraw. According to Intelligence, the village was lightly held but the Rifles' advance was almost in the face of an SS advance through Cambes on Anguerne. Now the Rifles were to attack again in battalion strength with greater support as it was now known that elements of 12th SS-Panzer Division Hitlerjugend were deployed in the area.

Four AVREs of 79 Assault Squadron lent their support to the Ulsters but were expected to act in the role of infantry tanks, as were the Crabs of the Westminster Dragoons. This was much less a problem for the Westminster Dragoons as their Shermans retained their 75mm main guns and could operate as gun tanks but the AVREs had only their Petards and Besa machine guns. The Westminster Dragoons had "plenty of shooting" and during the action Sergeant Wilson showed considerable bravery in dismounting from his tank to bring back two wounded members of the crew of another tank which had been knocked out.

All five AVREs were knocked out in this, successful, attack on Cambes. Five men of 79 Assault Squadron were wounded and fourteen were missing. Of the missing, several were dead and the Army Roll of Honour includes the names of six men of the squadron who died that day: Lance

Sergeant George Archer, Sapper Wilfred Arnell, Sapper Frederick Eastoe, Sapper Frederick Hirst, Sapper John W. Smith and Lance Sergeant Wolfe Zimmerman.

Having described the actions at Lion-sur-Mer and Cambes-en-Plaine, the historian of 79th Armoured Division echoed the views of his counterpart of 1 Assault Brigade. It was already evident that Crabs or AVREs placed under command of the infantry would be mishandled and suffer heavy casualties. Particularly did they not allow for the short range of the Petard and consequent vulnerability of AVREs.

From Brécy, B and C Squadrons of the Westminster Dragoons were ordered to move to Juaye Mondaye, about 8km south of Bayeux. The tanks moved on the evening of 11 June and arrived to find that the place to which they had been dispatched consisted of a small row of houses, a church and a monastery, all in very close country extremely near the Germans. Colonel Blair-Oliphant was commanding a mixed force consisting of a company of engineers, two troops of anti-tank guns, a platoon of medium machine guns, and his own two depleted squadrons. This force was under command of 231 Brigade in 50 Div and was to hold a hill about 600 yards south of the village.

On the 12 June B and C Squadrons were ordered to the assistance of the 2nd Devons, who, having fought continuously since D-Day had been repulsed from La Belle Epine. The task of the composite squadron was to support the 2nd Devons back into the village. The squadron arriving in the forming up area just before dusk and in the failing light it was impossible to distinguish any definite enemy points as the information was scanty. It was therefore decided, as the objective was only some 300 to 400m from the start line that the Crabs, used as ordinary tanks, should bring maximum fire to bear on the village, all the hedges and likely enemy-held positions. In the dusk it was a terrific sight. Tracer shells streaked through the gloom, and fires caused by the 75mm shells from the tanks lit the scene with a red glare. The attack was successful and no casualties were suffered by the Regiment.

**A Sherman flail tank, probably of the Westminster Dragoons, advances through a wrecked village on its way to Tilly-sur-Seulles, 13 June 1944. (IWM B 5445)**



As 21 Army Group fought to expand the Normandy bridgehead, units of 79th Armoured Division were involved in many small but important engagements. On 12 June, the Westminster Dragoons lost two Crabs to a German anti-tank gun screen as they advanced unsupported in the Bocage country.

By 15 June the battle had moved further away and A Squadron had rejoined the Regiment. The echelon trucks came up and the Westminster Dragoons settled in to a field alongside the row of houses at Mondaye, making it a kind of regimental base from which Squadrons went out when they were required for operations and to which they could come back for a rest and refit. The real village of Juaye Mondaye lay about 1km to the north. There in the wet and the squalor and the mud, which later became white dust covering everything, the Regiment spent June and July.

On the afternoon of June 17 the Regiment was ordered, at short notice, to produce tank support for the 2nd Battalion The Hampshire Regiment, part of 231 Brigade, for an attack on the village of La Senaudière, some two miles to the south of Point 112. Six flails of C Squadron commanded by Lieutenants Hoban and Pear were sent. After hurried orders the force moved to form up in the village of Bernières Bocage. The flails were to support A Company, the left-hand leading company, at that time only one platoon strong. Owing to mechanical failures only four tanks crossed the start line.

All went well at first and an advance of a thousand metres was made, several casualties being inflicted among the enemy infantry by the fire of the tanks. Then, immediately after pushing through a thick hedge, Lieutenant Pear's tank was engaged at close range by an enemy anti-tank weapon, later believed to have been a dug-in tank. After Pear's tank had been hit twice and all members in the turret wounded, he ordered the crew to bale out. Corporal McCall, in command of another tank, believing that he had put the enemy gun out of action, pushed through the hedge and was in turn knocked out. The commander alone escaped.

Lieutenant Hoban's tank was meanwhile covering the infantry in their withdrawal from a wood to the north when a corporal in the Hampshires told him that there were two or three German tanks in the wood. While moving to a better fire position Lieutenant Hoban's tank was hit in the suspension, lost a track and had to be abandoned. Lieutenant Pear and his crew having baled out, a shell landed very close and the driver, Trooper Bromby, was seriously wounded and



**A Sherman Crab of the Westminster Dragoons crossing Euston Bridge at Ranville returning to the assembly area at Juaye-Mondaye.**



**Westminster Dragoons  
conducting vehicle  
maintenance, June 1944.**

unable to walk any further. Lieutenant Pear, although wounded himself, ran back in the face of enemy fire to try and get a carrier, though this proved impossible. The fortitude and determination of this officer in his efforts to save his crew, were recognised by his being mentioned in despatches. Trooper Dennis Bromby died of his wounds before he could be evacuated. The total number of casualties in the Regiment resulting from this action was five killed (Troopers Alan Biddlecombe, Dennis Bromby, Alan Muir, Eric Pennington and Edwin Whitehouse, all buried at Hottot-les-Bagues cemetery) and four wounded.

By the end of June much of the Division was in France and Hobart had moved his main headquarters across the Channel.

In the meantime, the Allied armies were expanding the ground they held in Normandy. Second Army carried out a series of operations that maintained pressure on the Germans and brought the bulk of the enemy's armour on to the British and Canadian front as well as wearing down the strength of the German forces. June and July saw British and Canadian troops involved in Operations EPSOM, JUPITER, CHARNWOOD, GOODWOOD and BLUECOAT, in most of which elements of 79th Armoured Division deployed.

However, Hobart's presence in Normandy led to a more rational system of employing the 'Funnies'. Concerned that commanders were inclined to be profligate in their demands for and use of specialized armour, he used his position as Montgomery's Specialized Armour Advisor to

ensure a more effective employment of the Division's units. With the agreement of HQ 21 Army Group, which included a 79th Armoured Division cell, and as a result of operational experience 79th Division remained under direct command of 21 Army Group, suitable portions being placed in support of Armies for specific operations. Units and sub-units of Specialized Armour fought under command of 79th Armoured Division representatives in support of formations.

This ensured the timely supply of special stores and replacements, and made it possible to organize reliefs, replacements and the spacing of workshop overhauls in accordance with the Army Group forecast of operations. Thus at each level, from Army Headquarters downwards, a deputy of Commander 79th Armoured Division performed the dual role of Commander of all 79th Armoured Division detachments and Adviser to the formation Commander. After trial it was found that these advisers should be RAC officers; and that the AERE senior officers should act either under RAC commanders, or alternatively, in special circumstances, under the senior Engineer officer of the formation being supported.

As Macksey notes, this arrangement meant that no 'specialized armour remained under the command of another formation for a minute longer than operationally necessary', thereby guaranteeing that, at the end of a battle, the 'Funnies' and their crews came out of the line. This ensured rest for the soldiers and proper maintenance and repair for the vehicles. This system, which had its origins as far back as January 1944 when Montgomery assumed command of 21 Army Group, worked well throughout the subsequent campaign. Whenever the nature and extent of an operation had been outlined by any formation, a decision was made on the size and composition of the 79th Armoured Division force to be deployed and Hobart then sent one of his brigadiers to live with that formation, which was usually a corps HQ. Frequently, that representative arrived before the orders from 21 Army Group reached the formation commander and he became the harbinger of battle, and until the order appeared had to fend off the importunities of friends seeking news.

Those of 79th Armoured Division indisputably had unique privileges. The senior adviser had power to ask Hobart for increased resources: those working at lower levels alongside divisional and brigade commanders were charged to ensure the maximum use without misuse of each 'Funny'. The system worked to the approval of tank crews whose confidence in the past had been shaken by occasional misemployment under commanders who misunderstood their limitations or felt no personal responsibility for the welfare of attached units. Now they felt they were being given a square deal.

By the end of June the makeshift atmosphere began to disappear from the campaign and life became more organised for the Regiment. The signs of progress seen by the Regiment were the appearance of English nurses in Bayeux together with Mobile Bath Units. In addition a civilian bath house in the same town was requisitioned and parties were sent off to the cinema and even on occasion to the theatre. 50 Div had taken over the only theatre in Bayeux within a week of D-Day and ran a "Stars in Battledress" show. In fact the bridgehead began to fill up; the battle seemed to slow up, and in common with many of the other troops in the theatre and critics at home, the Westminster Dragoons had visions of a winter campaign in Normandy. The Regimental Technical Adjutant, however, assured everyone that Field Marshal Montgomery's driver had told him that Monty was pleased at the progress, so all was well.



The shape of the battle was beginning to change at this stage from that of holding and expanding our bridgehead, to the preparation for the breakout from the West. Under these circumstances the flails were not in great demand, and apart from early morning Physical Training and an hour's gentle tank maintenance, the day was passed in keeping dry, if it was wet, or sunbathing or sitting round a mysterious continual brew-up of tea or soup or dinner or dirty linens depending on the time of day. Not all the inhabitants of Normandy were as fortunate as those of Bayeux. Squadrons moving up to join formations for operations often found the roads blocked by horse-drawn carts piled high with furniture, mattresses and homeless civilians, jolting their way back through the dust and heat to whatever was left of a peasant's farm.

Early in July B Squadron was again called upon to assist 50 Div in a series of Brigade attacks in the region of Granville-Hottot. The attacks were intended

intended to straighten the front opposite the division and also to cut the main Caen - Hottot - Caumont road. B Squadron, in support of the armour attached to 8th Armoured Brigade, had to ensure the speedy clearing of lanes through minefields to maintain the momentum of the attacks.

56 Infantry Brigade attacked on 8 July on a two-battalion front, and 1 and 3 Troops supported the armour allotted to each battalion. Three tanks of 3 Troop moved off at H-Hour with two troops of the 4th Dragoon Guards in support of the South Wales Borderers. Initially the attack went well, Granville fell and the tanks and infantry moved on to their final objective. At this stage resistance stiffened, though minefields encountered were not extensive and gaps were quickly



**Liberation and Battle of France- Nuns and Deaf and Dumb Children, Refugees, Sheltering in the Stables of the Château D'amblié, near Caen, A Gross CBE (RA). Sketched 1944. (IWM ART LD 4485)**

made. A setback occurred when some 200m from the objective. Extremely high banks topped by thick hedges surrounded these Normandy fields. Two of the flail tanks became stuck while trying to cross one of these high banks. The third tank, lying back in support, went to their assistance and while tow-ropes were being fastened to pull them from their precarious positions two members of the troop were wounded by mortar fire. The tanks when freed pulled back some thousand yards, the right hand company by this time having reached their objective.

In the meantime the remaining two tanks of 3 troop were called upon to clear mines for the left hand company, where enemy resistance was particularly heavy. Although the flails cleared a gap no-use could be made of it as the infantry could still not get forward. 1 Troop with the Essex Regiment were not called upon.

The Squadron rallied afterwards, and the following day reconnaissances were made and plans issued for an attack by 231 Infantry Brigade on Hottot. This village strongpoint had been a 'thorn, in the flesh' for some time and had withstood a series of attacks; 3 Troop A Sqn under Lt. Dick was lent to help B Squadron. Troops moved to the forming up position at first light on 10 July.

The infantry met heavy resistance from the start and progress was very slow. The country in this area was heavily wooded and targets were never visible at distances greater than 200m. Each foot of ground was heavily contested and the infantry suffered severe casualties. The flails with the 2nd Devons were not used and the crews spent an unpleasant day being heavily mortared. No mines were encountered on the 1st HAMPSHIRE front but in the afternoon the troop of A Squadron was called forward to assist the infantry with gun fire. Suddenly a Panther was spotted creeping through the trees some 200m away, and armour-piercing rounds were poured at the German tank. Although the troop commander was certain hits were scored it could not be claimed as a knock-out. 3 Troop went to relieve the A Squadron troop and spent the night of 10/11 July on the alert, with enemy troops some 100m away.

On the morning of 11 June A Squadron was released to return once more to Juaye Mondaye. Four days later A Squadron moved forward again to Loucelles where it was placed in support of 33 Armoured Brigade for operations with the 59th Division. For this particular operation only two troops of the Squadron were required and Captain Beaumont with one tank plus 1 and 4 Troops were placed in support of 144 Regiment, Royal Armoured Corps; the remainder of the Squadron were held in Brigade Reserve. An officer with the Squadron describes the action: "The usual conferences, sorting maps, a really large supper and a good strong brew of tea, then a move to within three miles of the enemy's forward lines, under cover of darkness. The idea was an attack by the Infantry supported by tanks at dawn. The night was extremely dark and the armour moved nose to tail in a long line, the route being across country with no lights. There were periods of artificial moonlight which helped enormously and by sheer good driving and forceful language the tanks arrived at the right place at the right time."

It was not long before the call for flails came. 59 Infantry Division were attacking southwards and a minefield had been located to the north of Queuedeville - east and west of the Cheux-Noyers road. Forward patrols of the infantry had passed through but the 144 RAC had lost six tanks on the minefield.

Captain Beaumont went forward with Lieutenant Colonel Jolly commanding 144 Royal Armoured Corps. A short conference, a quick look at an air photograph, in a slit trench, and the plan was formed. Lieutenant Hall with 4 Troop made a lane through the minefield to the West of the Cheux-Noyers road and Lieutenant Ingram with 1 Troop to the east of the road. There were no anti-tank guns covering the minefield which was extremely fortunate, and the Squadrons of the 144 Royal Armoured Corps passed safely and quickly through. After the operation the flails collected together and harboured just to the north of the minefield.

By this time it was seven o'clock in the evening and mortaring was rather heavy at intervals of about twenty minutes, and lasted until about nine o'clock by which time the infantry got into Noyers. At last light the Germans counter-attacked at Noyers, supported by a few aircraft. The planes chose as their target an area which included A Squadron's harbour. This caused several casualties but fortunately did not last longer than about ten minutes. A small stock of smoke ammunition was set off by one bomb and over the whole area a thick smoke cloud made visibility practically nil, and for a short time confusion and darkness reigned. The rest of the night was spent in this area and on the following morning 1 and 4 Troops moved back to St Nicolas Farm and joined the rest of the Squadron. Three days later the Squadron returned to the Juaye Mondaye harbour.

During this operation casualties due to enemy mortar fire and the air attack were Trooper Francis Overton killed (buried at St Manvieu War Cemetery), and Captain Beaumont, Trooper Cannon and Trooper Beard wounded. The latter subsequently died of his wounds.

The arrival in France of the rest of the Regiment on 14 July was a welcome event. This meant that each Squadron now had its full establishment of four flail troops and one roller troop, besides a lavish scale of wheeled vehicles. Shortly afterwards, the unpleasant news was received that the War Establishment of a flail regiment was to be reduced to three flail troops in each Squadron. This meant that in each Squadron one flail troop and the roller troop were now surplus. Some of the crews were thus 'out' and sent to the rear, but returned later as reinforcements.

# Personal Recollections

Trooper E Lawrenson

Loader/WT Operator - B Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

By the end of May 1944, the twelve flail tanks of B Squadron taking part in OVERLORD had been waterproofed, and on 2 June we loaded them with ammunition, water, petrol etc, 'netted' the wireless, and were ready to go.

Early on 3 June B and C Squadrons' tanks embarked on a flotilla of Mark 4 LCTs near Calshot on the Solent. Enormous piles of stores such as 'compo' rations and cans of self-heating cocoa and soups were stacked on the shore. We loaded rations in every nook and cranny in the tank, topped up with petrol and soon were on our landing craft where we met once again the friendly crew who had carried us previously on exercises. We were prepared to the fullest extent of our skills and ready to go at last.

We sailed early on 4 June, but later in the day we were back at anchor in the Solent: D-Day had been put back a day because the weather had changed, with a howling gale and driving rain. Around dawn on 5 June a salt-caked WRNS in a motor-launch brought a Westminster Dragoons trooper to make up a tank crew on one of the LCTs. He was just in time for shortly we set sail again.

To us the conditions seemed worse, with waves washing over into the tank deck. Nearly all the passengers and crew were seasick: I was one of the lucky ones, too excited to be ill. The weather eased slightly, the RE on board whose role was to deal with underwater obstacles prepared their demolition charges: one or two of us cooked a meal on our tank cookers.

Sealed orders were opened and we had a last briefing with photographs and close-ups of where we were to breach the Atlantic Wall, details of RAF support, and maps showing anti-tank obstacles, pillboxes and machine-gun posts – which we were told would have been knocked out by bombing and shelling. 50th Infantry Division with two brigades up would attack Jig Green sector of Gold Beach, supported by DD tanks swimming ashore, and rockets and 25 pdr artillery fire from LCTs.

Breaching teams of flails. AVREs and other devices would land 5 minutes ahead of the infantry. The Westminster Dragoons tanks would drive up the beach cutting through the barbed wire defences and flailing through mines, until they reached the lateral road behind the beach, where they were to turn right to link up with the Hampshire Regiment at the village of Le Hamel, and then assault a small town which we later came to know as Arromanches, on the extreme right of the British sector.

When darkness approached, the weather was still atrocious, and though we did not know it at the time, the LCTs with RA 25-pdr guns got into trouble and had to be left behind; all one could see was our flotilla of about 12 LCTs. Some were apprehensive, but the majority were too sick to

care; I had a good night's sleep. Reveille was early, we cooked breakfast and loaded our gear on to the tanks. H-Hour for us was 7.25 am.

During our briefing we were informed that the beach where we were to land was bounded by turfed dunes with barbed wire entanglements and mined; there were patches of blue clay on the beach and beyond the dunes to the east was a marsh flanked by more minefields. The first objective was the lateral road.

The six assault teams had to make six gaps, three in jig Green sector and three in Jig Red: the teams were made up of B Squadron Westminster Dragoons flail tanks and 82nd Assault Regiment RE in AVREs, and were loaded on the LCTs in order of priority according to the first obstacle to be met; thus where blue clay was expected, a bobbin AVRE would land first to lay a carpet.

On our LCT the first to land would be a flail commanded by Sgt Bob Lindsay, followed by our flail commanded by Capt Ben Taylor. As we neared the shore, Capt Taylor was on the bridge checking landmarks with the LCT commander; he would board the tank at the last moment. We were keyed up, the few who felt like eating had done so, the gear was stowed, the guns loaded, the tanks unshackled from the deck. Tpr Gover and I had sealed the driver's and co-driver's hatches waterproofing them.

Les Clash, our driver, was very seasick; I remember his request to us not to forget, if the tank was knocked out, to traverse the turret so he and the co-driver could get out.

I sat on the turret giving a commentary over the tank's IC to the crew; everywhere was deathly quiet, the sailors manned the bow doors and opened fire with all their guns. Hostile shelling and small arms opened up, rockets from LC (Rockets) whooshed past, Ben Taylor leaped into the turret, the bow doors opened, there was a grating noise and a judder, and the beach stretched before us. Our tanks waded ashore in about five feet of water, the first British troops to land by sea.

As we waded ashore, Les Clash who was using a vomit bag at the same time as driving, misunderstood an order and started flailing, nearly drowning us. On reaching dry land, the cordite charges were ignited blowing the waterproofing off the guns and also the air intake and exhaust extensions. We followed our other flail up the beach dodging between the 'Element C' obstacles; one loomed up with a mine and a big shell fixed to it, but with all the crew screaming at our sick driver, he saw it in time.

Under heavy fire we approached the dunes, engaged the flail and along with Sgt Lindsay's tank started flogging our way through the barbed wire and mines; the density of mines was unbelievable and the sound of exploding mines seemed continuous. My tank, when about 15/20 yards from the lateral road, was knocked out – there was a tremendous explosion, the tank reared up, then crashed down; we were stopped in the minefield: the turret was traversed to enable driver and co-driver to open their hatches. I saw our other tank legging it down the road to the second objective. We had opened fire with our tank guns; to this day I don't know whether we hit anything; my concern was the wireless which the explosion had damaged.



Capt Taylor decided I had best take a message back to the commander of the Jig Green breaching teams, Major Elphinstone RE. I grabbed my tin hat and Sten gun and away through the minefield to the beach. Enemy fire was heavy - mortar, machine gun and small arms. The infantry were taking heavy casualties on the beach and had only reached the dunes: lanes 1 and 2 did not exist; Major Elphinstone had been killed.

I said earlier that we were briefed that strong points and pillboxes would have been taken out by bombing and shelling. But as mentioned the 25-pdr guns on LCTs did not arrive and the RAF missed Jig Green: only the determination of tank crews, sappers and infantry won the day on Jig Green.

I spotted Lt Col Nelson Smith of the Hampshires who although wounded was trying to get his men off the beach: I quickly gave him a situation report. With one lane through the minefield, slowly things started to move. Moving about the beach under heavy fire, I found one AVRE still in one piece under a 2/Lt: I brought him up to date, then made my way back through the minefield to my tank. I got the 38 set we had on board working and made contact with the AVRE, which started carefully through the lane; at the lateral road it started to turn right and hit a mine, breaking a track and blocking the lane.

Our crew went to help, Les Clash being one of the best track menders I had met. We were still under mortar fire, one landing on the back of the AVRE and wounding the commander.

A lieutenant from a DD tank appeared crying that he had lost his tank and crew. Some sappers appeared and with their help we cleared mines, repaired the AVRE and re-opened part of the lane; the sappers cleared the few yards we had missed and laid white tapes to mark the lane. The MG and small arms fire was slowing down, and the Hampshires were now in Le Hamel, about four hours late. We cleared a few mines from around our tank, single and double Teller mines, and a box mine which could only be found by prodding the ground. One's sense of time vanished, we seemed to be in a different world.

Sgt Crockatt arrived with the squadron ARV and an unexpected crew member, Lt Col Blair-Oliphant (CO of the Westminster Dragoons who, determined to land on D-Day, had taken the place of one of the regular fitters in the crew). He congratulated us on the job we had done, and examined our tank with interest; unknown to us a piece of one front sprocket had been taken out by an AP shot, over half our flailing chains had been blown away, and the front nearside bogey assembly blown off: however the fitter-sergeant thought the tank could be repaired. One of the ARV crew asked me why all those men were sleeping in rows above the high water mark; he vomited when I told him.

Troops and vehicles were now moving off the beach through our lane. An infantry 15 cwt truck drew level with our tank and set off another box mine: we had to give morphine to one of its crew. One of our scout cars had landed and was commandeered by Capt. Taylor who left us with the job of getting our tank back on the road. We found out how the other lanes had fared, including that Sgt Lindsay's tank had been knocked out and the crew wounded: two were captured but escaped a few days later. (Editor's note: The full story of Sgt Lindsay's gallant efforts on D-Day for which he was awarded the MM, may be found on pages 188 - 189 of the 1969 Regimental History.)

It was now early evening and stuff was piling ashore: the beach looked a shambles - knocked out tanks, vehicles, men, ships. An American sailor arrived at our tank in search of souvenirs. We found him a couple of German helmets and he kindly took home letters for us: when mine, postmarked "London, 7 June" reached my parents, they thought I was still in England and were pleased that I had not sailed for Normandy.

The night of 6 June we slept by our tank among the mines, surviving a near-miss from a German bomb, its blast probably smothered by the sand. On 7 June we started taking parts from knocked out tanks to repair ours, difficult working because of the tides. I salvaged a No. 19 wireless to replace my damaged one. All the Top Brass seemed to visit our tank, viewing with interest the repairs we were carrying out. After lots of hard work we salvaged our tank and rejoined the Regiment, in the knowledge that the lane I had helped to make on D-Day had proved the most suitable for armour to use on landing.

A final thought on D-Day.

My home was in Darwen, Lancashire. The conversion of Sherman tanks to flails was carried out by engineering firms all over the country: one such in Darwen, I later discovered, did flail conversions and tested them in the field I played in as a boy.

Could I have landed on D-Day in a tank that had been converted in my home town?

## Trooper J Minogue

### Gunner, B Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

(Extract from his unpublished book 'Flogging Wars')

We knew now that we would land in Normandy. We had no idea when, but we all felt that it would be soon and that our long training which had involved much hard work was about to be put to the test. We hoped that we would not be found wanting when the time came for us to go into action. It would be the first experience of battle for many of us.

We knew that we had prepared our Sherman Crab to the best of our ability. We were anxious to get it over and done with. We had confidence in each other as a crew. Now we wanted to see that confidence justified.

Of course, most of our concerns and fears were unspoken and there were moments when we would have liked to open up with each other. There have been many attempts to try to define in precise terms what is courage, bravery or what you will. What keeps soldiers going? I know nothing about psychology or psychiatry, or how minds work but I would think that the answer is the fear of being seen to be afraid by one's intimates, in our case the other members of the crew.

Fortunately, we were not kept waiting much longer and we put the tanks aboard an LCT (the army's arse-upwards way of saying Tank Landing Craft) on Saturday, June 3, 1944, in Southampton Water, not a long way from Lepe Point. It was a long, complicated business which took until late in the afternoon. Each landing craft took six tanks only. They had to be loaded in reverse order to how they would leave the flat-bottomed landing craft. Again, the problem with the flails was their almost 9 ft wide jib. It involved the sailors shifting one or two things about in case the flails damaged them when they left the craft.

In our landing craft there was an armoured bulldozer at the rear, then one of the command tanks - a "straight" Sherman - two flails and at the front two Churchills of the 82 Assault Squadron of the Royal Engineers. That little mixture was known as a composite breaching team. In addition there were several Sappers who would land on foot whose job it would be to mark with white tape the mine-free "lane" cleared by the flails. We didn't fancy their chances much. By this time, come to think of it, most of us were living on hope.

We shackled the tanks to the deck and the landing craft reversed into Southampton Water, to join the huge convoy that was being assembled as we removed the tarpaulin from our flail chains, which swung freely, ready to use when we reached our section of the landing beach - Jig Green. We slung the tarpaulin between the arms of the flail jib as a makeshift hammock.

We were really committed now, and strangely enough, felt a sense of relief. If we had forgotten anything in our preparations it was too bloody late to do anything about it. In any event, we were busy reading small booklets about how we should behave towards the French and a message from General Eisenhower about the "eyes of the world" being on us, and a stark reminder that the enemy was "well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened."

He wished us good luck and the blessings of the Almighty on our great and noble undertaking. In contrast, General Montgomery's message might have been issued by a Master of the Hunt and was something about "Cracking about on the plains of North Germany" and "Good Hunting". Bollocks!

We had seen General Eisenhower but did not know enough about him to form any kind of judgment of his abilities. In any event, we reasoned, messages of reassurance were fine, but it was silly sods like ourselves who would have to do the job.

We were impressed most by one phrase only, the bit about our enemy being "battle-hardened" when we knew that the majority of the flail crews had never been in action before. It worried us a little did that, adding a chilling note to our ever-increasing tension.

If I sound slightly sour about General Montgomery's message, I doubt whether I was without support for my dislike of it. Others on the landing craft as well thought his message was a bit over the top.

I saw "Monty" once only. He struck me as a lonely man. It is true that he bore massive responsibility and that may have accounted for his bleak, largely unsmiling, unbending appearance.

To my mind, he lacked any warmth so that soldiers might be drawn to him. I suppose his record must prove his abilities to lead and to win. But to the majority of ordinary soldiers he lacked what I suppose is the “common touch”, the possession of which, I am sure, he would have found abhorrent.

To be fair to him, however, his own writings and the work of eminent biographers probably show that my judgment is quite false. Certainly, my own experience is that most of the rank and file - the “ordinary” lads - regarded him as always being an unapproachable “one of them” and certainly not “one of us”.

We sailed on the morning of June 4 in a choppy sea, but were turned back at the Needles and spent 24 hours tied up alongside an American Tank Landing Ship (LST) packed with British infantry. It was frustrating to say the least and, if anything, merely increased our apprehension, which you could cut with a bloody knife.

We sailed finally on June 5 once again into a choppy sea so that we did not know if we were throwing up from genuine seasickness or plain old fashioned fear of what lay ahead. Wherever we looked, there were ships, with some of the infantry landing craft (LCI) parting company with their towing vessels.

The real heroes were the men standing on what seemed to be flat sections of roadway. In fact these, we learned later, were sections of the Mulberry Harbour, the instant port the supply ships would use later. But sod that for a game of soldiers!

The night itself was fantastic as the great convoy moved along a water motorway between red and green lights laid to indicate a mine-free channel.

It was a sobering thought that the Navy minesweepers were clearing the way for the as yet untried land mine sweepers.

The crew of our landing craft seemed totally unconcerned as they went calmly about their jobs. We had been on exercises with them once or twice, but I am sure they had never seen anything like this before, a massive convoy of ships of all shapes and sizes on a roughish sort of sea.

A convoy that had no intention of stopping until, quite literally, it hit the Normandy coast.

At first light we were standing off the Normandy coast, listening to the tremendous barrage from ships far out to sea and from the rocket-firing vessels closer to the shore, a grey, lightning smudge away.

Then came the order to unshackle the tanks, to “mount” and to start the engines as our landing craft began its run into the Jig Green section of Gold Beach.

That summer day, June 6 1944, D-Day, is etched indelibly on the windows of my mind. I can hear it, smell it, feel it as though it happened only 24 hours ago.

You may question why after all these years. I suppose I must have been so impressionable that every detail, almost every one of my own reactions can be recalled instantly and in fine focus.

If I were to say that, in some inexplicable way, it is my personal memorial to those who never made it safely off that beach, the cynics will accuse me of hyped-up slush to create an over-dramatic effect.

Make no mistake about the Normandy landing. Those of us who were in that first assault have never regarded it as a khaki-clad "Entry of the Gladiators". It was the most awesome moment in our lives.

And don't let anyone tell you anything different. Self-preservation is the strongest natural instinct. That summer day, before the sun was up, it was on display without any shame among the first tankmen and infantry to land.

If you hear a different story, those telling it are either bloody liars or they landed well after the initial assault.

When the ramp of our landing craft went down, the two Churchills left first, followed by two flails, Captain Stanyon's straight Sherman and the armoured bulldozer. We slid into about four feet of water and headed for the beach. It was exactly 07.25 and we seemed to be a little early, for there was a little delay before the Hampshires landed. But we were on the Jig Green and beginning our run up the beach, where we were not to start flailing until just short of the high water mark.

Our first minor mishap came when Sam Hardy, our driver, blew some of the waterproofing prematurely, and Biz Poole shouted "You nearly blew my f\_\_\_\_g head off."

Of course, Biz had been in France before with the Queen's Bays, but the rest of us were greener than golf course grass, operating largely on automatic pilot. There was much to do, like blowing away the light steel vent that enabled the engine to function in the water.

Before leaving the landing craft, we had been offered a ration of rum. We all refused. We had been brought up on stories of how some men were fighting drunk before going over the top in the 1914-18 war and did not want any of that bullshit.

As we went as quickly as possible towards the high water mark I broke the sealing round the turret ring with a 360 degree traverse. I will never forget the view through the periscope, seeing the infantry coming ashore, some being hit by guns firing across the beach on fixed lines. As men fell, their mates dragged them from the water and then ran on, not a frantic running motion but a sustained slow trot.

It was like a film in slow motion, yet I suppose it lasted for just seconds. I will never forget it. Then we started to flail, throwing up gobs of wet sand at first, then creating a fine dust cloud as we hit the dunes and began to blow landmines. We were into the serious business now and our speed at the maximum 1½ miles an hour when flailing made us an easy target.



But seeing a flail in action for the first time, as the German defenders were doing, is puzzling and confusing and we got through the minefield among the low sand dunes safely. Biz told us over the intercom that Sergeant Roberts, who was behind us, was successfully widening the lane we had cleared and that some of the Sappers who had been aboard our landing craft had started to mark the mine-free lane with white tape.

Some of our companions had not been so successful. Major Elphinstone RE was killed as soon as he landed, while Captain Stanyon's tank was hit and set on fire and some of his crew wounded.

Our own troubles started when we turned on to what we thought was the road into Le Hamel. It was, in fact, merely a track leading up to the road, and as we turned on to it, I remembered it was time to clear the waterproofing off the Browning machine gun in the turret by firing a short burst. To my amazement, just as I did so several of our infantrymen burst through a low hedge at the side of the track. One seemed to have been hit and others with him were dragging him back into the hedgerow.

To this day I still do not know whether I had hit him or he was being fired on by defending Germans.

But there was something else to worry about immediately. The narrow track we were on had been shelled so heavily that it started to crumble beneath the weight of the tank and we slid slowly sideways into a crater. The flail would not budge. Biz Poole, our driver Sam Hardy and his co-driver Arthur Pickford, got out of the tank and, at some risk to themselves because there was a great deal of shelling and mortaring going on, managed to dig out a shackle while the crew of one of the Engineers' Churchills passed us one of their steel towing hawsers and were able to pull us clear.

Fortunately, the flail was undamaged and then the mother and father of all arguments began. The infantry wanted us to push on to Le Hamel as we were supposed to be doing. A Major in the Royal Artillery insisted that we get out of the way of his 25-pounders and begin to clear a minefield for his guns. Rank won in the end, we started to clear mines for the gunners. In any case, we were now so far behind our schedule that the chance of fulfilling the original plan to rendezvous in Le Hamel about 20 minutes after the landing was hopeless.

And try as he might, Neville Duell, our wireless operator, was unable to contact anyone who could give us any orders which made any sense.

Biz left us to flail enough mines to get some of the guns into the field, while he set off to see if he could find any of our own officers to get some new orders. You may think it strange for him to leave his crew so soon after landing. We did not. Biz knew that if he had instructed us to do a job in the meantime we would get on with it. Equally, we knew that Biz Poole would never "drop us in it."

Flailing a lane from the approximate entrance to the field to the far end of it took only a few minutes, but each time we hit a mine, and fortunately there were only a few, the main gun in the turret fired of its own volition. Neville Duell, still searching the dial of the wireless set, did his job and at once shoved another shell up the breech. He did this twice before I was able to get off my seat to hammer with my fist on his shoulder to ask him to ignore the normal drill in which he re-loaded automatically as soon as a shell case was ejected.

The mines coming through the dunes had been numerous enough to throw the firing mechanism out of fluncture. something we would have to attempt to find an answer for in the future.

For now, however, it was time to change our flail chains, which had taken a considerable bashing coming off the beach. It was a filthy job, for the spare chains, carried in open "bins" on each side of the tank, were covered in protective grease. Each chain had to be bolted to the flail drum. Invariably, as it swung free, the iron ball at the end of it swung into your shinbone, so that, literally, we were reduced to dancing about, cursing fluently, with the pain.

We had done the job several times in practice. I don't think any flail crew ever cracked that particular problem.

Thoroughly knackered by our exertions, we flopped down at the side of the track for a rest and a smoke, watching a stream of vehicles using the lane that we and Sergeant Roberts had made free of mines. I think that was the one moment when we felt proud of what we had achieved.

Neville Duell was scrabbling about in the loose flailed earth. "What the bloody hell do you think this is then?" he asked. It was a German box mine, painted black and the firing mechanisms were showing red, meaning the mine was primed to blow up on any reasonable pressure being applied on that narrow red sliver of wood.

Gingerly, we clambered aboard the flail, and our driver was able to turn back to approach an already flailed area. The new chains got rid of that box mine, which our depleted chains had so obviously missed. I can remember feeling glad that mine recognition courses we had done in England had been well learned, particularly as I was sitting next to Neville when he began disturbing the loose earth.

A bit chastened, we resumed our position and our inevitable cigarettes by the side of the track. We were waiting for Biz to get back when we saw the driver of a Bren gun carrier stop, get out and pick up some object or other. It was a small anti-personnel mine which exploded in his hands. Arthur Pickford said later that it had blown off his hands. Certainly the sound of the man's screams were chilling.

And then a most amazing, totally unexpected sight in a day that was to be filled with them.

Our Colonel came strolling along, long-strided but not hurrying. He was dressed in white overalls and looked, for all the world, like an itinerant painter and decorator who had got into the act somehow. We told him where Corporal Poole had gone and he also set off to find some of our other tanks.

It was like an excerpt from a fantasy, something we would all remember,

When Biz returned he said we had to join another of our flails at the side of the road leading from Le Hamel, which was still holding out and by now it must have been after eleven, at least. We spent all the afternoon there, being cursed by other drivers trying to squeeze their own vehicles past the wide-jibbed flails.

I told Biz that in the scramble over the box mine, or perhaps even before. I had lost my revolver. His reply was typical of him. Losing a pistol meant “nowt” when so many others had lost their lives.

I fixed myself up with a German rifle, and enough ammunition for it to start a private war, from a small dump of discarded arms taken from a few German prisoners who were standing on the beach, helping to dig out any vehicles that needed some assistance. They did not look like defeated men to me. In fact, it was early in the afternoon when Le Hamel finally surrendered and it was supposed to be held by a platoon only.

In any event, we had only a precarious toehold at that time and it would have been no trouble at all for a superior force approaching from the low hills behind the beach to sweep us all back into the sea.

We spent that first night in Meauvaines, a small hamlet behind the beach. Just two of the 13 tanks B Squadron had brought to France.

As darkness fell, I had a distinguished companion for the first guard I ever did in the field, our Colonel. By that time, somebody had found him some khaki overalls. They did not fit his length but, at least, they were relatively inconspicuous.

As we patrolled, the Colonel thought he saw a German soldier cross the bedroom window of one of the shell-damaged houses in the hamlet. “Run off and bring a grenade, Trooper” he instructed. I got back with a Mills bomb from one of our two tanks. The Colonel pulled out the retaining pin and threw the grenade at the window frame. It hit the woodwork, rolled onto the window sill and then to the ground.

We were there well before it, having dived for cover in a dry ditch at the side of the path running in front of the house. For a tall man, the Colonel took cover quite elegantly. I just took cover.

Shortly afterwards one of our petrol and ammunition trucks turned up and the Colonel left to get the latest information from the Corporal in our squadron transport troop. He had the foresight to send another trooper to stand guard with me.

When the story of his standing guard with me was in full circulation it enhanced his reputation even more than the white overalls incident. Although instructed not to be part of the invasion, he had “hitched” a ride in one of our armoured recovery vehicles, posing as one of our fitters, to be with his men. But then, our Colonel thought a lot about his Regiment. Even at that early stage in Normandy we thought a great deal about, him as well.

That first night in Meauvaines was noisily fascinating. Some German aircraft made an appearance over the beaches, where there was still a mass of shipping. The streams of tracer bullets from heavy calibre machine guns and the rapid fire of Bofors anti-aircraft guns kept us awake until, tired out, we slipped into welcome sleep.

The following day the Colonel was ordered to move to Brécv. a short distance away. He took command of our tank, while Biz Poole crouched on the floor of the turret, under the gun shield. We hoped the Colonel would curb his enthusiasm and not order me to fire the gun. Had he done so, Biz would have received a red hot shell case in his lap.

When we reached Brécy there was a magnificent grey Percheron lying dead in the field. A young farm boy was digging a pit, some distance from the dead animal. Our crew joined in willingly, supplying him with ships' Woodbines, which were far superior to the rank-smelling, loosely roiled cigarettes he was smoking.

It turned out that his grandmother, bereft after the death of the farm's draught horse, wanted the animal buried in the corner of the field, convinced it would become a fertile spot. We used the flail to tow the dead animal into the pit and even contributed a large till of chloride of lime to assist in the decomposition process.

In penny numbers, some of the tanks that had been bogged on the beach turned up as they were recovered from the clay. Each crew had a story to tell, mostly comical ones. But one flail commanded by Corporal Alf Middleton, a Cockney, was just about to start coming off the ramp when the landing craft, caught by the ebbing tide, slewed round to face to the open sea. The crew stayed there uncomfortably until the tide turned again, enduring a ringside seat at the landings for several hours.

One of his crew took his shovel to answer an urgent signal from his bowels and returned minutes later with a clutch of Germans desperate to surrender to him. It was hard to decide who was the most frightened.

We remained in the field all that day and I remember that the grandmother, or it could have been the boy's mother, gave us five eggs but only after much schoolboy French to indicate that there were five members of the crew.

It was, I remember, another long day. We had been on the go from the first light. A great number of men and materials were still moving away from the landing area into the narrow bridgehead. In some ways, we were lucky not to know just what a small area of Normandy we were actually holding at that stage. Had the Germans been given the right order by Hitler on D-Day plus one, as it was known, they could have wiped the bloody floor with us. Fortunately, our ignorance gave us a confidence which, while completely unjustified, did us little harm.

But there was another event which makes Brécy memorable. Major General Hobart fulfilled the promise he had made to us at Lepe Point to visit us "as soon after the landing as possible."

Again, he came unaccompanied. He walked among the crews, with words of encouragement or sympathetic nods according to the stories they told him. When he heard that we and Sergeant Roberts had flailed successfully he was delighted. But, of course, the Normandy landings were the big test for his beloved "Funnies."

That "beloved Funnies" may strike you as being sentimental rubbish put in for effect. It is nothing of the sort. Sir Percy Hobart, we were all convinced, might be a Major General, but he was "one of us," a tankman's tankman. We felt, in spite of his high rank, that he would have been happy sitting on an upturned petrol tin chewing the fat with the crew, enjoying our corny jokes and sharing a mug of tea with us.

Like our own Colonel, we felt Sir Percy was a wise old bird, who knew our fears and our hopes and thought quite a bit about us. But then there is a bond among tankmen. I am not suggesting that tank crews are anything special. There are just as many awkward and stupid bastards among them as you will find in any large group of men. I think this bond might spring from the interdependence among crews. In flails, for example, with crews of five, there must have been occasions when we acted like identical quintuplets.

Even so, we retained our individuality. We could think and act as a crew but we were five distinct personalities. The army might have trained and moulded us along the lines it required, but just to take my own squadron as an example, there were identifiable differences between the crews in the various Troops.

## Lieutenant D C Potter

### Troop Leader, B Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

By the time on the morning of 3 June 1944 that we loaded our tanks we had had plenty of opportunity to get accustomed to life on LCTs. Already we had inspected them in Poole Harbour. Later we moved to a camp, well camouflaged by trees, north of Beaulieu. In May, we moved our tanks to a beautiful spot on low cliffs overlooking the Solent, while we installed ourselves in a camp a couple of miles east, near Southampton Water, directly above a sandy beach.

We waterproofed our tanks so that at the end of the process they were able to wade through nine feet of water without any leaks.

When did we first know that we were going to France? The full realisation came by degrees. We had been selected from the Regiment to join teams of tanks of 79 Armoured Division, to lead the assault on D-Day. But when, where, and indeed whether that assault would be made, was a matter of uncertainty for a long time.

In the Solent there was, by the middle of May, a huge fleet assembled, of all sizes and shapes. We took part in two exercises. One was a landing at Studland Bay. The other was a staff exercise to test how long the 80 mile crossing would take, We sat in the LCTs while they



proceeded many miles south of The Needles, then turned and came round the Isle of Wight towards Southsea. approximately the right distance.

Then came the "O" Group briefing. We sat before a huge "mock-up" of the coast where we were to land: a work of art, with hills, houses, roads, trees, all set out beautifully. For reasons of security made-up names were given to every village and the one town. All the same the Brigadier who briefed us told us that it was Normandy, the town being Bayeux and the village near our landing point Asnelles-sur-Mer.

We were told there was little danger of German air attack (and indeed there never was such an attack as it turned out), and that the RAF were going to blast all German gun emplacements. If not a walkover, the landing was a pretty certain victory. What I never learned until forty years later, was that there was a huge German command post behind Asnelles, dominating the whole of the beach. It was still there forty years later. Nor were we told that there was a concrete bunker on the beach at a point called Le Hamel.

No blame to those who omitted to tell us: there was no point in depressing us with the thought that possibly the RAF might miss, so that, as in fact happened, the bunker was still there when we arrived.

Only when we were afloat were we allowed to tell all the troops that this was the real thing. not an exercise, and that we were going to Normandy.

There came the day of loading our tanks, 3 June. In the dark we rose, packed what few bits and pieces we could take on our tanks, and were driven in trucks a couple of miles to our tank park. I felt overwhelmed by the importance of what we were to do. We were to land on D-Day, at H-Hour, 7.30 in the morning, on a wide empty beach, ahead of 50th Infantry Division. We were to be the very first ashore on our beach. That there were to be earlier airborne landings we were of course not told.

Ever since that morning I have found a special magic in starting a journey before dawn, seeing the light come gradually into the sky, with the whole day ahead.

We started our tank engines, and drove a few hundred yards to the concrete ramps or hards, where the LCTs were to arrive. We waited. Much of military operations consists of waiting. It was broad daylight, and mid-morning, when finally we reversed our tanks on to the LCTs and ourselves clambered aboard.

An LCT was not a luxury craft. It was flat-bottomed, drawing, if I remember right, two foot forward and four foot aft. It slithered over the sea, uncomfortably. At its front was the ramp, which was lowered in order to load or unload; and high on either side of the ramp was a kind of platform or look-out point. The engine, living quarters, and bridge, were in the stern. Between them and the ramp stretched the open hold, with its load of tanks covered with camouflage netting.

The word "hold" is a misnomer, for it was simply an open deck, more or less level with the surface of the sea. Either side was a catwalk leading dangerously

from the living quarters at the stern to the forward look-out points. In fine weather it was fun to stand on one or other of these look-out points, not unlike sitting on the top front seat of a London bus.

Imagine twenty tank crew members. For their comfort on board was provided a kind of box or large cupboard behind the open hold – comfortable for four persons, more or less. Imagine the hold awash with dirty sea water, sloshing to and fro; the craft made about five knots flat out, so that the crossing was likely to take some twenty hours. Imagine four tank crews trying to cook on an unreliable petrol stove. Thank heaven it did not rain.

We had waterproof tarpaulins, for some purpose or other. By slinging these between the front of the tank and its flail drum, we were able to form more or less a dry nest or hammock. I also found some stretchers, and as these had feet, they enabled some of us to sleep in comparative comfort.

The original plan practised on the exercises was for an LCT to carry an assault team of two flail tanks and two AVREs specially equipped to deal with other obstacles. But to our astonishment we also took on board a dozen or more Royal Engineers on foot, with an officer, Captain Smith. They had not been on our exercises and did not appear to be well briefed; their job, they said, was to clear underwater obstacles. Captain Smith, a cheerful hearty fellow, was totally unaffected by the unpleasant physical conditions.

Once the tanks were loaded, our craft backed from the hard and with a dozen or so similar craft lay at anchor in the Solent, with a choppy sea and a stiff breeze. A good deal of sweet tea - the favourite drink of the British Army - was drunk. Jokes, gossip, preparation and eating of food, and total idleness took up the rest of 3 June.

Why were we so cheerful? In part, ignorance of what was to come. In greater part, relief that after so much training, we were finally going to war. To some extent a feeling that we were honoured by being selected from the Regiment – four tanks from each of four troops, a small fraction of the whole Regiment, an elite. After so many years of defeat, a hope of victory. Underlying everything was the humorous character of the English. The following morning, 4 June, we proceeded to sea. I had overslept, and on finally getting up, I found the craft going west, towards The Needles, in a line of similar craft, all slopping about, making four or five knots. Although we were not told it at the time, we had started on our way to France.

Everybody now knows the story. The weather forecast was unfavourable, and Eisenhower gave the order to postpone the invasion. At the time all we knew was that, after passing The Needles, we turned, came back into the Solent. and tied up alongside a large ship.

I looked up from our restless small craft to the apparently stationary hull of the ship. To my surprise I saw a well-known face looking down. It was an officer I knew in the 23rd Hussars. He was some years older than I, and far more self-assured. Seeing the naive 22-year old looking up, without hesitation he invited me on board, and I accepted. He also invited me into a wardroom where I had lunch with him and a few American journalists. They seemed to be distinctly elderly, perhaps 30 years, but we got on well: only later did it occur to me that what they saw was a school-boyish youngster unaware of what he was in for. My friend told me that the 23rd Hussars

were to land in the afternoon of D-Day, having been warned that they might have to fight their way ashore. I told him that was nonsense - we would have finished everything by early morning so that the 23rd Hussars would land in peace. As it turned out that is what happened.

Well before dark I was back on the small craft, where one or two soldiers were already beginning to be seasick.

So arrived the morning of 5 June. Soon after I awoke, we slipped our lines to the ship and we proceeded west towards The Needles. We were now towing a small boat, some twelve foot overall, with a naval crew of two, who were to help deal with underwater obstacles.

So, on a choppy sea, a cool windy day, two lines of small craft, shipping water with tiresome regularity, set out on a 20-hour crossing to France, unaccompanied it seemed by any protection: no accompanying fleet or aircraft. All wireless sets were silent. Signals were passed from one craft to another by hand semaphore.

We passed The Needles, turned south, and slowly, uncomfortably, slithered over the choppy sea. Gradually the white cliffs of St Catherine's Point disappeared in a light haze.

I went up on the bridge. The Skipper, an Australian called Digger, told us we were definitely going to France. So I went down, got out the maps and told the tank crews that this was the great adventure at last. Not one expressed fear or despondency. They must have known that, to put it at its lowest, we were on a hazardous outing. But the war had been with us for five years, the second front had been discussed for at least two years, and now at last we were the second front. Morale was high, as they say. There was also an element of self-deception, a belief that since we had air superiority, most of the defences would have been wiped out before our arrival.

I suppose it was a time for great thoughts. Oddly, the tune of Rule Britannia ran through my head incessantly. Nothing more solemn.

The 5 June should have been a miserable day. The sea was rough, the craft shipped water, the hold was wet and filthy, there was no warmth, we were overcrowded, we had difficulty in cooking food, and many of us were seasick. There was little to relieve boredom, and we were going to land ahead of the entire army, at 7.30 the following morning, on a hostile shore. Nevertheless, nobody was in low spirits. I doubt if at the time I gave it any thought, except that I was convinced that I had a troop of first class soldiers.

The Navy passed the time by keeping on course, using radar, and sending humorous messages from one bridge to another.

So the day passed and we continued our way south, slowly approaching the enemy coast. We had no lights, and therefore as it became dark we did what we could to sleep.

I confess I slept pretty well. But in the middle of the night I became conscious of a voice shouting the awful words "abandon ship". I jumped up, under the impression that our craft was about to sink. I would have to swim for it. However, it turned out the voice came from the small craft we were towing, which owing to rough seas was filling with water and slowly sinking. We simply hauled it alongside, took off the two naval types, and then turned it adrift.

It was already light when I awoke again. We had time for a quick breakfast (thank God for self-heating cocoa) and set about packing the blankets and our small kit, on to the tank. We took off the huge camouflage nets, opened the hatches of the tanks, and warmed up the engines ready for the landing. I was more excited than I had ever been in my life.

From the bridge we could see the other craft, two lines separated by a few hundred yards. Then the low coast began to be visible. We altered course and formation, so that we were in line abreast, each craft carrying an assault team of tanks and foot soldiers. During briefing in the camp we had seen row upon row of photographs of the coast, taken by low flying aircraft. Consequently we were able to identify Asnelles-sur-Mer and Le Hamel a building on an embankment above the beach, and, some hundreds of yards to the east, a lane to the beach with an earth blockhouse on either side (it turned out they were concrete covered with earth).

We were to land at low tide, so that the underwater obstacles would be exposed. There was a vast wide sandy beach, behind it a row of very small sand dunes, no more than a low bank, behind those a flat area which was a minefield some fifty yards deep, and a narrow road parallel to the coast with a disused tramway alongside it.

We were to land at H-Hour, our job being to flail a path or paths through the minefield, marking those paths with fluorescent banners, while the 13/18th Hussars, who had DD tanks which could swim in, were to sit on the beach supporting both us and the infantry.

Our crews manned the tanks. Up on the bridge Digger called out that we were a few hundred yards too far to the east. That seemed to me to be as good as accurate. Then things began to happen very quickly. Digger called out "Just coming in, time you were on your vehicles" and shook us each heartily by the hand, saying goodbye. "Best of luck" he said "I want to get off quick without wasting time." I suddenly realised that his work was almost accomplished, ours was about to start. I went down and got into my tank, said a few words to the crew on the intercom, and sitting high in the turret so as to have a clear view, prepared to go ashore.

The craft came into the beach. With a good deal of noise the ramp went down. Off went the AVRE which unwound a huge roll of coconut matting in front of it. As I remember, my tank went next. We were in no more than four foot of water, some fifty or a hundred yards from the beach, which stretched a long, long way ahead, vast and empty. I vividly remember that as we went down the ramp, Captain Smith, standing high on the platform beside the ramp, waved and shouted a few words of encouragement, and I waved and shouted back. Memory plays tricks, and I could not now record accurately hour by hour exactly what happened on that long day. But my memory of landing is remarkably vivid, although vivid is not accurate. It was 7.30 in the morning, cool and dry, the sky part blue and part clouded. There was this enormous beach, scattered with obstacles looking like metal gates. Behind the beach was flat land. To the right, further away than I had expected, was the village of Asnelles, with a large building, said to be a sanatorium, direct on the beach at Le Hamel. No sign of any Germans, not that we expected them to be visible.

At some stage a craft behind us fired a group of rockets, which flew screaming up into the vast open sky, an overwhelming sound and sight. But no sign of the RAF. because. I presumed, they

had already smashed all enemy strong points. As it happened, the enemy strong points were still largely in good order.

So off we went into a few feet of salt water, the waterproofing necessitating that the guns pointed rear, and a huge "funnel" reaching heavenwards over the engine exhaust, all ready to flail our way through a minefield. Then we had to proceed along the road to our right into Asnelles, turn left inland, and rally in a field behind the village. Apart from our mine flailing capacity, we were fighting tanks, and it was clearly the British idea to put armour ashore at the very start to overwhelm the enemy, and lend real and moral support to our infantry.

No battle in history can every have gone according to plan in every detail. Certainly this one did not.

The first thing that had already occurred to me as not wholly in order was the absence of the DD tanks. They were supposed to swim in and give support on the beach while we cleared the mines. But the sea was too choppy and they were not launched. Instead they landed a short time after us, direct on the beach.

My tank cleared the water, and headed for the minefield several hundred yards away. Eagerly I pressed the switch that released the waterproofing, or rather those bits of it that impede the use of the tank as a fighting machine. Off went the huge "funnel" dropping to the sand behind us. The waterproof cloth around the base of the turret was blown off by a charge underneath it. My tank was going at, I suppose, eight or ten miles an hour, when, to my horrified surprise, we slithered to a halt. This was not planned. Clearly we had bogged down on a patch of clay lying underneath the sand topsoil. We had been warned that extensive tests on the Norfolk coast had shown that this risk existed. I waved furiously to Corporal Adams who was following me in the second flail, yelling that he should give me a wide berth lest he also be stuck, and go on ahead. He went on, reached the minefield, flailed a path through it to the road, flailed and widened the path, opening the route for infantry, tanks and vehicles to get off the beach and on to the road.

I was beside myself with anger and frustration. Stuck halfway across an almost empty beach, with nothing but a few tanks on it so far as one could see. This was to have been a glorious day, and here I was stuck in mud.

Two considerations prompted my next action. One was a desire to do something conspicuous. The other, more important, was the instinct that had been drummed into me time and time again during tank exercises. We were told "use your initiative" or "never do nothing". At least once I had been criticised for failing to get out of my tank promptly when something went wrong. I had also known of a tank commander criticised for being out of his tank and so unable to take orders. I instinctively felt I should get out of my tank, not quite sure what good would come of it, or what good would come of not getting out. But under no circumstances was I going to be reproached for doing nothing; at the very least there was a better chance of getting somebody to tow us out of the mud.

Thus it was that I can justly claim to have been the first soldier with 50 Division to set foot on the coast of France on D-Day.



I quickly nipped out of the turret, down to the sand, and walked round, confirming what I already knew, that we were stuck fast. There was the empty beach, save for a scattering of tanks. My eagerness in getting out of the tank was now replaced by some caution, and I therefore waited on the side of the tank furthest away from Asnelles and thus probably furthest away from hostile Germans, until after the infantry should arrive, when at least I could walk as far as the minefield, ascertain where paths had been cleared, and make sure that these were conspicuously marked.

I did not have long to wait. A few hundred yards behind me boats were coming ashore and soon a line of soldiers, single file, came up the beach, passing close to my tank. A sergeant was leading a platoon of the Devons in single file, not too fast, with perfect calmness, towards the low dunes and the minefield. The sergeant seemed sober and cheerful, although he told me with a laugh that he had been drinking whisky. That seemed to me then a sensible thing for him to have done. As I was dressed in black dungarees or “denims” and close fitting tin hat of the sort used by tank crews, as well as black jackboots that I had bought previously in Lillywhites, I was glad to be recognised as British and not German.

So we walked up the beach, peacefully, for nobody fired at us and we fired at nobody, although a lot of noise was coming from somewhere. Once we got to the dunes, I felt slightly at a loose end, for there was little that I could do. I could see Corporal Adams over to the right. Here and there I saw the odd tank. Behind us boats were disgorging soldiers. The beach was becoming full. I contacted the Company Commander in the Devons who had landed where we had come ashore, and lying on the dunes with our maps we confirmed where we had arrived, rather to the east of where we should have landed. With my binoculars I could see the road running parallel to the beach, perhaps fifty or one hundred yards inland. The minefield was fenced, with little skull and crossbones signs. I confess, being no infantryman, I was not clear what should happen next. However, a lieutenant in the Devons, after talking to the Company Commander, called to his platoon to go forward through the minefield and they walked forward, rather slowly, not – to my amazement – using the flailed path. They assumed that most if not all the mines would be intended for vehicles. I became aware that bullets were whistling. Then I noticed that, behind us, shells were falling on the beach. Suddenly, ahead of me, someone was screaming, as if in great pain.

Then a voice ahead called out “stretcher bearer, stretcher bearer”. For the first time in my life I was under fire.

Of the next hour or so some pictures stand out clearly, but the sequence of events is far from clear. I remember the Brigadier, Sir Alexander Stanier, walking up the beach totally calm with his intelligence officer, having landed far earlier than I thought they would. I went up to him and saluted (a silly thing to do in the circumstances) and told him that at least one path had been flailed.

The beach became full of men, tanks and vehicles. At least one LCT seemed to have been a casualty, for it was drifting sideways on shore. I later learned that a shell had killed the officers on the bridge and disabled the engine. The road was now full of troops and vehicles, virtually a traffic jam to get to Asnelles.

My Squadron Leader, Captain Harold Stanyon, was present, in a non-flail tank. Seeing it some yards away. I began to walk towards it, with a view to reporting to him that a path had been made. But before I got to it a German shell hit it, and it burst into flames, a really spectacular event. Stanyon and his crew got out, one with a severe head wound, the others only shocked. There was a bit of beach where wounded were being collected, and we helped the wounded men to it. I guessed that the bullets and shells were coming from Le Hamel, a few hundred yards away, but the vast beach was now so full of men and vehicles pouring ashore, crossing the beach with no protection, that most managed to cross it unscathed.

I noticed that the dead were being laid together on a part of the beach. They were all British. I saw no Germans, and my innocent reaction was surprise that such trouble was being taken to respect the dead and to tidy the field of conflict. I saw a traffic jam on the road, and at one point there was an awful explosion as the Germans blew a large hole in the road. However, AVREs with "fascines" did what could be done to fill the hole. After some time the strong point at Le Hamel was taken by the infantry, and the bullets ceased, although the shelling, becoming sporadic, did not cease until sometime later. Meantime, the Squadron Leader's tank was blazing away. An infantryman came up to me and yelled "How safe is it to be near the burning tank?" Having no idea whatever, I said that it was not safe. That happened to be correct, for before long the ammunition in the tank began to explode. The crew had been lucky to get out alive. I walked back to my own tank, knowing that a recovery vehicle had landed, and that my tank had to be pulled out of the mud before the tide overtook it. I got thoroughly wet and almost in tears, as I tried to attach a line to my tank which by now was surrounded by a few inches of water. No hope. My tank was immovable and beginning to fill with water. Up to my waist in water I did what I could to get our personal effects together and taken up the beach, where we formed a rather forlorn group, near the wounded and the corpses.

The beach began to quieten, the battle passing inland. I walked through a path to the road, turned right, and followed the road into Asnelles to report in person to our planned assembly point. By now it may have been three hours or so after landing.

Now there was an extraordinary incident. Our CO, Lt Col Blair-Oliphant, had been due to be phased in on some day after D-Day. He wanted to be there earlier, and consequently had taken the place of a fitter on a recovery vehicle which landed an hour or so after H-Hour. Thus he wangled a presence on D-Day. The road into Asnelles was packed with vehicles, hardly moving, a real traffic jam. As I walked along it I heard a bullet or two whistling past, and then I noticed British corpses lying by the road. Somebody yelled at me "There are snipers over in those hedges" and consequently I moved by running quickly from one vehicle to the next so as not to encourage any sniper. But, to my utter amazement, while I was beside one tank thinking about a dash of a couple of yards to the next, there arrived, walking slowly along the road, dressed in white overalls, carrying a large map case, calm and serene as if on holiday, the Colonel. The bullets did not seem to trouble him. I saluted him, for it seemed the least I could do. We had a conversation, and he decided to go forward, telling me to get back to the beach and organise whatever troops I found there.

Later that day I noted a white flutter or two from the snipers hedge. What the snipers were using as white flags I know not, but it could have been their undervests. They surrendered. A small

band of German prisoners began to collect on the beach, to be taken off later in the day. They were well treated by the British soldiers, a fact which I found significant, for they had after all been sniping away, killing and wounding British soldiers. I remember our troops selling cigarettes to prisoners, once the battle had passed on. The commercial instincts of our troops were confirmed over and over again in the following months. I never saw them robbing prisoners, but the sale of cigarettes at reasonably high prices was fairly common.

I find it difficult to disentangle many remembered incidents. The beach became peaceful, covered with the waste of war, including my tank now lost forever. I met some sappers from our LCT who had been clearing obstacles. One of them, in a plain, matter of fact voice, told me that Captain Smith had been killed soon after landing, as had some of his troops. I was also told that Captain Stanyon's opposite number in the RE, Major Elphinstone, had been killed by a bullet while getting out of his tank. What struck me at the time was that these statements were made in plain unemotional matter of fact tones. No tears, still less hysteria, almost no emotion. Later I recognised this as a way of making acceptable the awfulness of death.

Later in the day French civilians began to emerge. They must have suffered many casualties. Both then and later. I was amazed at the friendliness displayed by French civilians, over and over again: it was not universal, but it was certainly common.

One episode of black comedy enlivened the afternoon. The tide, having drowned my tank and much else, ebbed, revealing the huge beach covered in obstacles, mostly metal frames, some five foot wide and three foot high, fixed upright on the sands. Fastened to them by wire and facing the sea were artillery shells, the idea being that a boat, striking the point of a shell, would detonate it. Up came a RE Colonel, ordered me to collect some of my troops, and instructed us to carry out an exercise in neutralising the shells. What had become of the RE from our LCT was not clear, but they seemed to have disappeared. We said to the Colonel, "We have excellent wire cutters; what we do is cut the wire and carry the live shells to a safe point above high tide." "No" said the Colonel "You simply render the shell safe by using your hands or a wrench, and unscrewing the tip of it. Underneath the tip is a small detonator. You simply remove the detonator. The shell is then safe."

He proceeded to demonstrate. He unscrewed the tip of a shell, removed the small detonator, and threw it away. He came to the next shell. He unscrewed the tip, but then to our absolute horror showed that the detonator had already been slightly hit and was half crumpled: it was liable to explode any second. The Colonel became less overbearing, indeed somewhat troubled, and agreed that our slower method was, in all the circumstances, acceptable.

In a sense our task was over, for paths had been flailed through the minefield, and tanks and other vehicles had departed inland. Only one of our tanks, as I remember, reached Asnelles. turned inland and entered the assembly place. This tank was fired on by a German anti-tank gun, and caught fire. The crew, or perhaps all but one, got out; Sergeant Lindsay and one other got back to the coast, wounded, and two were captured, although they escaped a few weeks later. The Sergeant got a well-deserved MM.

In late afternoon our Colonel came back from an "O" Group and told me to collect what tanks I could and go to a village about 1km inland called Meuvaines. I was able to collect four tanks and

I think a truck or two. We came to the end of the village, to an apparently empty house with grass and an orchard next to it. The Colonel had been an infantryman, and he calmly told me, as we halted 100 yards away "Take one NCO with you and a couple of sten guns and hand grenades and do the usual clearance of the house."

In theory I knew how to do a clearance. You are supposed to throw a grenade through an upper window (luckily open), and then rush the door (luckily also open) screaming and firing the sten gun.

Now, I was never any good at throwing or bowling. But Corporal Poole was a keen cricketer, and the obvious man. He and I did the exercise. We went up to the house.

Corporal Poole gently lobbed a grenade up at the window. I stood ready to scream etc. But nothing goes according to plan in war. To my horror the grenade gently hit the window sill and gently dropped back to our feet. It would explode in a few seconds. Without a word we turned, we fled, we dived head first over a low stone wall, landing in nettles, and we heard the grenade explode. After that we just walked into the house, with sten guns, but not screaming. The house was a German billet, empty, with clear signs of a hurried evacuation that morning.

So we bedded down in the orchard and slept in what was now a peaceful village. I took over one of my NCOs' tank and, the following day, led a move inland to a small village where, in the next week or so, the Regiment gradually collected itself together.

## Trooper W J Blackwell

### Co-Driver, 3 Troop, B Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

Early on the morning of June 5th, 3 Troop, B Squadron started on our way to the beach in Southampton Water to embark in a landing craft. There were many civilians watching us as we made our way to the beach, but we had orders not to speak to anyone, as we had been briefed on the task we had to do and where we would land in France. They probably thought that we were on our way to Poole Harbour, where we had made frequent trips to waterproof and test the tanks.

There was some delay after we embarked, but soon we were away, and as we left the shore I called to a black American soldier, there were a few there, to throw me a pebble, which he did. I suppose it was a rather sentimental gesture to have a piece of England in my pocket.

The sea was very rough and being a terrible sailor, I was soon being very seasick and had little interest in what was going on around us. This lasted for most of the day and although the other crew members managed a 'compo' meal, I didn't.

When night fell, we lay down to sleep on a tarpaulin over the cold deck, but not much sleep, as the sea ran over the deck from the bilge.

When morning came we saw an amazing sight, what seemed like hundreds of sea craft of all shapes and sizes stretching as far as you could see. This seemed to give us all a great feeling of comfort, as when we set out, it was with just a few tank landing craft.

The sea was not so rough now, but I was still feeling very bad, and when Lt Potter called us together to read us the message from General Montgomery, I was still heaving and if I had been thrown overboard it would have been a relief.

Then somebody shouted out that the French coast was in view, and suddenly my seasickness was forgotten. We all mounted our tanks and prepared for the landing. We battened down the hatches and waited for the orders to disembark.

I was the co-driver and Don Fullerlove, who is now my brother-in-law, was the driver, and when the order came we shook hands and took the plunge.

To me, the most frightening moment was to look through the periscope and to see nothing but water. Not being a swimmer or a lover of water it was a traumatic time until we reached the beach and the sea drained away. The vents were blown off and the hatches opened, to be swiftly closed again, as we made our way up the beach to our designated position. Tracer bullets were visible ahead of us and eventually ricocheted off the flails. One tank, I believe Captain Stanyon's, was hit and smoking. We carried on over an embankment and as we dipped down three German soldiers jumped up in front. We couldn't look back but I believe we went over them. By now there was a terrific barrage from the Naval vessels and the German coastal guns. The grass in the sand dunes was alight and clouds of yellow smoke enveloped us.

We reached our road, but before we got very far a shell exploded beside the tank and we slid sideways into a deep ditch. Don Fullerlove tried everything to get out, but we stuck fast. We clambered out to see if it was possible to dig our way free, but it was hopeless, so we did what all highly trained and disciplined British soldiers do, we had a brew-up.

As we sat there drinking tea and chewing a 'compo' biscuit, a line of infantry men came through the smoke. It must have been a surprise and a relief for them, but none stopped for tea.

In the next few hours our road became very busy with vehicles of all sorts coming off the beach. With nothing to do, Don and I went down to the beach and were able to assist some of those who were wounded or nearly drowned getting ashore. It was sad to see the tank aerials sticking out of the water.

We went back to our flail, incidentally named 'Hellzapopin' after a film of that name we saw in the Southampton camp, not painted on but letters formed with Bostic, and waited for the recovery vehicle.

A German plane was hit above us by Naval gunners, and the pilot parachuted into a field beside us. Don and I climbed over the barbed wire fence and ran about fifty yards to where he had landed.

He was sitting there, quite dazed, and although he had a Luger pistol, made no attempt to draw it. Nothing was said, he accepted a cigarette and we walked him back to the road, where two

MPs had arrived, to take him away. We went back to collect his parachute, and it was some time later that we saw the sign 'Achtung Minen' on the fence. How lucky can you get.

The recovery vehicle arrived and we made a slow journey to rejoin the Squadron.

## Lance Corporal R C Eastwood

### Loader/WT Operator, B Squadron, WDgns

On 3 June I embarked on LCT No. 886 as a crew member in Lt Townsend Green's troop. After a number of delays we sailed on Monday 5 June for France.

After spending a rough day and night at sea, as dawn broke on D-Day I looked out to sea and found it completely awash with ships and landing craft of all shapes and sizes as far as the eye could see.

I was on the flotilla commander's craft which was carrying No. 1 assault team of 6 assault tanks to the seaside resort of Le Hamel (Gold Beach). We approached the beach under a deafening arch of gunfire coming from battleships right down to landing craft guns, giving us a certain amount of confidence.

About 100 yards from the water line, the ramp went down into about 8 - 10 feet of water, and as the leading AVRE disembarked, it disappeared and drowned under the waves. Then all hell broke loose: the craft was hit numerous times on the bridge and in the engine room by shells from heavy calibre guns on the beach, it was completely disabled and turned sideways on, and started hitting beach obstacles and defences, exploding mines and fused shells attached to them, causing a number of casualties on board.

During this time I frequently looked through my periscope and saw the assault infantry of the 1st Bn the Hampshire Regiment being cut down on the beach, and numerous tanks ablaze: one flail tank to my immediate front was attacking an 88mm gun emplacement and unfortunately lost the fight: I heard afterwards that the crew escaped unscathed. (Editor's note: this must have been the tank of Sgt Lindsay, who was awarded the MM for his gallant actions on D-Day, which are described more fully on pages 188-9 of the Regimental History.)

Eventually we got ashore and whilst dismounted and helping with casualties, I was approached by a naval officer who asked if we had bolt croppers on board: when I said yes he told me to start cutting the wires attaching the mines and shells to the beach defences. I was greatly happy when we were ordered to move on inland.

(I met this naval officer after the war on a visit to Gold Beach, and he turned out to have been the beachmaster: he and I are now the greatest of friends.)

After leaving the beach. We spent the first night at a small village called Meuvaines where I believe we mustered four tanks out of the original thirteen.



A very hectic day.

## Lieutenant BMS Hoban

### Troop Leader, 1 Troop, C Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

My first recollection is of a tremendous sense of anticlimax when we learnt on the evening of 4 June that the operation had been postponed for 24 hours because of worsening weather.

By that time our landing craft had got as far as The Needles which were in full sight. It has occurred to me often that it must have been a remarkable bit of sea-traffic control to turn round even the leading elements of the expedition at that stage.

When dawn came on the 6th, we were all treated to the unforgettable spectacle of that huge armada moving in strict formation. Add to that the stirring sound of the shells from the Royal Navy's big guns tunnelling overhead and you have quite an experience. As it grew lighter we began to distinguish the Normandy coast ahead - and also some frantic gesticulation from the Landing Craft (Rocket) which was next in station behind us. It turned out that their engine was giving trouble and their skipper, a wonderfully scruffy Sub Lt RNVR, who was determined not to miss the chance of lobbing his array of hardware on to German positions, was begging for a tow. (He did not seem in any way concerned as to how he was going to get back home.) The tow was granted and effected: we continued on our way with a sort of dog on a lead behind us.

By this time it was light enough for us to see the landing beaches before us, looking exactly as they had on the large "cloth model" which we had studied in the woods near Fawley.

Now those beaches seemed to rush towards us. We could see large numbers of explosions on the land and a few (German ones) in the water around us. We had mounted and started up the tanks. As the crew of the LCT were getting ready to lower the bow-ramp. I leaned down into the turret to stow away the book I had been reading, to see my loader-operator. Cpl Harold Burnham also stowing away a book: his, I saw, was by Spinoza, mine was by Thomas a Kempis.

The familiar juddering thud as the LCT ran aground at La Rivière, the familiar rattle of chains, as the ramp was lowered. From then on things seemed to happen fast. We were soon down in the water, appreciating the fact that our waterproofing seemed to have been efficient. Two AVREs from our LCT charged ahead up the beach until in quick succession they simply exploded. Everything stopped of a sudden: then got going again in response to the resolute Canadian tones on the wireless of Major Tim Thompstone RE, our breaching- squadron commander, saying "Get on up that bloody beach, all of you!" Luckily Captain Roger Bell, on my left, spotted where the fire was coming from, an 88mm in a huge concrete pillbox, and managed to engage, firing through the slot in the pillbox. After his fifth round, the gun fell silent.

By now, I could make out on the ground the line along which I had been ordered to flail. At the appropriate point I started flailing, keeping an eye on Sgt Webb's tank behind me through my periscope and correcting his line by orders over the wireless. We had exploded several mines

when suddenly my tracks began to race: we were bogged in the minefield and could move neither backwards nor forwards. Almost immediately Sgt Webb reported that the same had happened to him. Hearing on the radio which lanes through the minefield were being successful, I dismounted and ran back through the minefield following the track marks of my tank. The primary task of our flails was to open ways through the minefields to enable the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards, the DD (amphibious) armoured regiment coming along behind us, to move into the open country beyond. Shortly after my tank had been bogged, they began to arrive on the beach - dry-shod (the roughish sea had prevented them from swimming); it seemed to me that the most useful thing I could do was to act as a traffic controller on the beach, directing the 4th/7th to the lanes which I knew to be open. This kept me busy for quite a while, but once the 4th/7th were through we could get on with our own business. My two tanks were quickly towed out of the minefield by an AVRE, and we rallied with the rest of C Squadron in an orchard about a mile inland on the edge of the village of Ver-sur-Mer. At this point the squadron could muster only 5 flails, one of which, Roger Bell's, was having starter trouble.

Suddenly the squadron was ordered inland to support 6th Gordon Highlanders, and shortly afterwards ordered to report to 7th Gordon Highlanders instead. As we were going up the high street of Creully (about 5 km inland), a message came from 69 Brigade "40 Tigers advancing north-east front Rucqueville" about 5 miles south-west of Creully, so it looked as if these enemy tanks were heading directly towards C Squadron. As we topped the ridge south of Creully on our way to Bn HQ of the 7th Gordon Highlanders, we saw 3 tanks of the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards hit and starting to burn some 800 yards ahead. We quickly got our tanks behind cover in fire positions. Brian Pear and I were conferring in the open when a 4th/7th subaltern came running up to ask if we had any Fireflies (Sherman with 17-pounder guns) with us: apparently they were fed up with seeing their 75mm AP shot bouncing off the German tank that was causing them so much trouble and damage. Here was early first-hand evidence, if we needed it, of how vulnerable our tanks were to German armour. We regretted that we had no Fireflies.

Time passed. Roger Bell joined us with 7 more flails which he had brought up front Ver-sur-Mer. The 40 Tigers never came - it is doubtful whether there ever were so many in the area at that time. The squadron pulled back to refuel and settled down for the night in a field near Crepon, some 3 miles front the coast. We had a quiet night - which was just as well in view of the events of the following day. (Editor's note: This refers to an incident early next morning when C Squadron suffered several casualties including the wounding of the Squadron Commander, Major S P M Sutton - see page 196 of the Regimental History.)

A final note; we did not see a single German aircraft on D-Day.

## Trooper C T Smith

### Driver 1 Troop, C Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

The French coast lay ahead. Only a dim outline as yet, but we knew that the invasion was really on this time. Three days earlier we had left Beaulieu only to be turned back to wait for an

improvement in the weather. The tank landing craft still rolled, discouraging all but a few of the hardiest from breakfast. Five tanks: three Churchills of the Royal Engineers fitted with special devices for overcoming beach obstacles, manmade or natural; and two minesweeping tanks of the Westminster Dragoons, comprised an assault team which would force its way through the minefields and tank traps to make a path for the following conventional tanks and infantry.

Training for the assault on Hitler's Europe had begun the previous winter on the cold and desolate Suffolk coast. The Westminster Dragoons, The Lothians and Border Yeomanry and the 22nd Dragoons had previously formed an armoured brigade but now, re-equipped with Sherman tanks modified to destroy mines and known as Crabs or Flails, were part of the 79th Armoured Division. The Divisional sign, the Bull's Head, would be seen in every sector of the front throughout the coming campaign and would make a unique contribution to the Allied victory and the history of warfare, but all this was still in the future on that stormy June morning.

Now all our training was to be put to the test. Last-minute preparations were complete. The tanks checked and re-checked, final letters written, pre-printed field postcards issued, French money and a guidebook on France given out. All assault troops received an escape pack with items to be hidden in clothing and kit. It included concentrated tablets of beef and malted milk, benzedrine, a rubber water bag, a file, and even a tiny compass looking like a trouser button.

In addition the tanks carried self-heating tins of cocoa and soup. A heating element in the centre of the tin could be ignited and in a minute or two a piping hot drink was ready. We were to find these invaluable on the beach and in fact gave them all away to the wounded. Our ordinary rations were 14 men/1 day "Compo" packs of tinned food, chocolate, sweets and biscuits and even included supplies of Army Form Blank! Eight different "Compo" packs provided a variety of excellent food, the sole exception being the tea of quite unbelievable nastiness. No one ever mastered the art of producing a decent cup of tea from this mixture of tea, sugar and milk powder. Rations were cooked on a petrol cooker or more often in a tin of water boiled over another tin containing a mixture of sand and petrol. Both methods could produce severe burns on occasions.

For the last few days before embarkation we were under canvas in the woods near Beaulieu before we moved down to Bucklers Hard to load on to the landing craft which were to take us to France. At this stage we still did not know where we were to land and a sweepstake on likely places was run. I won it, but never did manage to collect my winnings! The Solent and Spithead were full of ships from tiny assault craft and landing craft of all kinds to cruisers, destroyers, liners and cargo ships. Wootton Creek, where I had learnt to sail before the War, was filled with landing craft and a mystifying sight was the number of enormous caissons and piers of what was to be the Mulberry Harbour.

Soon we moved into the Channel. It was rough and wild. The seasick pills worked until Harold Burnham (Radio Operator/Loader in the Troop Leader's tank) decided on a brew up of steak and kidney pudding, together with a treacle duff cooked on a petrol cooker in the little deckhouse. I made a quick exit. Later the weather worsened and we were told that the invasion had been postponed a day so we returned to our moorings.

The following day, 5 June, we sailed again and our little convoy of landing craft seemed almost alone but as dawn broke on 6 June as far as we could see on either side and behind us was an armada of ships, landing craft of all sorts, destroyers, minesweepers, rocket craft, motor gunboats and on the horizon the unmistakable silhouette of the cruiser Belfast, who with her destroyer flotilla was to cover our landing on Gold Beach. Over the invasion fleet were squadrons of planes to plaster the defences and protect the ships should the Luftwaffe try its luck.

We were not given long to admire the panorama. "Drivers, Mount Up". We climbed into the tanks and the turret crews sealed our hatches with waterproofing compound. The plan was that the tanks would drop into six feet of water from the landing craft and wade ashore, The engine inlet and exhaust outlets were covered by extension housings to bring them above water level and the waterproof seal on the turret contained an explosive cable. Upon emerging from the water the tank commander would blow the extensions and turret waterproofing away. We had tested the waterproofing drill many times on exercises without mishap, but the thought of "Will the waterproofing hold?" was ever present. I heard nothing of the tremendous bombardment as the Fleet opened up on the beach as I was sealed into the driver's compartment by then but could see the bursting of shells through the periscope.

"Driver, Start Up", and my tank, named "Hobson's Choice", responded immediately. In front of us I could see the two Churchills of the Royal Engineers and our Troop Leader Mike Hoban's Crab with their engines running. Down went the ramp and the three tanks in front moved forward. "Driver. Advance", and Hobson's Choice followed. I thought, "God I hope the water's not more than six feet deep - I can only see water through the periscope". All was well, the engine did not falter and the water streamed away from the glass. I could see the beach and recognise the houses from the model we had studied back in England. The Navy had put us down in exactly the right place and depth.

The task of C Squadron, Westminster Dragoons, and the Royal Engineers was to make six lanes through the minefields to the road running behind the beach through which the assaulting infantry and armour and the following multitude of vehicles and men could pour onto the fields of Normandy. We were landed at half-tide. The Germans had expected that the landings would be made at high water and had placed their "Hedgehogs" or anti-tank obstacles further up the beach. These consisted of short lengths of railway line welded together with a mine on top. Fortunately, they were placed far enough apart to allow us to pass between them.

The two Crabs were following the AVREs when I saw the flash as the leading one was hit. A voice came up on the radio, "For Christ's sake put that gun out". Immediately after, the second AVRE began to burn and then there was an enormous cloud of black smoke and the two Churchills disappeared. We heard later that they had been carrying "Wade" charges for blowing up the beach defences. Their crews did not have a chance. An 88mm anti-tank gun in a massive pill box untouched by the bombing and bombardment was enfilading the beach.

It could have turned the assault into a disaster but for the action of Captain Roger Bell, commanding the assault team nearest to the pill-box, who brought his tank within one hundred yards of the gun. Trooper Jim Smith, his gunner, fired several rounds at the pill-box, one being

an armour piercing or solid shot which entered the embrasure and, buzzing round the pill-box like a bee in a hive, so disconcerted the gunners that they surrendered. Later I went into the pill-box and saw the deep scarring round the walls which the shot had carved out. The gun itself was undamaged.

Meanwhile, the two Crabs of our team advanced up the beach and started flailing. Unfortunately, Mike Hoban's Crab bogged and while trying to pass him "Hobson's Choice" ran over an anti-tank mine which the flails had not exploded. We lost a track and several bogey wheels. Luckily no one was hurt but the bottom of the tank was a mess with the contents of the flattened ration tins mixed with acid from the broken batteries. Seeing that the Troop Leader's tank was still bogged, we connected the tow rope to the remaining Churchill of our team and he went off to join the Squadron which had succeeded in making four lanes through the minefield out of six attempted.

Since the damage to "Hobson's Choice" was greater than we could repair on our own, we had to wait on the beach until the fitters arrived. For three days I had a grandstand view of the landing. Tanks, guns, infantry and transport pouring ashore and off the beach. The organisation run by the RN Beachmasters and their teams was superb. Never a break in the flow of men and supplies of all kinds landed and taken inland. The empty landing craft returned to the ships lying off shore laden with wounded and German prisoners of war. Many of the latter were in fact Russians, used extensively in France as occupation troops. The skies were entirely free of enemy aircraft though during the first two nights the Luftwaffe tried to attack the ships without success. Mobile again we moved up to rejoin the Squadron not far from Bayeux. Three weeks later I celebrated my twentieth birthday.

## Trooper H W J Smith

### Gunner, C Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

After we were marshalled into our top secret concentration area in Southern England, we were aware of the number of large crates that were stacked around our compound and it was now the time to find out just what they were for. Inside the crates were all the materials needed to waterproof the tanks, a task that was to be undertaken by all the crew members. It didn't seem possible that with a few tins of Bostik and some other materials we could fill every hole and seam on this monster of a flail tank so that it could submerge to a depth of 6 - 8 ft without us all having to wear diving suits, but it was done.

It had also occurred to some of us to wonder just how well this tank with a 12-ft jib sticking out in front would perform under true battle conditions; it wasn't to be long before we found out.

A lot of our time was now spent on checking and rechecking our equipment to be certain that nothing was left to chance, if and when we went into action.

Embarkation commenced on 2 June and we were looking forward to a nice sea trip. As it turned out, we only moved out to centre channel between the mainland and the Isle of Wight and

anchored up. I should point out at this time that an LCT (Landing Craft Tank) is not a bit like a cruise liner. In fact, it is not like any vessel you can describe, flat-bottomed, flat-fronted and with 4 - 6 tanks and equipment on the open deck. In bad weather this is not the nicest place to be, but we all thought that for just a few hours we could suffer it. We finally set off on 5 June and when we reached mid-channel the weather worsened: a flat-bottomed boat is the worst type of craft to be on in rough and stormy sea. About 85% of the personnel on board, including the naval crew, were seasick. Our crew were lucky: someone had got their hands on a supply of anti-seasick tablets, whether by fair means or foul, but they certainly worked for us - it was surprising that anyone else was fit enough to face the enemy but they did.

After a long and stormy crossing we approached the coast of Normandy and hove to quite a distance from shore, to allow the armada of boats to take up the right order for the assault. All the time this was going on, an enormous bombardment was taking place, carrying out the softening-up process of the occupying German forces. Flights of aircraft were flying in dropping their bombs, warships that were a couple of miles away fired salvo after salvo over our heads, the shells sounding like tube trains flying over and when the rocket craft opened up the noise was frightening. We got under way again along with several other craft and headed towards the coast, 5 minutes ahead of the main force to give us the time to cut a path through the two minefields.

All tank crews were now in their vehicles with engines running. From now until we blow our waterproofing on the beach, all instructions will be from Capt Bell. The sea was too rough for any amphibious tanks to be launched, so it was all in the hands of the landing craft.

Our LCT approached the beach, touched and dropped the ramp, the lead tank moved forward and off the end of the ramp, it disappeared under the water: the Naval crew realised that they hadn't beached but hit an underwater obstacle, they backed off and repositioned: this time they did beach and we could now get on with it.

Our two Churchill AVREs went off the ramp and Capt Bell gave the order for us to move. We dropped off the ramp into about 4 ft of water, and headed up the beach. Once clear of the water the order was given to blow the waterproofing, we were now able to traverse the turret and elevate the guns. The two AVREs were now moving up the beach just ahead and to our right. Suddenly there was a bright flash and the first AVRE brewed up, the second one kept moving



Trooper Jim Smith.

forward. When that also brewed up, Capt Bell ordered our driver to halt and came over the intercom for our assessment of the situation. We all agreed that a German 88mm in a concrete emplacement on our left flank had a fixed line of sight across the beach.

Capt Bell at first suggested that we might run the gauntlet and try to outrun the Germans, but this was voted out because we would not be able to gather enough speed to have any sort of chance and we convinced him to let me try to disable it.

I asked to be loaded with HE, aimed and fired. The round exploded close to the gun apron with very little effect. The second round was the same. I asked to be loaded with Armour Piercing to try and penetrate the gun mantle. As I sighted on the target he fired off another round at something on the beach and at this moment I decided to try and hit the barrel of their gun while they were reloading. I aimed and fired, the AP hit their gun barrel, deflected, and found its way between the mantle and the concrete, entering the emplacement and spinning around inside killing all the crew. This was confirmed later in the day by some infantry soldiers who had been held up on the beach and followed us into Ver-sur-Mer.

We had another hairy moment after we cleared the beach. Our second flail got bellied down in the mud and we had to help him out. We reversed on to him and I had the task of jumping out and hooking on the towing hawser: the few seconds it took to drop to the ground and hitch on seemed like an eternity with all the flak that was flying around but we managed to get him on to firm ground. As I was about to climb back on board I heard someone ask me for a cigarette, I turned round to see an infantry soldier and he had been caught in the blast of a shell or mortar and his clothing and his skin were hanging off him. I obliged him with his ciggy but I doubted whether he lived to finish it. I now had to get back into the tank, and that's the time when you are a good target for snipers.

We advanced slowly throughout the morning and into the afternoon. The bocage area was very difficult terrain to fight in. Although we were a specialised unit with the flail, because the weather was still holding up the landing of extra reinforcements we had to carry out the role of the armoured fighting unit, in spite of the cumbersome jib. The hedgerows alongside the fields and the lanes well below the level of the land on either side made it an ideal area for ambush and for the Germans to use their anti-tank weapons to good effect. All thoughts of what had happened on the beach were now put behind us and what might lie ahead was now taking over.

We were very thankful for our flails on I think it was D+3. We had marshalled around a field in preparation to refuel and take a little break, the camouflage nets were on and we were about to boil the water for a cup of hot drink when the fitters' vehicle took a direct hit. A second round hit another vehicle. We broke cover to assess the situation and discovered a German field gun troop which had been overlooked during the advance and they had waited to pick a target which was us. Recce revealed that the gun was dug in on the far side of a field of long grass. It was not possible to see how many Germans were there so 4 flails set off line abreast across the field with the flails in motion about 6 inches off the ground as though we were crossing a minefield. By the time we were halfway across the field about a dozen enemy had surrendered, a few well placed rounds finished the rest. When we were mopping up it was found they had tunnels across the field to a central underground bunker which was full of supplies, a couple of flame



throwers soon got rid of that. All of us felt very sad about our casualties because they were so much a part of us but the war had to go on.

The advance pressed on. Place names were seen that meant little to us at the time, but in later years are written in the history books. Some events stay with you as though they happened yesterday, like the day we were pulled back, put on to lorries and taken into Bayeux to get a hot shower in the town's public bathhouse; or the day we came across the remnants of a Canadian armoured division that had been destroyed at a French chateau. A fierce battle had taken place and numbers of German dead were all around, the acrid smell of death stays with you forever.

Things went reasonably well until we were deployed to Carpiquet near Caen. It was to be a holding operation for us, to stand off around the airfield perimeter but not to attack. The German planes used us for target practice but we had to put up with it. After a couple of days it all ended for me and I was sent home to England.

(Editor's Note: Tpr Smith was really a driver and was not due to land on D-Day. When Capt Bell's regular gunner dropped out through sickness Tpr Smith volunteered to take his place.)

## Lieutenant RHW Bullock

### Troop Leader, 2 Troop, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

Our concentration area was at Bolney on the A23 near Haywards Heath. We tested the waterproofing of our vehicles in a water tank at Pease Pottage, a few miles up the road and embarked at Newhaven on, I suppose, 3 June with the intention of setting out on the 4th; but because of the postponement of the invasion, we must have remained on the LCT for two nights. We finally sailed on 5 June, and our convoy made its way west along the South Coast until, in the area off Southsea which became known as Piccadilly Circus, we joined up with other forces which had come from Southampton Water and points further west: there we turned left to cross the Channel with the rest of the huge invasion fleet - which made an unforgettable sight as the sun went down.

A Squadron was not due to take part in the initial assault on D-Day, but parts of my troop and 4 troop under Lt "Sam" Hall' landed some three hours after H-hour in support of the Staffordshire Yeomanry, an armoured regiment which was part of a 3rd Division force supposed to follow up the initial assault and capture Caen by the evening of D-Day: in the end it was held up 3 or 4 miles short of this objective, and Caen was not finally captured until 9 July.

A Squadron had only been chosen for this role at a late stage; consequently whereas B and C Squadrons tanks had practised driving on and off landing craft, our crews never saw one until they embarked for D-Day. As the flail equipment on the front of the Sherman tank was only 7" narrower than the bow door opening of the LCT, it was a considerable test of the unpractised drivers' skills to back the cumbersome vehicles on board and drive them off again safely: the consequences of a flail getting jammed in the opening and blocking the exit for succeeding vehicles did not bear thinking about: but as far as I know, this never happened.

The weather was very rough as we chugged south at the speed of the slowest ships in the convoy - the LCTs: many of the troops were seasick, not helped by the cramped and smelly conditions. Though I was not a good sailor, the adrenalin flow stimulated by the occasion saved me from seasickness - and also, so far as I remember, from undue apprehension about what might lie ahead.

On each side we could dimly see other landing craft and escorting vessels - destroyers, minesweepers and occasional MTBs; one of the latter was festooned with loudspeakers and on its way to create a diversion off a different part of the French coast by playing recordings of chains rattling, orders being shouted and other naval noises.

Long before we could see the coast, explosions, gunfire and smoke were visible in the distance and we heard the fearsome noise of 15" naval shells screaming overhead to bombard the German positions.

By the time I landed on Sword Beach, near Lion-sur-Mer, the main battle had moved inland and the beach was relatively quiet, though littered with wrecked vehicles. I saw an area of foreshore which seemed to be unscathed, and decided to flail across it to make another safe passage to the road beyond: however, we encountered no mines.

We drove through the village of Hermanville, a little way inland, without event. Most of the local people were so shaken by the bombardment that only a few ventured out to wave a welcome. We rendezvoused with the rest of the half-squadron and the squadron commander, Major Brian Wallace, a short way beyond the village, on a broad plain sloping gently up to a crest beyond which the battle had passed. We had got out of our tanks to stretch our legs and have a brew-up, when I noticed a tank a couple of hundred yards ahead burst into flames. I naively thought this must have been due to carelessness with its cooker. Another vehicle came up to help and it too burst into flames: when a third tank went up, I belatedly realized that someone was shooting at the great array of vehicles spread over the plain: there must have been at least a hundred sitting targets.

I ordered my crews to mount and my gunner to traverse the turret while I vainly searched for any sign of where the shooting was coming from. Suddenly there was an enormous clang: I asked over the intercom whether the crew were OK: the co-driver (on the right of the Sherman) said he was, but that the spare chains for the flail (some of which were kept in a container on the front of the tank and could be seen through his periscope) had gone: the driver (on the left) added that he had seen them fly past him. I then realized that we had been hit by a projectile fired from our right but it had missed the tank hull. (Subsequent inspection showed that an 88mm AP shot had passed through both arms of the flailing gear just in front of the hull.)

I hastily told the driver to advance and dodge about so as not to be a sitting duck, while I tried to spot our attacker. A few seconds later I saw a nearby tank of my troop hit; it was not so lucky as we had been, and was hit fair and square: fortunately all the crew got out and survived, though the driver and co-driver were both wounded, the former seriously.

There was no further firing and I later heard that two men in German uniform had surrendered to the crew of the knocked-out tank: apparently an anti-tank gun had got left behind in the German

retreat, and its crew had decided to fire off their remaining ammunition before surrendering. Some said that they were not Germans, but from some East European country (perhaps the USSR) but I do not know if this was confirmed.

Later we moved forward beyond the crest, and saw some way ahead a tank battle with a counter-attacking force from 21st Panzer Division. About 5pm - by which time the sun was shining brightly - we saw the second airborne force of the invasion passing almost overhead to land east of the River Orne: dozens of Lancasters and Halifaxes discharged their loads of paratroopers, and Stirlings released the gliders they were towing. It was a splendid and heart-warming sight, though sadly a few aircraft were hit by ack-ack fire and one grieved for the fate of their crews, particularly the gallant, parachuteless, troops in the gliders. Little did I know at the time that the arrival of this force was what persuaded the German commander that he would not be able to achieve his objective of breaking through to the sea between the British and Canadian armies, and to call off the counter-attack - which if successful could have fundamentally changed the course of events in the British sector of the landing.

Later that evening we were pulled back to harbour for the night, and my last memory of D-Day was of a German fighter (the only one we saw all day) flying fast and low from east to west along the beaches; a hail of AA and machine gun fire was let loose at it from every direction - but the only apparent result was the spectacular collapse in flames of several of the numerous barrage balloons protecting the invasion fleet. I vividly recall one of my troopers, "Ginger" Peddle, with his shock of red hair, leaping on to my tank and joining in with a vain burst from the turret .5 AA Browning gun - the first and last shots fired in anger from my tank on 6 June 1944.

## Lieutenant W S Hall

### Troop Leader, 4 Troop, A Squadron Westminster Dragoons

Initially A Squadron was not included in Operation Overlord (code-name for the invasion) so we were left in our camp at Thorpeness in Suffolk. Surprisingly, this omission did little for our morale as we received feedback from B and C Squadrons undergoing seaborne assault training on the south coast. My troop got the Squadron's first five flails so consequently did all the demonstrations for Generals and VIPs concerned with D-Day planning, including General Eisenhower who did not, however, decide to use them on the US beaches. In hindsight this was given as one of the reasons for the lack of progress and very high casualties on Omaha Beach. I can assure you that in my Troop's opinion, the demo was flawless!

Just a few weeks before D-Day, my troop and 2 Troop were included and were to support the Staffordshire Yeomanry, a very experienced armoured regiment just back from the desert fighting. Their role was to land two or three hours after the start and fight their way south to take Caen and we were to be available to clear any minefields on the way. This caused great excitement mixed, of course, with some apprehension.

Moving south on transporters we joined our new partners somewhere near Haywards Heath. I attended several 'O' Groups at different levels and was very impressed with the detail and superb models of the landing areas. Code-names were, of course, substituted for the real locations. I travelled down to the docks at Newhaven to see for the first time a Landing Craft Tank which was to be our transport across the Channel. The skipper and his 2nd i/c gave me a superb welcome in true Navy style with lots of Pink Plymouth Gin, their traditional drink. Having boarded across a small gang plank level with the quay, I was taken aback on departure to find a very long steel ladder to climb to regain the harbour. I had no idea how much the tide moved in dock! I staggered up the stairs doing my best to hide my ignorance.

The next move was to Petworth Park when we assembled with the rest of our assault group for our sector. One day we all lined up for inspection by HM King George VI. As he drew level with us he looked puzzled at the sight of our flails and my heart missed a beat or two as he turned to my Squadron Leader, Major Brian Wallace, and stuttering slightly said "If it has been fed and watered, could I see it working?" Brian turned to me and passed on His Majesty's instructions. I'm sure the King was completely unaware of the hours and hours we had taken to waterproof the vehicle which would all have to be re-checked. We mounted and gave the flail a bit of a whirl which Brian assured me really pleased HM who by now was on his way down the lines.

The exact number of days until we joined our LCT I have now forgotten, but such trivial events as being parked alongside a Wren Barracks close to the quay at Newhaven and the wild enthusiasm and raucous shouts from my lads to the girls hanging out of their windows are firmly etched in my mind.

Reversing aboard our ship seemed simple enough but it must have stirred the thoughts of my crews as it did mine to think that disembarking would be on to a very hostile beach. However, any doubts were certainly obliterated by the adrenal in, excitement and the knowledge that we were off at last, after the months and years of training and boredom.

Spirits were high and I recall the humbling feeling of my responsibility to my 34 superb young soldiers. It was an honour indeed and I fervently determined not to let them down. Youth and excellent training was on our side and I felt sure we would succeed.

As the only Army officer on board I was OC Troops responsible to the ship's Captain for liaison and problems during the crossing. It did not, in fact, involve many duties and with seasickness striking, the troops stopped complaining about anything else! During the journey the actual maps, photos etc would be delivered by high-powered speedboats and I had to unseal and distribute them to my troops and others aboard - from memory a total of about 200.

A great and much-appreciated "perk" with the OC Troops duty was that I shared the officers' accommodation aboard - not, I suspect, for courtesy but to have me close for messages etc it was a great boon when sorting the maps which would have been a shambles on deck in the force 6 or 7 gale!

The first signal received was that there was to be a 24-hour delay due to even worse weather reports, a message very sombrely received by the troops. Their accommodation was more or less where they stood or could lie down and with a very limited "ablution" area and at least 80%

being violently seasick it was not a pretty sight. I was also lucky in that I was not actually sick, though I felt quite had enough. A sort of spin-off of what I suppose we should now refer to as mal-de-mer was that little or no cooking took place and most on board had lost all fear and apprehension and would be happy to do anything just so long as they were on dry land!

I was touched by the ship's painters' excellent effort of painting the cap badges and colours of all the different units on board onto the side of the bridge. They looked splendid.

As dawn drew near on 6 June, the coastline was ahead with a mass of flashes and explosions. The Captain assured me that he would land us in perfect and hopefully dry. We were to be disembarked on the beach, hopefully cleared two or three hours after the first landing and advance through the dunes and Hermanville and RV with our group on clear ground beyond the coastal buildings.

When we got near the shore the mass of ships were all around, the noise intense. It was time to seal down the drivers' hatches which I was doing with my cheerful Cockney gunner, Trooper Len Beard. The bow of a very large LST loomed up to our left, its hooter giving six blast signals, just before it struck us a few feet away. Beard said it meant "out of control" and added – "Bloody Hell, we're not even going to make it to the shore!" As it hit alongside us it appeared to bounce off and vanish astern. In hindsight, I suppose it pushed our craft sideways. It left a huge dent in the catwalk and we carried on our way much relieved.

Our superb Navy was as good as their word and landed us almost dry, well up the beach as the tide was well in by now. The skipper came ashore to wish me luck, which was impressive so I dismounted, glad to be on firm ground at last, thanked him and he departed back to his ship. My Beachmaster was only a few yards away and indicated our exit route. The noise was utterly indescribable and things seemed to be rather chaotic. Amongst many casualties, the horrific sight of one poor (lead man mangled and blown apart, the unreal vivid red of his remains are to this day etched in my mind. Thankfully back aboard my tank with the sounds obliterated to a large extent by the headphones. I took my tanks all safely ashore off the beach. I was slightly surprised to find a red-hatted military policeman on point duty at the first exit junction waving his arms in that impatient and well known manner indicating "Come on! Speed up!"

As we moved on it was necessary to get rid of the waterproofing around the turrets and hatches etc. This was done by firing explosive strips. It included a large metal chute on the rear of the tank over the exhaust. Unfortunately, a motorcycle despatch rider had tucked in behind us and was unsighted. The heavy hollow box landed on his bike, which quite rightly upset him and he said so in no uncertain terms!

We got behind HQ Squadron of the Staffordshire Yeomanry, spread out and were ready for the charge on Caen.

As we waited I noticed the crew of one of my troop dismount about 100 yards away. Having failed to get them on the radio I ran across to find one of their tanks had been blown off on the blind side to me. Luckily the crew were OK. We all moved into safer positions as the same gun picked off a number of tanks and other vehicles. In spite of all our training, finding the location of

these guns at such distances with their very superior range, power and accuracy seemed an almost insurmountable task - but obviously had to be learnt and soon!

Further on we tucked in close to a large farm and a girl appeared with a jug of milk about which I could do nothing as one of our bombers appeared very low overhead and just about to crash. The crew were baling out from holes in the fuselage, their faces clearly visible. It was a great relief to see their parachutes open in time for a safe landing as the plane crashed nearby, exploding as it hit the ground.

During the late afternoon some enemy Mk IV tanks appeared to our right flank and were soon engaged by the Staffordshire Yeomanry and beaten off. Meanwhile my troop were ordered to remain in our positions. We were now about five to six miles inland, four miles short of our objective for that day of Caen. In the early evening I was returning to a position east of Bieville where the afternoon drop of gliders had already landed. It was quite close to what was to become so well known, Pegasus Bridge. I was asked by an airborne officer to flail through a marked minefield to some of their supply containers, so they could get at them. This I did successfully, but all the highly coloured chutes wrapped themselves around our chains and took a lot of hard work to cut away later. In one of the underground fortifications I picked up some crockery with German crests which I fancied. My first souvenirs had a very short life stored in the metal bins on the outside of my tank!

We moved towards the beach and joined the rest of the Squadron and the supply trucks and carried out "feeding and watering" of our vehicles. It was interrupted for a while by enemy sniper fire from a church tower, but this was soon dealt with.

As this momentous day drew to a close and the crews settled down to a well earned sleep I was very grateful that we had got through it without casualties, which seemed extraordinary but it was a day that none of us would forget.

Early the following morning my remaining four flails under Squadron Leader Brian Wallace in his standard Sherman were ordered to clear lanes through a minefield inland to a fortified encampment on the coast at Lion-sur-Mer by a gas works. The Germans had not been cleared out and our attack, supported by infantry, was given this task.

Brian and I dismounted close to the start line and made a recce on foot along the now deserted and eerie streets. I then took my tanks to the edge of the mined area and a barrage was laid down ahead of us onto the concrete emplacement from a battleship in the Channel. I was puzzled then and still am as to how the Navy guns miles out in the still rough Channel could fire with such accuracy. We then flailed two lanes successfully to the objective and engaged the enemy with HE and machine-gun fire at point blank range. White flags went up and about 80 Germans surrendered. I got a bit of a shock when the green beret of a Commando also appeared; he had been captured on D-Day!

As the infantry came through and took over the searching of the really badly shaken prisoners noticed one of the completely demoralised Germans tearing something up. I stopped him only to find they were French nude postcards which I let this sheepish-looking prisoner keep!

Apart from small arms fire damage to my jib, we again had no casualties.

## Trooper W H Jennings

### Loader/WT Operator, 2 Troop, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

At the end of May 1944, the tanks of 2 Troop, A Squadron, were part of a long line of armoured vehicles occupying one side of the main London to Brighton dual carriageway. The tank crews were occupying bell tents behind barbed wire in the nearby Bolney estate and spending the days completing the waterproofing of their vehicles.

At a briefing, we were shown photographs and models of the beaches in France where we were to land on D-Day and informed that A Squadron's role was to land on Queen White Beach at H-hour plus 3 and support Staffordshire Yeomanry and infantry of 3rd Division in an attempt to 'rush' Caen on the first day.

In a large marquee, we were issued with stiff, new, 'anti-gas' battledress and strange-looking French francs, and later joined in our tent by a Military Police Lance Corporal whose motorcycle was to be strapped to the turret of our tank for the landing. At this time also, we were instructed to paint a large white star on the roof of the turret and a number on the side.

On two occasions we were taken out of the park to attend parades. First to receive a 'pep' talk from General Montgomery and then to be reviewed by the King and Queen and the two young princesses. A highly polished Crab was part of the display of specialised armour drawn up at one end of the field. "I would like to see it working", said HM lugubriously, "but I don't suppose it will."

With the waterproofing completed, we took the tanks to a nearby army base where we drove, in turn, into a large concrete ditch containing several feet of water. Here we waited anxiously for a few minutes, listening for sounds of water gushing in through overlooked holes. However, everything turned out well and we drove back to our assembly point pleased with our work.

A day or so later, we moved off down the dual carriageway into Brighton and thence to Newhaven where our tanks were loaded on to LCTs bearing the divisional sign of 3rd Infantry Division. Accommodation on the tank deck was limited to a small, partially enclosed area under the bridge with a table and a few wooden forms.

When D-Day was postponed from 5 June to 6 June, the tank crews were taken off the LCTs, driven inland to a camp for a hot meal, and then put back aboard.

On 5 June we put to sea and I soon found that the anti-seasickness pills we had been issued were totally ineffective. My tank driver, George, concocted a sort of stew from various 'compo' tins, but not many of us could face it. With a freeboard of only a foot or so, the spray from the choppy sea swept over the tank deck and added to the misery.



A great boon were the cans of self-heating soup which had a central core of some combustible substance which could be ignited by the touch of a lighted cigarette.

The sea around us was covered as far as the eye could see with ships of all sizes and types, some towing barrage balloons. An impressive armada indeed, but a queasy stomach lent disenchantment to the view and I crept under a blanket in a paint locker on the port side.

Sixth June dawned brighter but much noisier as we neared the French coast. I climbed into the tank and switched on the 19 set, listening to the busy traffic, but could not make much sense of it. Shells were falling around us, and, as we ran into the beach, the LCI on our right received a direct hit. It was blazing amidships but still forging ahead. After the grey skies, grey sea, and grey ships of yesterday, the sands of the beach were bright yellow in the sunshine and, since our tank was last to drive off the LCT, we hardly wet the tracks as we joined the throng heading for the beach exit.

We unloaded the motorcycle for our passenger, the Military Policeman, and he roared off to his own private war. There was quite a lot of vehicle congestion but eventually we were off the beach and into a small orchard where we discarded the exhaust chute and exploded the Cordtex on the proofing on the gun mantle, much to the annoyance of a party of infantry resting nearby.

After more delay, we finally moved off on to the road inland and eventually passed through Hermanville where the street was lined with cheering inhabitants. Beyond the country opened out and the tank column extended into fields on both sides of the road with 2 Troop on the right flank.

By this time, I was recovering from the sea crossing and watching the scene through my periscope. I suddenly noticed flames coming from the rear of one of the tanks ahead and immediately thought that one of the crew must have stowed his bed-roll too close to the exhaust. Then came an enormous CLANG with a great shower of sparks and flame and I knew that we had been hit.

Now our gunner, Geoff, was usually very considerate about keeping the 75mm gun depressed, leaving me a fair clearance to crawl under the breech and recoil guard to get out of the only hatch which was on the other side of the turret. However, this time the gun was partly elevated and since the turret floor was obscured by flame and smoke anyway. I had no option but to wriggle my way over the recoil guard, with some difficulty, to make my escape.

Outside, I found Tom Kelly, our co-driver, lying wounded by the side of the tank. He told me that our driver, George Woodhouse, was still inside, being severely wounded in the legs and unable to move. I, therefore, climbed up on the tank and somehow found the strength to lift George out by his epaulettes just as the ammunition was starting to 'cook off' in the front compartment.

As I was doing this, two Germans appeared from the corn with their hands up. Geoff Stedall volunteered to escort them back to the Military Police in Hermanville and, on the way, relieved one of them of a fine pair of field glasses.

Meanwhile, Cpl Coop (the tank commander) and I carried the driver and co-driver back to the Staffs Yeomanry MO who had set up a dressing station behind a haystack. He was woefully short of medical supplies, since his half-track had also been hit and brewed up. He was, therefore, very pleased to receive our tank first-aid kit with its scissors and morphine capsules.

After seeing our wounded comrades sent off on a Jeep ambulance, we met up with Geoff Stedall and mooched around looking for food and shelter. We spotted an advance party of the Warwicks who seemed to have plenty of rations and after some haggling, arranged to swop the 'liberated' field glasses for a few 'compo' ration tins.

While this transaction was in progress, a Press photographer appeared and took a group photograph of the Warwicks and ourselves (unfortunately only my right hand holding some rations was in frame) together with some French civilians on their doorstep.

(Editor's note: A copy of this photograph, in which the German field glasses and the rations for which they had been exchanged are plainly visible, is now in the regimental museum.)

After the photograph, the three of us remained watching the traffic and presently a rumour spread that the Germans were putting in an armoured counter-attack. We were very relieved when a battery of 25pdr SP guns arrived from the coast and immediately went into action in front of Hermanville. It was about this time that a battalion of infantry on bicycles rode past on their way to relieve the airborne troops holding the bridges on the left flank of the bridgehead.

Shortly after, we were delighted to see a lone Crab making its way back to Hermanville and we guided it into a small orchard just off the road. This proved to be Cpl Loveday's tank our own troop which had been damaged when it slid down a steep bank taking avoiding action after their commander was wounded. Cpl Coop took it over and when their operator, 'Tubby' Allen was evacuated with a damaged hand. I took his place in the crew.

It was now about 5pm, and the sky was suddenly full of gliders and tugs as the rest of the 6th Airborne Division flew in to reinforce the left flank. Several planes fell out of formation after being hit by AA fire, but no German aircraft appeared here or throughout the whole day's operations.

We made ourselves a meal and, since it was a fine evening, bedded down in the open beside the tank.

Personally, I slept very well and only wakened at around 6am to the swelling racket of ground fire as a German recce aircraft scooted back inland. Later that morning we rallied with the rest of the squadron in a field in front of Hermanville and found ourselves parked next to a crashed Spitfire which still contained the body of the pilot, a young naval Sub-Lt who was later buried in one of our blankets.

In the next day or two, the squadron was involved in some small local operations, but I was not directly concerned. Instead, I spent some time seeking out the Staffs Yeomanry Quartermaster for replacement kit after salvaging what I could from the outside bins on our burnt-out tank. The shot had come in under the co-driver's seat, through the gearbox, and out the other side, leaving a clean, round hole right through the tank.

I also visited a nearby German strongpoint code name 'Morris', which consisted of a large concrete gun emplacement and an elaborate trench system enclosed within minefields and barbed wire. The area was completely covered with overlapping shells and bomb craters, but the 10ft thick walls of the blockhouse were hardly scratched. Inside was quite bare and unfinished and contained only a 105mm field gun, some two-tier wooden bunks, and piles of German army personnel documents. As a souvenir, I selected a 'Wehrpass' of a young Gefreiter, or Corporal, of the 2nd Battery of Heavy Artillery Regiment 1716 who was probably one of the 65-man garrison who surrendered here on D-Day.

## Jim Ramsey

### Gunner, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

Jim Ramsey wrote down the following memories of D-Day, shortly before he died in 1990. At the time of the invasion, he was a gunner in a flail tank. A 20-year old from a Lancastrian village, this was his first trip abroad, and he refused to visit Europe again for the next 45 years (even though my mother tried to assure him that nobody would be shooting at him any more).

#### Preparation for D-Day

At the beginning of May 1944, "A" Squadron Westminster Dragoons was stationed at Thorpeness in Norfolk. We had to waterproof our tanks. Every inch of the outside had to be wire-brushed and all nuts and bolts, openings, escape hatches and gun ports were sealed and made waterproof. It was boring, dirty work and took a fortnight. It was unnecessary in the event for we landed dry-shod. On trains we transported the tanks to Sussex, where we were put under armed guard and not allowed out of the area where we lived in tents. We could write no letters. We were given new clothes, paid in French francs and taken into a hut, which was very heavily guarded, and shown a map with mythical names. It was a map of Normandy. I remember the town Caen had the code name Poland and was to be taken on the first day. We were sworn to secrecy.

#### The Invasion

At Newhaven we loaded onto an L.T.C. where we spent an additional 24 hours as the Invasion was postponed for a day because of bad weather. We set sail in the dark on the night of 5/6 June. When morning came we were not alone. There were ships as far as the eye could see from horizon to horizon. Normandy came in sight and we got ready. We had a motorcycle strapped on the back of the tank and a motor cyclist riding on the turret. I offered to share the gunner's seat with him but he declined. He joined me quickly when something flew past his head. Shells were falling round us and a ship near us was hit. Our B and C squadrons had landed with the first wave three hours earlier. We were to push inland with the tanks of the Staffordshire Yeomanry (ordinary Shermans).

We went past the village of Hermanville; we had landed on Queen Beach, and were crawling through some open fields a few hundred yards past the town when tanks behind us began to

blow up. Three flails and a half-track were knocked out from anti-tank fire from our right. We carried on some distance until we halted on a ridge. We waited for the advance which never came. We stuck thereabouts guarding the flank until 5 in the afternoon.

A great mass of 4-engined bombers and gliders came in on our left to reinforce the original airborne drop on the River Orne. Quite a number were shot down and one Sterling crashed close to us. Next came a report that 40 German tiger tanks were heading our way. We feared the worst. I have since read that these tanks were stopped by an anti-tank screen which the British had posted on their line of advance.

At last it began to grow dark and all the tanks withdrew to form a laager further back. We filled up with petrol and ammunition and made a cup of tea. I was on guard for 2 hours. I heard 3 single German planes up above and so much flak was sent up from our bridgehead that all three were shot down on fire. We were up at first light, about four o'clock. D-Day was over and D-Day +1 had started.

We had bread for the first time a month later. I slept in a bed again on Christmas Eve in Brussels where I had 48 hours' leave from Holland.

All the infantry who landed with us were killed or wounded within a few months. Several infantry divisions were disbanded later. I was really glad not to be in the infantry.

## Trooper N T Kelly

### Co-Driver, 2 Troop, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

First sight of landing beaches about 0800 hrs - very hazy, sea choppy, dull sky. Young Naval padre did his rounds - no religion mentioned.

Rocket ships moving out as our LCT went nearer, beach looked crowded; presumed this was the right place Sword Queen Red. Trouble-free run in with our ramp going down in only 2 or 3 inches of water at mid-morning (can't remember, but guess approximately 11.00 hrs). Beach not very wide (incoming tide).

No sign of Beachmaster's staff (Kenneth More and dog hadn't arrived). Tanks leaving beach in single file, remember weather now bright, blue sky, brisk wind blowing smoke inland.

G Woodhouse, the driver, negotiated some sort of ramp which led on to promenade without problem, we turned left. Noticed one civilian in long raincoat away to our right. To our left was a large wooden building which I took to be a tramshed as the tram lines from promenade went into the building. Tank stopped whilst Cpl Coop, our tank commander, helped our Military Police passenger to get out, I dismounted and P Coop passed the MP's motorbike down - stayed out until the MP started his bike then climbed aboard tank.

We went only a few yards further then turned right down a main street - tall buildings on each corner all knocked about, no windows. Fairly good speed through this place (Hermanville), passed walking soldiery: recall seeing a sign 'Achtung Minen' which had been uprooted. One or two groups of civilians outside farms, but didn't stop, didn't speak. My lasting impression was that they were worried/sullen.

Pulled into a field on our left and soon joined by a half-track from which emerged the Commanding Officer (Lt Col Blair-Oliphant) in white overalls. Moved off about 14.00 hrs in single file behind tanks of the Staffs Yeomanry. Hadn't gone far when I realised shots were coming from the right - the first I saw was an 'over' but the second and third shots each hit tanks ahead of us - at this stage I remember thinking that the next one could hit us - it did. Even after 50 years this is particularly vivid. The front compartment was full of smoke.

I opened hatch and baled out into long grass or corn, then found I was unable to stand or walk. Turret crew appeared and from them learned that they had got G Woodhouse out of the tank.

LCpl Reg Davis and crew were by now on the scene and I have a recollection of hearing that they had lost a track. G Stedall had baled out in beret and asked for my steel helmet and revolver, both of which I gave him in exchange for his beret which was too big for me. (During this deal he should have said the classic line "For you the war is over.")

Next recollection is of some 'coal-scuttle' helmets being spotted approaching, but don't recall the outcome beyond the fact that I cannot remember any shots being fired. (Told later that they were intent on surrendering.)

Very little coherent thoughts from now on ... can remember being given morphia and being taken on a Jeep and being in a tented hospital with the continual sound of planes overhead all night.

As an epilogue and after 6 June I recall being on a stretcher with many other casualties ... many red berets on high ground overlooking a beach which was being bombed by relays of 5 planes this would be Wednesday 7 or Thursday 8 June. Loaded on to a DUKW which had to make 5 attempts before getting up the ramp of a LST. Can remember that there were German wounded on the LST and recall having drinks of iced water (must have been a US Navy ship). Next remember being on a stone ramp near waters edge obviously being sorted out as there was mention of Haslar (Naval hospital at Gosport) this rang a bell as I had a cousin who was SBA at Haslar at that time ... recall being on a bunk in a train and then having drink of tea from an invalid's cup (like a miniature teapot). This was Botley Park Emergency Hospital, Chertsey, on 9 June 1944.

Trooper L Webber

## Loader/WT Operator, 4 Troop, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

(Editor's Note: This account was given in a letter home written by Trooper Webber on or shortly after D-Day. It bears the signature (indicating 'censored') of W S Hall, the troop leader whose own account is elsewhere in this book.)

The first thing was to waterproof the tank - what a job. We worked until dark every day for over a week before we finally said "she's waterproof." Then came the inevitable kit inspections. The tanks were loaded with ammo etc. and everything was prepared for the Battle. I must say that the kit we were issued with was absolutely A1.

Well we were then moved down South, very near Brighton. We had been in our new camp for about a week, when they decided to seal it. That meant we were cut right off from "Civvy Street". Another few days and then we moved again. This time it was the "Invasion Camp", and all the troops that were there were to participate in the invasion of the same sector as ourselves. We had been briefed by this time and knew exactly what our job was to be: what we didn't know, was where we were invading. We had been paid that week in French currency, but of course that meant nothing. We stayed at this camp for three days, during which time a "Red Cap" temporarily joined the crew, complete with motorcycle. We were to take this chap with us as far as the other side, and then dump him at the earliest opportunity.

On the third day another move, this time we knew it was embarkation; it was rumoured that the port was to be Newhaven - it was. When we arrived there, the road to the docks was lined with tanks, and we were kept in this "invasion queue" for about one hour before we rolled on down the line. It was then that I saw the much talked-of "Landing Craft Tank"; there they were all lined up waiting for us to load. When it came our turn, we rolled down the cobbled slope, on to the ramp and then we were aboard.

The next thing was to shackle the tank to the deck. Whilst we did this, the boat (or craft if you wish) had moved away from the dockside and had taken its place in the great line.

We were anchored in the harbour for two days: all this time each tank crew did its own cooking on the deck. We all slept in various places: I personally slept under the tank. I found the metal deck rather hard, but managed - at least we had no guards to do! On the third day we moved out of the harbour and anchored once more (the weather was pretty poor, and I felt sick even at this early stage).

At twelve-thirty p.m. on that day, we started our journey. It wasn't long before I was really seasick, out came the anti-sickness tablets which made me feel a little better. Well, it was an awful trip and before the night had fallen not only I but the remainder of the crew felt bad. What with our blankets being soaked through, and waves washing over the side when we least expected them - can you imagine it?

I spent an awful night lying on a duck-board. (The deck was two inches deep in water.) We were up and about very early the next morning; we had been moving all night and God knows what

route we had taken. We had been given our maps the previous day - yes, it was France, and we were nearly there.

As it grew light, we eagerly searched the horizon for the coast, which by now the infantry should have had well under control. At last we saw it, just a grey blur in the distance as yet, but slowly coming nearer. The Navy had promised to get us there safely, and it looked as though that promise would be fulfilled.

Through binoculars one could see the buildings, many of them burning. We knew by this time that it would not be long before we were landed, so we started on the job of sealing the driver in his compartment, for we did not know what the depth of water would be, and this was one of the precautions that had to be taken. By this time the Germans had started shelling us and it wasn't long before our barrage balloon came flopping down, having been punctured by shrapnel. In general, things seemed to be getting rather hot, so we decided it was time to "climb in" (this was done whilst the tank commander knocked away the chocks wedging the tank tracks). The rest of the picture I saw through my periscope.

It seemed ages before we eventually came into the shore, and then the tank was driven off into the water which at the most was only six inches deep - so much for our wasted efforts at waterproofing.

On landing we turned right along the beach following the line of tanks, until we came to a sudden halt. It was a traffic jam, hardly the place or the time for such a thing, but it kept us there for about 30 minutes. During this time I kept my eyes glued to the periscope. It wasn't long before I saw my first Hun, he was being brought out of a house at the point of a bayonet: a little further on I sighted another, but he needed no escort - he was dead!

After the hold up we turned left into the town (I can't tell you its name for reasons of security). A few French civilians lined the pavements, they certainly did not look too happy, but they waved to us, and I threw a few cigarettes and bars of chocolate to them, which they literally grabbed at.

Well that is as far as I can go just now, as I can't tell you what happened when we reached the other end of the town. That was D-Day landing as I saw it, and that part was comparatively easy, for us anyway; the infantry who cleared the way for us had a far worse time, but they certainly did their job and did it well.

## Trooper G H W Woodhouse

### Driver, 2 Troop, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

One amusing incident I remember before we went over is being the last tank in a very long line of "funnies" on parade at Petworth Park. King George VI came down the line inspecting the vehicles. When he reached my tank a Brass Hat with him asked "Would you like to see this flail working, Sir?" The King replied "You can show me if you like - I don't suppose the bloody thing will work." By his remarks I imagined that things had gone wrong up the line.



To cut a long story short, it worked. The King and those with him scattered. Queen Elizabeth and the two Princesses were looking on from a Bren-gun carrier.

A few days later we embarked at Newhaven on a Tank Landing Craft LCT 245. Our quarters on board was the Chain Locker where we had a table. When we finally set off on 5 June the weather was fair but choppy; having been in the Merchant Navy the state of the sea did not bother me. Gathering up some tins of "Maconochies" (iron rations) I made my way to the ship's galley. Having got permission from the cook, I made a nice stew and carried it back to the chain locker. "Grub up - who's for breakfast?" I called: it was not received with rapture - on the other hand there were some hasty exits!

Came the late evening, there not being much to see apart from other ships of various sizes and tonnages, most turned in to get what sleep they could: also wondering what the next day would bring (we were aware that our Regiment would be used when an invasion took place, but when we did not know).

I was awakened by one of our troop shouting "Come and have a look at this lot." Everywhere one looked were ships. In front, each side and following. Battleships, cruisers, rocket ships (with bank upon bank of rocket projectiles on both sides); motor torpedo boats weaving in and out to what I thought was a marshalling operation.

As we drew nearer to the French coast the noise reached a crescendo. It all seemed to come from the ships at sea. The order we had been waiting for came at last. "GET MOUNTED" (remember - we were The Westminster Dragoons). My co-driver, Tommy Kelly, a Liverpoolian and I climbed aboard our tank.

We were very lucky; the skipper brought his boat right up to the shore-line, down went the ramp and we were on dry land. Others were not so lucky; some tanks going right under the water.

The beach we had landed on turned out to be Queen Beach and it fronted the small town of Hermanville. It was crowded with lorries and tanks and people all trying to get off the beach as quick as they could. The Beachmaster with his pet dog by his side was yelling and gesticulating, endeavouring to keep everything on the move.

One thing will stay in my memory as long as I live: leaning over the promenade railings were two persons, a man in a sports jacket and flannels and a woman in a red dress.

At last we were off the beach and our Tank Commander, Cpl Coop, gave me the order "Straight Ahead". I glanced at the houses on the front and could see dead Germans half hanging out of the upstairs windows. Suddenly we were free of the town. At that moment I turned to my co-driver and said, "Tommy you are going to have to take a walk. The proofing covers have not blown." (That is the waterproof paper that covers all the air inlets to the engines plus the gun mounting.) He was out, tore the paper off, and back in less than 5 seconds flat.

The fields looked fresh and green and passing one field I saw white tame rabbits running around. They could have been decoys.

After covering 5km we stopped for a halt. It was outside a farm. The farmer stood with his children and there must have been at least 6 in the farm entrance. He was addressing us in French and one of our boys translated it for our benefit.

“You people have been here only hours and you steal my eggs! The Germans have been here for years and pay for everything.”

Shortly after this outburst orders were received that we were to proceed some distance down the road then turn off at a given point to our right and carry out a sweep of a mined area; so it would open a way for oncoming troops, tanks, vehicles and men.

From the turret one of the crew wanted to know if Tommy and I would like a drink. This was self-heated cocoa. Yes, we replied, but we never got that drink. That was the last I remember. Next thing I was aware of was that the tank was on fire. On looking towards my co-driver I could not see him. I shouted out to the rest of the crew but got no answer. When I tried to reach up to the hatch I then found I had no use in my legs. It was at that moment I prayed to God for a miracle to happen. In front of me was my periscope, I turned this first one way and then the other. How long I sat in that time bomb I do not know but it must have only been minutes. The hatch above my head was opened up and I remember the beautiful blue sky that I had thought I would never see again above me. My pals who had thought I had had my chips had spotted the periscope turning and came back: you have to bear in mind the tank was loaded with all sorts of high explosives and was on fire. To make things more complicated, after pulling me up from my seat and outside, they lowered me to the ground (I was smouldering) not realizing that both my legs were smashed.

After putting out the fire and laying me on the ground and giving me a cigarette, I pulled out my .38 revolver, passed it to the wireless operator and said "You might as well have this. I won't be needing it."

From where I lay I could see a hole in the side of the tank; the shell that had hit us had also smashed one of the arms of the flail.

Three fellows in German uniform came running across the field with their hands up. They were the ones who had hit us. “Quick give me back my gun” I said to my mates “I’ll shoot the bastards.” They refused and I am glad they did so.

The rest of Tuesday and Tuesday night I spent in a little Field Hospital tent with people being brought in, dying and being taken out again.

Every now and then the RAMC Orderly would light up a cigarette for me, and give me an injection. In between times he would say “See you in a minute” and then make a dash. I soon cottoned on to the fact that there was a slit trench and he was taking cover. During the night I and others were loaded onto a jeep only to be taken off again because it was required for ammunition. Eventually, I reached the beach and was placed on the sand. At some time on Wednesday a priest came along, lifted my identity tag, put it down again, muttering "C of E" and walked on.

During the day the beach got strafed by planes. Wednesday evening about 7 p.m. I was finally taken aboard a hospital ship bound for Southampton. From there I was transferred to Winchester Hospital where they kept me for several days whilst they plastered me up and then despatched me by hospital train to Bradford Royal Infirmary in Yorkshire where I stayed for eight months having 15 operations during my stay. During the early days my wife and mother were sent for as evidently not much hope to my recovery was given. They arrived and did not stay long as we had two children.

After my wife went home she became so ill she unfortunately had a cerebral haemorrhage and died. I was still too ill to do much about it; a few weeks later, as I began to improve, my mother brought the children to see me. I had the best medical treatment one could wish for and in the following November I met my present wife Margaret (who was a student nurse there). In April 1995 I had another piece of metal removed from my left thigh - shell or tank or gearbox.

Long after the invasion we learned that official planning assumed that flail regiments landing on D-Day would by D+30 have suffered so many casualties that it would not be worthwhile reinforcing and reforming them.

In the event, the casualties of the Westminster Dragoons on D-Day amounted to two officers and five other ranks wounded. And despite the regiment's continued involvement in action almost until the end of the European war 11 months later, the total number of all ranks killed was less than two dozen.

## Trooper J M Wadey

### Loader/WT Operator, 1 Troop, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

Shortly before D-Day we found ourselves at Petworth Park in Sussex where, together with a number of other units, we were reviewed by King George VI.

Shortly afterwards we moved to a camp to the east of London where we were sealed off from outside contact for security reasons. After a few days we received instructions to move to Tilbury Docks where we embarked on an LST (the largest type of tank landing vessel) which had an American crew.

When the time came to sail we had a rather inauspicious start to our voyage. Firstly a crew member cast off the bow mooring ropes without orders, causing the front of the vessel to drift across the fairly narrow dock dangerously near to hitting another LST and there was some panic before the situation was brought under control. Then when we finally sailed we hit one of the dock gates much to the anger of an official standing on the dockside! However, we reached the open sea without further incident and sailed round the south coast to one of the forming-up areas where we stayed for a few days.

The weather was not particularly kind and a ship of some 3,000 tons with a draught of only 6 feet (if I remember rightly) was not very stable, but fortunately I turned out to be a good sailor and did not suffer from seasickness as did so many others.

We had been issued with rations to feed ourselves whilst on board, but our American crew, whatever their shortcomings as sailors, proved to be excellent hosts insisting that we ate with them and we had food which would not have disgraced a first class hotel!

After several days of this luxury we set sail again late on 5 June and were then told of our destination. I do not think we had much sleep that night and at first light on D-Day we went up on deck to be greeted by a sight I shall never forget - hundreds of ships of all shapes and sizes stretching from horizon to horizon and above them the sky filled with barrage balloons which were towed by many of the vessels. As we made our way along shipping lanes clearly marked by moored buoys, our American crew contrived to hit several of the buoys. At one stage being severely reprimanded by a naval officer with a loud-hailer who was in a small boat helping to direct operations!

No. 1 Troop was not scheduled to take part in the initial landings and so we approached the French coast some hours after the first assault. For reasons about which I am unclear we anchored a mile or so off coast and stayed there all day watching events and listening to the sound of battle from comparative safety.

I say comparative safety because although the RAF had almost complete command of the sky a few Luftwaffe planes did sometimes manage to penetrate their defensive screen and on one such occasion a stick of bombs fell almost alongside our LST although fortunately without causing any damage. At that moment I would rather have been ashore as I did not relish the prospect of finding myself swimming in the rough sea amongst all the chaos. On another occasion a large ship not too far away (I believe an ammunition ship) was hit by shellfire and erupted in a huge explosion. We could see the flashes of German guns apparently firing in our general direction, which obviously was a cause of some concern to us.

The crew of our ship told us they had 19 Bofors and Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns on the vessel and whenever an enemy plane came over they opened fire with the lot. The noise was unbelievable, particularly if you were below deck at the time, as happened to me once, when the whole vessel reverberated rather like being inside some gigantic metal box being struck with hammers. Another source of incredible noise was, of course, the naval bombardment and particularly impressive were the broadsides fired by the battleships *Warspite* and *Rodney* which were cruising up and down parallel to the coast. A couple of times these salvos of 16" shells passed directly over the top of our ship and it was rather as if a series of express trains was rushing by, what it must have been like to be on the receiving end of those salvos was difficult to imagine.

As the day wore on, the sound of battle gradually receded as the bridgehead was established and the advance pushed further inland although the naval bombardment continued its non-stop noise. Nightfall came eventually but I cannot recall if we managed to get any sleep before the morning when it became our turn to land.

We were under the command of the 3rd Canadian Division and came ashore on the Nan sector at Bernières-sur-Mer. The LST took us right up on to the beach and we drove off the ramp on to almost dry sand - so much for all our time spent on waterproofing! I was kept fairly busy operating the radio but was able to catch glimpses through the periscope of the chaos on the beaches. We slowly progressed inland through continuing chaos until we finally reached higher ground and were directed to an assembly area where we were able to dismount and get some fresh air. Hardly had we set foot on the ground when a truck parked a few yards away was hit by a shell and blown to pieces. Fortunately, we were standing on the other side of our tank and were protected from the blast, but this brought home to us very starkly that we were no longer just onlookers.

## Lieutenant D C Ingram

### Troop Leader, 1 Troop, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons

We left Leiston in Suffolk on transporters and unloaded in Petworth Park amongst the greatest organised chaos yet seen. We found ourselves attached to a squadron of 13th/18th Hussars, half of whom had sand running out of their shoes.

There we spent most of our time lying on our backs waterproofing, apart from a parade for the King's inspection, where he had to tell the conducting General who we were.

There was a Squadron order group, where I realised how unfirmly we were attached to the 13th/18th, and we were given orders for the move on transporters all the way back to Tilbury. The following day, there was another O-group to say that they had lost the transporters and we would go on our tracks. When asked where there would be a Petrol Point, the 13th/18th Squadron Leader told me firmly that I would not need one, Tilbury was well within the range of a Sherman: they knew about such things.

They didn't. We ran out of petrol at various places around the North Circular, one driver managing to do so at the end of his own road. My tank got as far as the edge of Epping Forest where, because we were so secret, we crossed the pavement to the shelter of the trees, only to be followed by a man who said he had been fitting flails to Shennans at Currans of Cardiff. He was followed by a Council foreman who was very cross about his pavement. A month later, he sent me a bill for a couple of hundred pounds for repairs.

Eventually the petrol arrived and we all arrived on the same grass verge in Grays: I can't think how that happened. The next day we were lying on our backs again, replacing the waterproofing. The following day it took eleven hours to cover the three miles to the Docks. The other tank commanders in the troop were comparatively wise in the ways of the world, so we had many brew-ups while we waited near crossroads to be slotted, apparently correctly, into the scheme of things.

On our eventual arrival, the ultimate insult took place. Our tanks were driven away by a loading party of Royal Marines, who should not have known about such things. To counteract this shock

the Navy had a constant supply of hot sweet tea, but more to the point there was a Petty Officer's production line of a doorstep of bread, a slice of cheese, and a handful of pickled onions. Delicious. The next shock was that the LST was American. What's more, it gradually emerged that the first time most of the crew had really been to sea was when they brought the ship across the Atlantic. Thank heaven for the four Regulars.

At nightfall on 5 June the Straits of Dover looked like the M25 on a bad day. I suppose that our crew just followed the one in front because we were off the beach at Courseulles on time on D-Day but could not unload for the wreckage. We kept hoping that we would get another American meal before landing.

Dawn on 7 June saw us still anchored off the beach. The RAF must have done a good job because there were only a couple of badly aimed bombing runs by the Germans on D+1. It turned out to be a fairly quiet day, except for our gaggle of DUKWs swimming off early on. The morning calm was shattered by Oerlikon fire from the top deck. On enquiry, a deep deep Southern voice said "Aw, he's jest trigger happy." Later an almighty explosion marked the disappearance of a neighbouring petrol barge and its crew of two.

Early on D+2 they tipped us off into six foot of water, when we were pleasantly surprised to find that our waterproofing held. The only French we saw was a young couple arm-in-arm at the first crossroads where she was chatting up the Redcap while he micturated into the ditch. Funny how first impressions last. We then rejoined the Regiment.

## Corporal F H Reynolds

### R Signals Attached Westminster Dragoons, CO's Wireless Operator

Having been posted to 30th Armoured Brigade (which included the Westminster Dragoons), I became wireless operator to a succession of Brigadiers which involved working with them in ACVs, armoured cars and tanks, and undergoing gunnery training, including on Shermans. At the beginning of June 1944 I was sent "on loan" to the Westminster Dragoons to replace the CO's wireless operator who had been injured playing football.

I joined somewhere in the Solent area, and for the first time met Colonel "Bill" Blair-Oliphant, who at first seemed a forbidding figure. He questioned me and seemed far happier at my knowledge of the Sherman tank, which I could drive as well as load and fire the guns, than at any expertise I may have had regarding wireless. I later discovered that he had a deep distrust of wireless, and on one occasion he said he preferred "a basket of b\_\_\_\_\_y pigeons".

The next few days were chaotic as I had to find out who was operating on what frequency, their "call-signs" etc etc. normally very secret and not readily given to a "buckshee corporal". It seemed everyone knew what to do except me.

We boarded our landing craft, and it transpired that the Colonel and I were to land in B Squadron's ARV. Fortunately I have always been a good sailor and whilst so many were seasick

on the way over, I escaped that problem; but on the other hand as we neared the coast, I was able to see the scene ahead – our comrades could not and could not care less. I think my biggest fear was that we might be sunk – I could not swim.

The initial assault had been well ahead of us, but we saw and heard the naval guns – we were quite close to them – we saw tracers which looked deceptively pretty, the whole scene was unbelievable and more frightening than many of us would admit – though on the odd occasions we saw “Colonel Bill”, he seemed to ooze calmness and confidence (he had been at Dunkirk of course). As we were nearing the shore and time came to load up, we saw damaged craft drifting, much smoke on shore, and objects floating in the sea wearing khaki uniforms .... I think we grew older by the minute.

After “radio silence” was ended, the wireless came to life, and whilst the 19 set was locked on to two frequencies, the Colonel would ask me what was going on on other channels, as if assuming that the wireless set was a telephone exchange. Fortunately (and strictly against “good signals procedure”) I was able to listen in to some very hectic wireless traffic. This seemed to please the Colonel.

Landing on the beach (near La Rivière) seemed rather chaotic, everybody seemed to be shouting at the same time, there seemed to be more “marshals” than troops, and when the Colonel wanted to halt to ask some question or other, his rank gave him no protection from a lot of abuse. We got little help from the wireless, unidentified persons kept breaking in. I'm sure this was one reason why very soon after we had landed, the Colonel said he was "going to find out what was going on" and prepared to depart.

I was not in possession of a No. 38 set which would have enabled me to keep in wireless contact whilst accompanying him, so I foolishly asked him what it was intended I should do; he said "Oh make yourself useful". Fortunately the crew of the ARV were soon very busy and accepted my help, my training on tanks standing me in good stead. The ARV lads were also helped by the crews of bogged down tanks, and in between wireless work. I could also boil that horrible (compo) tea and porridge. One of the bogged tanks had a radio “on the blink” and I was able to change a faulty valve. The Colonel – conspicuous in very very washed out pale overalls – would occasionally appear with heartening news – he kept the bad to himself. I know that at nightfall I had never felt so tired doing "nothing".

A lighter note to close; a day or two later I was doing exactly what the Colonel had ordered making myself useful; I had heard his warning about looting and its penalties, but our food was not palatable, so when I found a mortally wounded chicken (that's my story), I plucked it, removed its innards, cut it into pieces and over an “earth” fire, cooked it with a few small potatoes found in a field. The recovery team were eagerly awaiting the finished product when to our horror “Colonel Bill” appeared. “That smells good” he said so the Sergeant produced a mess tin and served him a portion. “This is good” he said “What type of ration is it?” Quick as a flash the Sergeant said “It's one of the new food packs, Sir.” “Hmm”, said the Colonel “It's better than we get in the Officers' Mess.”

Was that the Nelson touch?



## Lieutenant MJ Eedy - Intelligence Officer and Acting Adjutant

My battle job was regimental rear (radio) link in the CO's tank; but he had nothing to command during the landing, and as he was determined to be with his troops, he thumbed a lift and as others have described, walked the beaches in his white overalls, cheering people on. In the run up to D-Day I spent a frantic time in a back bedroom in Bournemouth trying to cope with a vast volume of paper: I well remember being asked for ammunition requirements for the whole regiment for D+30, one of many impossible and fatuous requests. It was a relief to go off for embarkation - one lone tank by itself, a standard Sherman.

All the Westminster Dragoons in the initial assault were under command of other formations, and looked after by them, in particular getting their invasion maps that way. Having some idea what might happen, I had kept a set of maps issued to me as 10 for training months before - and just as well or I would have landed mapless: they were actually quite alarming because, though they did not have correct place names, they made it blindingly obvious where the whole invasion was bound to take place; you drew a line to show the limit of fighter cover from England and then looked for beaches that were flat and hard without cliffs, and with flat country inland. These training maps which had been taken from French surveys were very detailed and I shall never know why the enemy didn't work it out; I can't believe that they were entirely taken in by the canvas screens forming dummy landing craft which were deployed to give the impression that the main effort would be launched from East Anglia.

Anyway, my tank was loaded onto an LCT with a motley group due to land second tide D-Day. The LCT commander was extremely young and very pale. We set out in line ahead, into what suddenly became an extremely empty sea: there were about ten craft, in touch only by short wave radio, and when the engine on ours packed up, we were very rapidly completely alone and out of touch. They got it going again, but the poor boy had no idea where we were (this being D-1): eventually we came in sight of land and drove round flat out in large circles with the idea, I suppose, that eventually we should meet someone to ask the way. It was now dark and we collided lightly with another craft before getting more or less on course. We finally landed in the afternoon of D-Day at more or less the right place, opposite the pillbox where another Westminster Dragoons tank had earlier distinguished itself.

We drove off the beach and headed for the hamlet where RHQ was to assemble. Once off the beach everywhere was curiously empty. There was a lot of small arms fire and smoke in the distance, but I was quite alone.

Rounding a bend, I suddenly saw a German Tiger with its gun pointing straight at us: I yelled to the gunner who turned to me, mouthing soundlessly and did nothing at all. I then realized that the Tiger had been put out of action: the gunner had - fortunately - not attempted to fire at it since our 75mm gun was not only still waterproofed but also for some reason full of rope.

We found the rendezvous where Col Blair-Oliphant and various troops were collecting. The CO decided that his HQ should be established in a small farmhouse over a garden wall, and went off with one or two people to show how a good infantry soldier cleared houses: this involved

throwing a Mills bomb through a window - which was fine if you got it through: unfortunately, the CO's bomb bounced back and went off as everyone ducked behind the wall; he being the tallest got clipped by a bomb fragment.

People were a bit jumpy in this small close wood, and one gunner thinking he saw Germans in a trench among the trees, let off a 75 HE round which, of course, exploded about six feet away in the branches, about the most dangerous thing that happened to me that day.

The local villagers appeared very soon, interested only in getting us to wreak mayhem on the occupying Germans who, of course, had gone. I well remember the superb old woman who described the local German commander walking around with a great black dog, terrorising the locals: she said, with great understandable venom, he was a swine, a devil "fier orgueilleux", and she spat.

## Captain D S Squirrell - Regimental Technical Adjutant

In the run up to D-Day I was Troop Leader of 3 Troop, A Squadron. We were sent to collect our five Shermans from the Milner Safe Co in Liverpool, who had converted them to flails: we were amused, after seeing them being tested by factory staff in full view of several hundred other workers in the Trading Estate, to have to sheet our flails down fully when we left on the transporters because they were still on the SECRET list as far as the War Office was concerned.

After many toings and froings around Essex, which frequently saw us arrive wherever we had been ordered to, only to find the place totally devoid of military activity or nobody expecting us, we finally found ourselves at a camp near Tilbury. A few days later I was woken at 2 a.m. and ordered to report to the Adjutant's office where I was astounded to find two Westminster Dragoon officers asleep on the floor - my brother Peter and Lt Arthur Dick: they had come to inform me that I was now Regimental Technical Adjutant and was to report to the CO at Beaulieu immediately. My departure was delayed because no one was allowed to leave the camp, but after much frantic telephoning by my brother, I was able to hand over my troop to Arthur Dick and set off.

My "briefing" from the CO was brief indeed: the RTA's scout-car was in a camp near Romsey and I was to join it next day: as soon as I landed on the beach, I was to find the CO "somewhere": he did not know where he would be as he was travelling over by "unspecified means" (which later turned out to be the B Squadron ARV).

I arrived at Romsey to find Tpr Bryant and the scout-car parked on the verge outside the camp; he was still busy waterproofing the vehicle - and living in it, with food being passed through the perimeter wire, since if he entered the camp, the staff would not let him out again to work on his scout-car. On reporting to the Camp commandant I was told in no uncertain terms that "that bloody WD's driver outside is more trouble to me than all the rest of the (750) personnel in the camp."

Next day a motley convoy of vehicles, including our scout-car, moved off to the loading "hard" at Rank's Flour Mill at Southampton Docks: we were due to embark on a US Navy LST which would also be carrying medical staff etc to bring back wounded to the UK. I was chatting to a Lt RN commanding an LCT in the next berth when our LST appeared steaming up Southampton Water at high speed; it turned to starboard and the Lt RN said "That bastard's going to ram my ship" - and it did. He was furious and said "That's the end of my war - I shall be in dockyard for the next six weeks." However, over the rail of the LST appeared a plump man in white open-neck shirt, no cap, and with braces holding up his blue serge trousers, and shouted in a broad Texas accent "Sorry, bud - I've been doing that ever since we left Stateside. We'll fix you up in no time!" Over the side came USN sailors with steel plates and welding gear and sure enough the LCT was repaired "in no time" much to the satisfaction of the RN Lt.

We boarded the LST and lay at anchor in Southampton Water waiting for the "off". The doctors and nurses were good company, but because it was a USN vessel, there was no alcohol aboard.

We sailed eventually at night on 5 June and arrived off Gold Beach in the early evening of D-Day after an uneventful voyage apart from the noise of the assault and the bad weather. We anchored to await "call in" by the Beachmaster's organisation, which came much later than expected - much to Trooper Bryant's relief; he said "I'd go anywhere to get off this \*\*\* ship."

After all that waterproofing we drove off the LST at about 7 p.m. - into about two inches of water. There was a confused mass of vehicles in various stages of disrepair and beached shipping: there were many dead lying on the beach and wounded on stretchers waiting for evacuation in our LST and others. No enemy mortars or shells were falling on the beach, but the noise overhead of firing from RN vessels offshore was deafening. We were not permitted to deviate from the marked lanes leading off the beach so we moved straight inland looking for Westminster Dragoons "anywhere". We moved 2 - 3 miles inland with no success, so returned to the beach and threaded our way along the beach road with difficulty due to various obstructions such as abandoned vehicles and a large crater - later filled by pushing in a Churchill AVRE.

We got back to the beach near Le Hamel and found several bogged/ mined/ brewed-up flails and AVREs. I spoke to a few flail crewmen who had seen and spoken to the CO earlier when he was walking about the beach in his conspicuous light-coloured overalls carrying a small suitcase! They did not know where he had gone.

I traversed Gold Beach from East to West in the scout-car and found "Baron" Stanyon's brewed-up tank but no sign of him or his crew: I also made a note of about 10 other ditched or brewed-up flails with a view to later recovery. It was now getting dark, so I moved inland a short distance, we made a meal and settled down for the night with a view to a renewed search in the morning. It was a very noisy night with many aircraft overhead, a few bombs (or were they shells?) and much flare and tracer activity.

In the morning of D+1 we set off again to find "someone" - anyone, but had another look along the beach first. I confirmed my original appreciation of the "damage" and then moved inland where I found the rump of C Squadron under command of Major Peter Sutton who had just been wounded, and a number of his men killed. Together we moved inland to meet up with the rump of B Squadron and the CO near Crepon.

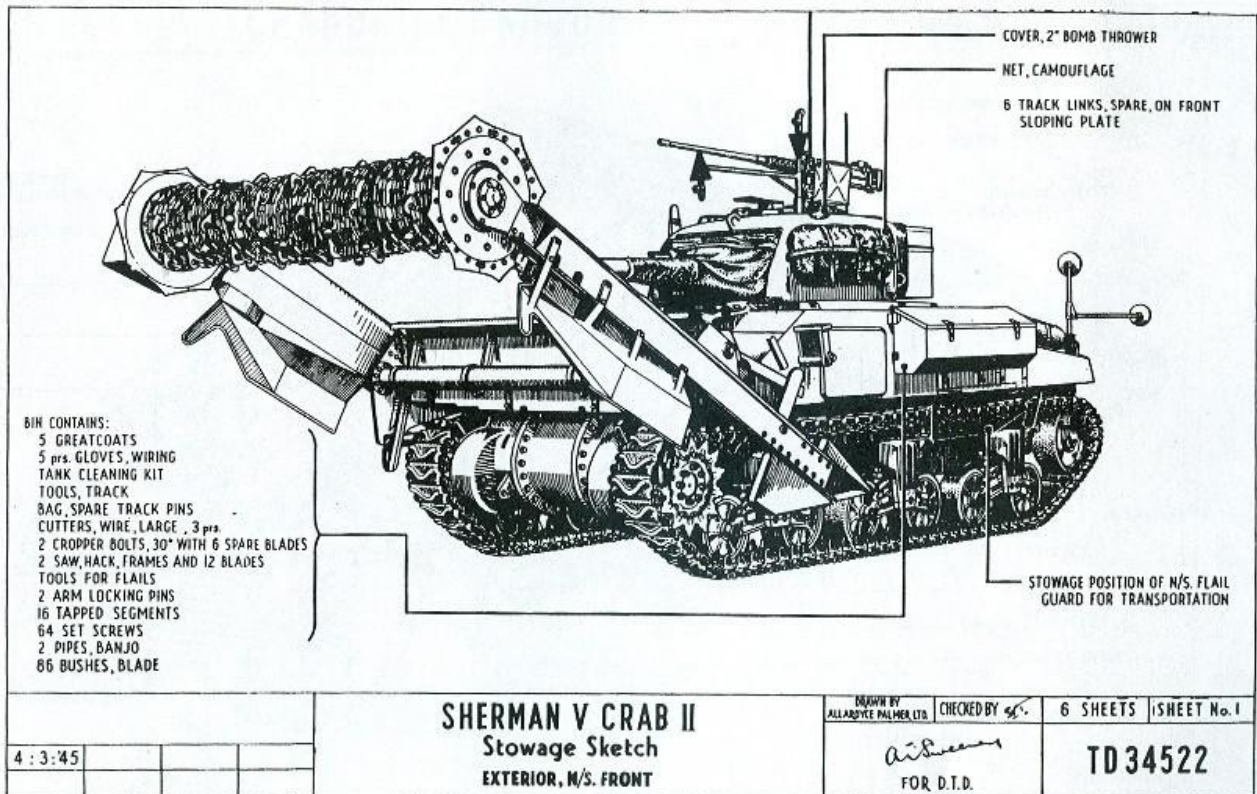
When we arrived I reported to the CO who in no uncertain terms demanded to know where I had been. He seemed to accept my reply. I sorted myself out and collected a band of fitters and ARVs to return to the beaches to start recovery.

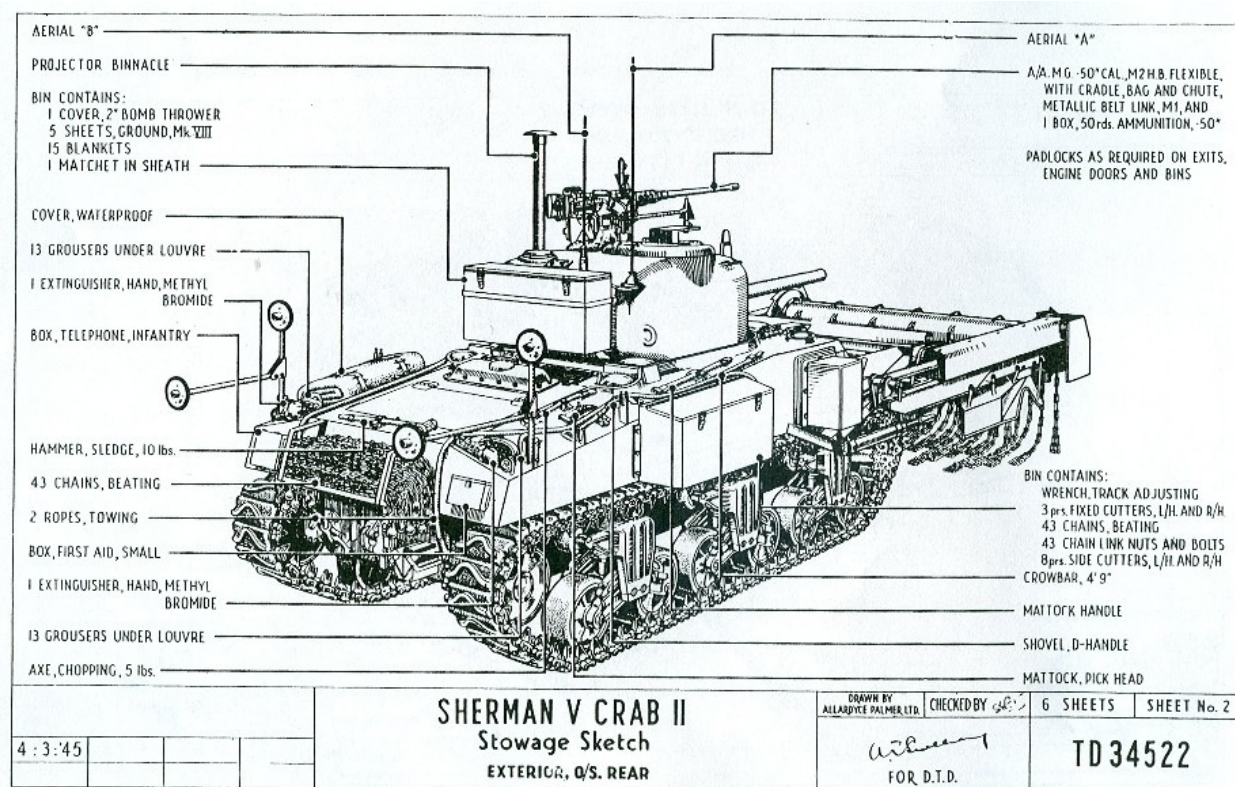
# Flails and Flailing

Flail tanks for mine-clearing were first used in the Western Desert. Those used in NW Europe worked on the same principle of a drum rotating between two arms at the front of the tank; attached to the drum were chains which literally flailed the ground and detonated any mines. Known by the code name Crabs, they were based on the American Mark V Sherman tank whose engine drove the flail drum as well as propelling the vehicle – unlike those used in Africa which were based on the Matilda and Valentine infantry tanks whose engines were not powerful enough for the dual role; so they had separate engine to operate the flail.

The projecting arms, or jib, of the Crab were pivoted and had a counter-balancing weight at the rear; when flailing the impact of the chains on the ground automatically altered the height of the rotor to follow the contours of the ground. When not flailing the jib could be raised hydraulically about 45 degrees giving the driver a better view.

The flailed path was the width of the tank, and (in theory at least) three Crabs normally worked together in echelon, their overlapping paths making a clear lane some 25 feet wide. During flailing, so much earth was thrown up by the 5 feet long heavy link chains threshing the ground that forward vision was seldom possible; the leading flail, therefore, was lined up at the start on the appropriate compass bearing and subsequently kept on course by means of a gyro-compass in front of the driver. The tank commander looked back through his periscope at the





following flail and to ensure that its flailed path overlapped his, gave directions direct to its driver over the 'B' wireless set. Top flailing speed was 1¼ mph- slow walking pace.

In its turret the Crab had the standard 75mm gun firing AP and HE, and a .300 Browning MG; on top it had a .5 Browning AA machine gun for the commander's use. The crew numbered 5 - commander, gunner, loader-WT operator, driver and co-driver, but the latter did not have the standard Sherman's hull-mounted .300 Browning in front of him, since the flailing gear would have blocked its field of fire. Apart from this, the Crab could (and did) operate as a normal gun-tank.





*From the Landing Craft Assault- we watched the 'planes dive-bombing near Le Hamel, D Day, 6th June 1944, JC Heath. (IWM ART LD 4277)*

# Glossary

ARV - Armoured Recovery Vehicle: a turretless tank used by fitters and REME recovering damaged or broken-down vehicles.

AVRE - Armoured Vehicles Royal Engineers: adapted Churchill tanks with various devices for crossing or destroying obstacles, including bobbins (mats unwound in front to cross clay), bridge-layers, fascines (large bundles of wood lobe dropped in large craters etc) and petards (mortars to project large explosive charges - known jocularly as flying dustbins - at pillboxes, gun emplacements and concrete obstacles).

Churchill - Heavily armoured British infantry tank on which AVRE was based.

Crab - Code name for flail tank based on US Sherman Mark V.

DUKW ("Duck") - Wheeled amphibious load-carrier (US).

Flail - Tank adapted to clear lane through minefields and barbed wire by beating ground with heavy chains fixed to a revolving drum mounted between two arms projecting in front of tank.

LCR - Landing Craft Rocket: LCT filled with rows of rocket launchers to attack beaches.

LCT - Landing Craft Tank: Flat-bottomed shallow draught vessel with ramp at front to land tanks on beach or in shallow water.

LST - Landing Ship Tank: Similar to LCT but much larger.

Squadron - Major's command consisting of 4 or 5 tank troops; a tank or flail regiment normally had 3 fighting and 1 HQ squadron, under the command of a Lieutenant Colonel.

Troop - Smallest unit of a flail regiment, normally 5 tanks commanded by a subaltern.

19 Set - Standard tank wireless set, with 2 elements - 'A' Set for medium range communication and 'B' Set for short range (within troop).

38 Set - Infantry "back pack" wireless set: also used for communication between infantry and tanks.



# War Diaries of the Westminster Dragoons June-July 1944

**ORIGINAL  
WAR DIARY  
or  
INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY**  
(Erase heading not required)

Instructions regarding War Diaries and Intelligence Summaries are contained in F.S. Regs., Vol. I and the Staff Manual respectively. Title pages will be prepared in manuscript.

Unit **WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS** Army Form **C 2118/22**  
Commanding Officer **LT. COL. K. BLAIR OLIPHANT M.C.**

Month and Year **JUNE 44**

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices
ENGLAND	1 JUN		Marshalling into Craft loads began. Weather which was hitherto very hot with no wind appeared to be breaking.	
	2		Marshalling continued. Weather hot but some wind. Considerable quantities of stores and equipment were still arriving, causing considerable difficulties in the dispersed state of the Regt.	
	3		Embarkation began. Weather fine with strong wind. Many of the baggage balloons carried by landing craft were carried away.	Appx E
	4	0730	D. day announced as 5 Jun, but sailing postponed immediately by rough weather.	WAR DIARIES SECTION No. 12 JUL 1944 G. H. Q. 2nd Echelon
	5		Craft moved off. Hyoscine Bromide anti sea-sickness Tablets were issued with varying results. 10 or 15% were extremely sick.	WAD
	6		D. day. H. hr was 0415 B, and at this time craft carrying 13 CRABS of B Sqn under command 231 Inf Bde and 13 CRABS of C Sqn under command 69 Inf Bde were due to touch down.	

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WAR DIARY  
or  
INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY  
(Erase heading not required)

Unit WESTMINSTER D RAGOO  
Army Form C 2118

Month and Year JUNE 44

Commanding Officer Lt Col WYK BLAIR-OLIPHANT MC

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices
FIELD	6		Accounts of D day action are appended, by sqn. Lt Col WYK Blair Oliphant landed at H+60 in (Sqn ARV as his tank was not due until H+18 hrs. By night B Sqn ARV, C Sqn M14 and 4 amm and petrol lorries were ashore	Appx A
X	7	1500	Lt M. J. Eedy with CO's tank, 20MS Evans, and two lorries due in at 0100 hrs. landed and joined C.O. and B Sqn at BRÉCYBATS	Appx A.
BRÉCY	8	0900	C Sqn arrived in harbour area. CRAB status was then as follows:-	
			Fit 3 C. Repair in 2 hrs 3 - Repairable when spares arrive 2 5 Beyond repair 5 2	
			Total 13 13	
		1300	Harbour area was not mopped up and two PW taken	
		1500	One Tp 1st RAC (CHURCHILL Crocodiles) arrived for a tank which did not materialize	
		1800	Regt refilled with POL, amm and sups from 50 Dis points. All transport was continually run regularly under 20MS	

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Unit WESTMINSTER DGNS  
Army Form C 2118

Month and Year JUNE 44

Commanding Officer Lt Col WYK BLAIR-OLIPHANT MC

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices
BRÉCY	9	1730	Lt MA SUTTON (L.O.) in a Jeep, Lt RF GOULD (Supt Oth) in a Tank Capt D.S. SQUIRELL, RTA in place of Capt EASTWOOD, in a Scout Car PW RHYMES and three lorries incl. tech stores arrived in harbour having landed one day late.	
		1800	One CRAB of C Sqn blown up while assisting recovery of a 4/7 DG tank from a minefield. Cause was a very deep but TELLER which did not explode until run over at least twice. Major S.P.M. Sutton who had been wounded in the thigh 7 Jun forced to leave for hospital FDS	
	10	0900	All de water proofing now complete. About 50% of all fuel chains under replacement, and 100% for one CRAB which had dealt with 40 mins without mishap. C S Returns (14 and 16q X Nil and one Y Nil and 3 Z Nil and 2	W.P.O.
		1200	Regt at one hrs notice to move. First Regt Orders in France issued	Appx B

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Unit WESTMINSTER DCNS  
Commanding Officer LTCOL WYK BLAIR OLIPHANT MC

Month and Year JUNE 44

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices
BRECY	10	1930	Dglt dinner in officers mess.	
	11	1000	Rw Rhymus held CofE Services in a barn. Weather since Dday had been fine and no rain. There had been no enemy bombing or shelling whatever near right area. Tp 141 RAC left Comd.	
		1300	Major Gen PCS HOBART commanding 79 Arm Div arrived on visit	
		1400	C.O. called to HQSO Div to order, wireless warning order received to move to hold high ground Pt 112/7891 with under comd two Tps 6 pdr ATK, 233 Pd Coy RE as inf, and one pl MHC the whole force under 231 Inf Bde	
		1530	C.O. left in car on recon, with Capt Stanton as Commander of all tanks. Echelon moved to wood 7982 near JUAYE-MONDAYE under Capt Taylor, arriving 1900 hrs Bochs and inf CRABS remained at BRECY with ATK and RQMS	WAO.

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Unit WESTMINSTER DCNS  
Commanding Officer LTCOL WYK BLAIR OLIPHANT MC

Month and Year JUNE 44

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices
JUAYE-MONDAYE	11	1900	RHQ with two Shermans and 17 CRABS arrived	
		2130	All Crabs moved on urgent orders to LA BELLE ÉPINE 7669 where 2 DEVONS had been overrun. The tanks under Capt Stanton shot the inf into the village with no casualties, and killed no enemy. The action finished in the dark, and tanks returned to harbour Defence of point 112 was now laid out with Tps under Comd and co held tanks as mob res.	App C
		2330	7 tanks moved out to hold stops on three approach roads	
	12	0430	Stand by. Pet and amm horses brought up by Lt Sutton as wireless comms has been impossible at more than five miles Two vehicles filled with water from petrol cans. Responsibility was not discovered	WAO.
		1200	Lts Hoban and Pear left with six CRABS to sp 231 Bde adv from LA FROIDE RUE 7672 to LA SENAUDIÈRE 7869	

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WAR DIARY  
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Unit WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS 78  
Army Form C 2118  
Commanding Officer COLONY BLAIR OLYPHANT MC

Month and Year JUNE 44

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices
JUARE MONDAYE	12	1400	Tanks RV with inf in very close country impossible for AFVs to op with success, and they were expected to adv without proper inf sp. SA and by mortar fire were met, and an 88mm gun knocked out three tanks of which one commanded by Cpl McCall C Sqn brewed up. Cpl McCall escaped wounded, but the rest of his crew were missing (believed killed) Lt Pear was hit by mortar splinters in the back of the head, but made his way nearly 2000 yards before collapsing, to bring help to Tpr BRAMBY, his driver, who was severely injured and later died. Lt Pear was recommended to mention in Despatches for this action.	Appx D.
	12	1900	Cpls Stanton and Taylor in two CRABS recovered two much cas. under mortar fire, and regt <del>had</del> <sup>acquired</sup> with six CRABS remaining fit.	WBO.
	13	0430	Stand to, and move to open harbour 0530 hrs	
		1100	Regt reverted to 30 Corps Control and echelon moved to DOUET 8272	

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WAR DIARY  
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Unit WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS 80  
Army Form C  
Commanding Officer COLONY BLAIR OLYPHANT MC

Month and Year JUNE 44

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices																				
JUARE MONDAYE	14	0900	Lt Townsend-Creen, B Sqn, left harbour with three CRABS to flank mine in back area under C.F. 30 Corps. Two tanks were eventually put out of action by losing chains and missing occasional mine																					
		1500	Inf took BERNIERES CHATEAU 2000 yards south and Lt HOBANS tank knocked out 12 Jun. in action under 231 Bde was recovered with only track and one bogie shot away. Later Lt PEAR'S and Cpl McCall's tanks, knocked out in the same action were reached both burnt out. Pw Rhymes buried the remains of some of Cpl McCall's crew, which could not be identified.	WBO.																				
	15	1600	A Sqn under Major B.A. Wallace arrived with Capt CB Beaumont and Lts BULLOCK INGRAM HALL and DICK and 17 fit CRABS. A Sqn's original assault party, included 12 CRABS, and a further 10 for TD Regt. These were now returned to the Regt as reinforcements and tank status was as follows:																					
			<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>A</th> <th>B</th> <th>C</th> <th>Total</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Fit</td> <td>17</td> <td>4</td> <td>3</td> <td>24</td> </tr> <tr> <td>24 hrs</td> <td>2</td> <td>1</td> <td>2</td> <td>5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Over 24 hrs</td> <td>2</td> <td>3</td> <td>1</td> <td>6</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		A	B	C	Total	Fit	17	4	3	24	24 hrs	2	1	2	5	Over 24 hrs	2	3	1	6	
	A	B	C	Total																				
Fit	17	4	3	24																				
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Unit **WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS**  
Commanding Officer **Lt Col WYKBLAIR-OLIPHANT MC**

Month and Year **JUNE 44**

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices																												
JUNY- MONDAYE	16	1800	Regt Det of 30 Armd Bde OEF consisting of Capt WHITTAKER and 4 ORS with eight lorries arrived for permanent attachment																													
	17	0900	Lt D.F. INGRAM, CSqn left with three PRABS to clear mine in back area for CE, 30 Corps.  Field miniature range was established and officers were opened. 75 ORs daily went on recreational transport to BAYEUX. Baths were a most urgent necessity, but could not be obtained anywhere.																													
Recommendation for Honours and Awards are summarized as follows																																
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WAD.

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**WAR DIARY**  
or  
**INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY**  
(Erase heading not required)

Unit **WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS**  
Commanding Officer **Lt Col WYKBLAIR-OLIPHANT M.C.**

Month and Year **JUNE 44**

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices																																																											
JUNY- MONDAYE	18		Rw Rhymus held services at 0600 and 1000 hrs in the cloister of the abbey at MONDAYE. Weather continues hot and fine. Casualties since D day are summarized as follows																																																												
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WAR DIARY

UNIT WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS  
 COMMANDING OFFICER LT COL WYK BLAIR OLIPHANT M.C. 10 82

MONTH AND YEAR JUNE 44

PLACE	DATE	HOUR	SUMMARY OF EVENTS	REF APPX.
JUYE-MONDAYE	18	1200	LT INGRAM'S Gp returned without mishap.	
		1500	BRIAN DUNCAN visited the Regt.	
	19		Workshop and field miniature range gunnery begun. Heavy rain started at dawn.	
	20	1400	LT <del>DUCK</del> <sup>DICK</sup> and three CRABS of A Sqn det to Lt L of C to clear mine in rear area.	
			Capt G.C. BOGLE stated by Des HQ to have been posted as HQ 30 Armd Bde as C2. Lt M. J. EEDY appointed Adjutant in his place and promotion applied for.	
		1700	The first bath party was held for half the Regiment in BAYBUR. L.O. from 30 Corps arrived with orders for one sqn to det. to Lt of Div. Coans Major P.A. WALLACE commanding A Sqn which was selected, left for HQ HQ Bde 1715 hrs.	
21		1030	C.O. ordered to HQ 30 Corps.	
		1130	Two lorries of Wdqs det 30 Armd Bde RASC arrived and became "echelon" to A Sqn which still remains at MONDAYE harbour.	
		1800	Sqn ldr tanks of B and C Sqn, due D+10, arrived. A Sqn less two Tps placed under command of Lt of Div in sp. 1100 hrs Bde for attack on wood 8666 near TESSIE-BRETTEVILLE. Wood was suspected of being protected by mine. Attack was due to begin 0330 hrs 23 June	
22	0900	C Sqn, now 11 CRABS and one SHERMAN placed under comd 8 Corps and sub allotted	W90.	

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WAR DIARY  
 or  
 INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY  
 (Erase heading not required)

Unit WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS  
 COMMANDING OFFICER LT COL WYK BLAIR OLIPHANT M.C. 11 83  
 Army Form C 2118

Month and Year JUNE 44

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	References to Appendices
JUYE-MONDAYE	22		to 9 RTT, 31 Tk BDE, 15 Dv	
		0900	A Sqn moved to CHOUAIN 8372 for Conc and C Sqn moved to FRESNAY LE COQUEUR 8978. Both A and C Sqn were in res in case mine were encountered in the big attack planned for 24 June	
	23		Attack postponed to 25 June. Re-tp A Sqn - Lt Ingram - also allotted to Lt of Div. A Sqn under Major Wallace with two Tps - Lt Ingram and Bullock now under Lt of Div <sup>direct</sup> with Capt Beaumont and one Tps - Lt Hall in sp. 1100 hrs. C Sqn received no definite orders but were also in sp in case mine were met	
			Lt Dick with Lt L of C now had two out of three tanks out of action as tanks, having failed to deal successfully with wooden box AT mine. In one place seven were flared and fuse did not explode, but in all cases flares showed pattern of field and enabled RE to lift the remainder by hand without difficulty.	
		2000	Lt Col Wyk Blair Oliphant ordered to HQ 8 Corps as adviser on Flare and AVRE for the attack. No orders had still been received for B Sqn	W90.



WAR DIARY

UNIT WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS 12 34

COMMANDING OFFICER Lt COL WYKBLAIR-CHAMBERLAIN

MONTH AND YEAR JUNE 44

PLACE	DATE	HOOR	Summary of Events and Information	Ref. to Appendices																								
JUAYE-MONDAYE	24		<p>Lt Dick returned from Lt L of C with two tanks out of three empty flails. He dealt with 137 out of 140 "S" mines but found 75% of Holzmine in 3 to 5 inches of soil under long grass were not blown. These mines in several cases were not exploded even by a tank running over them once.</p> <p>1800 30 Corps ordered B Squ to remain in res.</p> <p>Lt Ingram joined A Squ under Lt A Dw with his troop. Major Wallace and Capt Beaumont were now in Lt A Dw res. with two Tps under Lt Ingram and Lt Bullock, in all 12 CRABs, and Lt Dick was held in right res. Distribution of Tanks <sup>(CRAB)</sup> at 2300 hrs, all being fit, was as follows:-</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>A</th> <th>B</th> <th>C</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>In Lt A Dw Res</td> <td>12</td> <td>-</td> <td>-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>146 B Co under Lt A Dw</td> <td>5</td> <td>-</td> <td>-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>15 Dw</td> <td>-</td> <td>-</td> <td>11</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Right Area, 30 Corps res.</td> <td>4</td> <td>8</td> <td>-</td> </tr> <tr> <td>TOTAL</td> <td>21</td> <td>8</td> <td>11</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Two RHO Sherman and one Sherman each B+C also remained in Right Area. Capt D. S. Squerrill, RTA, in repairing Lt Dick's flails, had now used the last spares available from knocked out tanks. Only four tanks of the right had been in REME hands in France and Right fitters had continually done the work of 2 and 3rd line workshops with the most excellent results.</p> <p>The official "Bob Weight" chains had never yet been seen, and less than two op res. of 200% bar link were now held. Some round links of which OFF dit had eight sets were fitted.</p>		A	B	C	In Lt A Dw Res	12	-	-	146 B Co under Lt A Dw	5	-	-	15 Dw	-	-	11	Right Area, 30 Corps res.	4	8	-	TOTAL	21	8	11	
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	25	0800	<p>Rw Rhymes held Service in cloisters of Mondaye abbey, after a night very disturbed by the arty sited around harbour. Weather still fine and hot. The attack <sup>had</sup> now <del>started</del> started first light 25 June.</p>																									

WAB.

WAR DIARY

WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS 13

Commanding Officer - Lt Col WYKBLAIR-CHAMBERLAIN

Place	Date	Hour	Summary of Events and Information	Ref. to Appendices
MONDAYE	26		<p>C Squ moved to NORREY-EN-BASSIN 0270, still in res. A Squ remained in res at Le Port Rec incl Lt Hall's Tp now also under Lt A Dw Control. A section 30 Armd Bde Workshops REME arrived at Mondaye under Capt Friend for permanent attachment. This section was originally intended for 22 Dqms. It consisted of 26 vehs and 63 all ranks incl one A.V., two transporters, 100 lbs and eight stone bombs.</p>	
	27		<p>Heavy rain fell before dawn. C Squ broke two wheel bogies during move.</p>	
	28		<p>A Squ under comd 8 Armd Bde but location unchanged</p>	
	29		<p>Situation unchanged</p>	
	30		<p>Supply by 30 Armd Bde RASC to Right Location was begun in place of drawing from 30 Corps Tps Parks by Unit Transport.</p>	

WAB.

APPENDIX "A".

1. At approx 0725 hrs 6 Jun 44 the six LCT Mk III containing 13 Crabs of C Sqn Westminster Dragoons touched down at their appointed places on the beach west of La Riviere.
2. The three right hand craft contained "X Breaching Sqn" consisting of 7 Crabs and 10 AVRE's, commanded by Major S.P.L. Sutton. The 7 Crabs consisted of HQ Crab, 5 3 Tp Crabs and 1 4 Tp Crab attached to 3 Tp.  
"X Breaching Sqn" consisted of 3 teams. Each team will be considered separately as follows:-

No. 1 Team.

Task. - To breach the minefield up to the lateral road, turn left on the lateral road and remain in reserve. While in reserve to give fire support and on orders from Sqn Comd to make a lane from the O.P. House to the Quarry.

Actual Course of Events.

Came off the craft into 4' 6" of water and did a wade of about 100 yds. Both tanks got through the beach obstacles but the rear tank struck in the clay bog on the beach. The remaining tank which was commanded by Lt. Pear proceeded up the beach, flailed a lane up to the lateral road, and turned left as planned.

On hearing that No. 3 Lane had failed the Sqn Comd ordered Lt. Pear to proceed up to the X rds, turn right and go up the hill to the O.P. house. Lt. Pear found first that the small bridge over the stream had not been blown and an even greater surprise was that the road over the A tk ditch was also not blown. He proceeded about another 25 yards up the road and found a crater on the road opposite the O.P. house about 25 ft wide probably caused by one of our own shells. The Sqn Comd ordered the bridge which had been brought up for putting across the A tk ditch to be dropped across this crater, this was done very quickly and accurately by Capt KIMMX Davis RR. Lt. Pear then crossed the bridge and continued with his final task as stated above. He completed this task by himself, the lane later being widened by the Sqn Comd. This final lane from the O.P. house to the Quarry was for the D.D. tanks to get out to the open country. The information was passed over the wireless to the D.D. Sqn Ldr personally and the D.D. Sqn arrived on the heels of the flails just as the lane was completed.

No. 2 Team.

Task.

To breach the minefield up to the lateral road, turn left advance up the lateral road, pass the X rds, turn right into the so called Marsh where the ground looked suitable and make a lane to the outskirts of Ver-sur-Mere.

Course of Events.

After a wade of 5 ft for 150 yds both flails successfully crossed the beach and made a lane up to the lateral road. They turned left, passed the X rds and the leading Crab commanded by Cpl Walker turned right off the road as planned. He felt himself sinking into a bog and at once reversed back on to the road. He then proceeded further along the road looking for less marshy ground. He found the road barred by deep craters from our own bombs, both Crabs made a sporting effort to get ~~pass~~ past them but the leading tank got bogged in the crater and the second one in the marshy ground to the left of the road.

No. 3 Team.

Task - Breach the beach minefield at as near the X rds and open up the road as far as the O.P. House.

Course of Events.

Came off craft into 4' 6" of water and did a wade of 100 yards. Both flails crossed the beach successfully but were both hit in the rotor by the 88 mm at La Riviere as they were about to enter the minefield. The bridge which was in this team was directed by the Sqn Comd through No. 2 Team's lane through the beach minefield and so to the crater as already explained.



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The three left hand craft contained "Z" Breaching Sqdn", consisting of 6 Crabs and 10 AVREs, commanded by Major Thompstone RE. The 6 Crabs consisted of 1 HQ and 5 1 Tp. "Z" Breaching Sqdn consisted of 3 teams each team being considered separately as follows:-

No.4 Team.  
Task. - To breach the beach minefield up to the lateral road, proceed straight across and take up position behind hedgerow 50 yds beyond the road and remain there in reserve.

Course of Events.  
Came off the craft into 4' 6" of water and waded for 100 yards. Both tanks got through the beach obstacles and started to flail up to the lateral road; however both tanks got bogged before reaching the road.

No.5 Team.  
Task. - To breach the beach minefield up to the lateral road, to the North - South minefield, turn left handed 50 yards across the road and breach the N/S minefield. To turn right at the end of the minefield and make a lane up to the lighthouse position.

Course of Events.  
Came off craft into 4' 6" of water and waded for 100 yards. Both tanks got through the beach obstacles and started to flail up to the road but both tanks got bogged before reaching the. From there they gave cover to No.6 Team and also supported the infantry attack on La Riviere by HE and smoke.

No.6 Team.  
Task. - To breach the beach minefield up to the lateral road left of the N/S minefield, turn right handed immediately after crossing the road, breach the N/S minefield and take up a position behind the hedgerow. From there on orders from the Sqdn Comd to make a lane up to the road just to the right of the lighthouse position.

Course of Events.  
Owing to a wire in the starter sciencoid burning out on Capt Bell's tank whilst on the craft it was necessary for him to be towed to start by the Bobbin, thus changing the order of the flails, leaving the craft. This led to Capt Bell's tank touching the flails, of the assault boats without him knowing it, as a result all remaining vehicles were delayed coming off the LCT.

Capt Bell saw an AVRE hit by what he assumed to be the 88 mm on the end of the La Riviere sea wall, he advanced to a position from where he could engage the gun and silenced it.

He then proceeded to make a lane through the minefield and became bogged just as he reached the road. Col Thorpe followed up, made a lane beside his tank, crossed the road but had his track blown by a mine immediately across the road.

The lane was made usable by towing Capt Bell's tank onto the road with the fascine AVRE and dropping the fascine into the boggy patch just before the road where it was used by the Fd Coy RE to cover up the boggy patches.

As the ground beyond the lateral road was sheer bog, Capt Bell was ordered to proceed up the road to Ver/sur-Mere and ensure it was open.

#### 4. GENERAL REMARKS.

(a) The area which contained the 88 mm gun on the end of the sea wall at La Riviere was dealt with in the fire plan by 6 Sqns of Fortresses (88 mm was aiming pt), 4 Destroyers, 86 Fd Regt, 2 LCT (R) and sundry smaller supporting craft.

How much of this fire support actually took place is not known, in any case the primary target the 88 mm gun was active when we touched down on the beach. It was silenced by a tank of C Sqdn namely that commanded by Capt Bell.

(b) Information regarding minefields was inaccurate, there were far more minefields than we had been told about, they were, however, well marked by signs.

(c) Information about the marsh was even more inaccurate; the only ways off the beach on the front in which we were put down, were along the roads.

June 6th 1944.

1. At 0730 hrs on the morning of the 6th June 1944 five out of six LCT IVs carrying breaching teams comprising AVRE, Flaiks and Bulldozers touched down on German occupied France East of LE HAMEL.

The sixth LCT IV was unable to discharge its lane team owing to heavy seas and enemy shellfire putting the craft out of commission.

2. Craft touched down at approx half tide in heavy seas.

3. Beach obstacles comprised:-

- Element 'C' ) With Teller mines
- Tetrahedra ) and shell heads
- Ramp type Obstacles) attached.
- Hedgehogs.

Minefields and wire were encountered on the mainland.

In no cases, with the exception of the bad clay were beach obstacles troublesome and it was possible for all troops to by-pass the artificial obstacles.

4. The beach was fairly flat leading up to small sand dunes 8 to 6' high. Clay patches were present on the beach in varying depth and were another obstacle to tanks.

5. The craft did not touch down exactly at the places as planned. This was due to a slight sea mist rising when the LCT's were some 1000 - 2000 yards out from the shore making recognition of landmarks difficult. As a result all lane teams were landed to the EAST of the selected points by some 400 yds and the position of the teams detailed for lanes 2 and 3 were reversed.

6. Lane 1 Team did not land as LCT IV was hit before it could touch down. Tank Comd - E/Sjt Byrne and Cpl Middleton.

7. Lane 2 was unfortunately set down in Lane 3. Leading AVRE rolled out its matting and the Bobbin AVRE was not required to cover the bad ground.

The leading flail (Lt. Townsend-Green) began flailing at H.W.M., flailed some 20 yds inland and was bogged in the very marshy ground. The second flail (Cpl Barton) was not committed to the lane owing to the bad going and the troop leader (Lt. Townsend-Green) from the bogged tank took over command of this vehicle. As orders had been given that the ramp exit at the EASTERN end of LE HAMEL was vital this tank then proceeded across the beach towards this exit but unfortunately was bogged in the clay. This tank was subsequently hit three times by an 80 mm Fd gun sited at the EASTERN end of LE HAMEL to flail the beach.

The fascine AVRE on this lane reached H.W.M. and as it jettisoned its fascine a burst of MG fire killed the driver. The tank being gear slowly climbed the fascine and turned over on its side.

8. Lane 3. The team of this lane touched down roughly in its correct position and was thus on the wrong side of Lane 2. The Holy Poly laid its matting. The Bobbin AVRE was not required as the condition of the beach was good. The leading flail (Sjt Lindsay) began flailing at H.W.M. and flailed a path through the minefield on the mainland. On reaching the lateral road into LE HAMEL the flail turned right to carry out the task ordered in the support of the 1 HANTS. Unfortunately the attack on LE HAMEL did not go according to plan and this flail was destroyed in the town by A tk gun fire. Details cannot be ascertained as crew were wounded and returned to UK.

The second (Capt B. Taylor) flail -cheloned right of the leading flail passed almost through the minefield and was blown up by what was thought to be two mines connected on the same fuse.

Number of mines destroyed on this lane were eight. The fascine AVRE was not required in the breaching of this lane. Although the second flail was blown up in the lane it was possible for track vehicles to use it. It was subsequently used as a heavy track exit.

9. Lane 4. The team on this lane was put down some 400 - 500 yards EAST of its prearranged objective. The leading AVRE rolled out its matting and was followed by the Bobbin AVRE. Unfortunately the Bobbin AVRE was able to cross the bad ground without laying its matting and the AVRE tank comd did not therefore lay the matting



The first flail followed immediately behind the Bobbin was able to get across the clay but the second flail became bogged. The leading flail (Cpl Adams) having crossed the bad ground tried to find his objective but was unable to discover the correct place. He eventually made a gap through the minefield but became bogged in the marshy ground on the mainland.

The fascine AVREs were not required to lay their fascines on the initial breaching.  
 10. Lane 5. The Roly Poly AVRE laid its matting on leaving the LCT. It was then followed by the Bobbin AVRE which was not required to lay its matting as the clay patches were small and easily distinguishable.

The two flails (L/Sjt Poole and Cpl Roberts G.) then started flailing at H.W.M. and flailed a path through the minefield on to the lateral road and went towards the X rds at LES ROQUETTES. Some 200 yds from the cross roads a shell fell on to the road making a crater which proved to be a tank obstacle. The leading flail then called up the fascine AVRE which had followed the flail off the LCT and the fascine was used for filling the crater. The flails then continued up to the X rds turned left and flailed a 16 ft gap in the infantry through the minefield on the SOUTHERN side of the road in order that the infantry could get through their carriers and wheels. Subsequently a gap was also made in a minefield further inland for the Sp Arty and the AA gunners.

The final flail off this LCT carrying the Breach Comd (Capt. H.P. Stanyon) was struck on the petrol tank by a heavy mortar or gun shell which pierced the petrol tank.

The tank immediately went up in flames. The lane to the lateral road was completed at approx H plus 15.

11. Lane 6. The Roly Poly AVRE laid its matting and was followed by the Bobbin which laid its matting over a bad patch of clay. The two flails then crossed the matting and started flailing at H.W.M.

The two flails (Sjt Marsh and Cpl Roberts A) were successful in breaching the minefield up to the lateral road and the lane was open at approx H plus 22. The fascine AVRE was used to place its fascine in the crater mentioned in para 10 to make a more effective bridge. The leading flail having breached the minefield was then ordered to rally and come to 231 Inf Bde res.

The second flail was used to develop the single tank gap mentioned in para 9 above but unfortunately was bogged in the marshy ground through the lane which had been made.

12. Subsequently the Sqn reverted to Comd of 31 Inf Bde and came under control of Regt HQ. The Sqn harboured for the night D/D plus 1 on the outskirts of MEUVAINNE.

13. On D plus 1 work went on preparing the tanks for further action and recovering the bogged tanks. AT 1200 hrs on this day the Regt was ordered to a fwd rally at BRECY where it remained for the night D plus 1/D plus 2.

14. Throughout the whole of the action on D day casualties were as follows:-

Vehicles.

- (a) By enemy action 3
- (b) Stuck in mud and subsequently inundated by the Sea owing to failure of Beach Rec. 2

Personnel.

Killed.

- Officers - NIL.
- ORs - NIL.

Wounded.

- Officers - NIL.
- ORs - Sjt Lindsay,  
L/Sjt Butcher  
Tpr Cooper  
Tpr Shaw.

Missing believed wounded.

- Tpr Field.
- Tpr Gray.

D day continued.

On completion of the initial assault operation the Sqn rallied in an orchard on the Southern outskirts of VER SUR MER. Five Crabs had reached the rally by 1400 hrs when the Sqn was ordered forward to VILLERS le SEC..

Before reaching there the four Crabs commanded by Major Sutton with the comds Lt.Hoban, Lt.Pear, Cpl McCall were ordered SOUTH of CREULLY. On passing through CREULLY information came over the air that 30 - 40 German tanks were moving NE from RUCQUEVILLE 3 miles away.

The four Crabs took up position on the high ground on the Southern outskirts of CREULLY where they were joined 1 hr later by 7 more Crabs of the Sqn which had been recovered from the beaches. However, the enemy tanks did not come within range and the battle passed a mile to the SOUTH.

At midnight the Sqn moved back just South of CREPON where it leagured for the night.

D plus 1.

At 0545 hrs the Sqn moved alongside a hedge on the immediate South outskirts of CREPON. At approx 0610 hrs a shell exploded in the trees above the Sqn followed by SAA fire. A second shell fell shortly after by the Sqn Ldr's tank killing Tpr Birch and wounding Cpl Adcock. A third fell wounding the Sqn Ldr, Cpl Gillespie and L/Cpl Lennon. The Sqn Ldr spotted the gun a 10 cm Fd gun about 150 yards away, and jumped on to Lt.Hoban's tank which put the gun out of action with one shot, killing one member of the crew and wounding the rest. Cpl Baldwin carried out First Aid most efficiently and coolly under fire.

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The Sqn remained just South of CREPON all day, petrol being fetched from the Beach Group. In the evening our D day 2 lorries arrived. Orders were received in the afternoon to join RHQ and B Sqn at BRECY the following morning.



INTRODUCTION.

On May 44 A Squadron were ordered to provide 22 Flails for 1 Corps which were to be allocated as follows:-

12 to 27 Armoured Brigade to come under command of Major Clifford of 22 Dragoons and for the initial landing to be divided into two parties, one of eight flails under Major Wallace and the other of four under Capt Beaumont.

5 to 266 Forward Delivery Squadron. This in fact was 1 Tp under Lt. Ingram.

5 to 'C' Sqn Canadian Armoured Delivery Regiment. This was 3 Tp under Lt. D. S. Squirrell and subsequently Lt. A. K. Dick.

The above parties waterproofed their vehicles at Thorpeness Suffolk and proceeded from there by Transporter to Concentration Areas as follows:-

Major Wallace's party to Bolney, Sussex with Staffordshire Yeomanry.

Capt Beaumont's party and 1 Tp to Petworth Sussex.

3 Tp to Gosport, Hants.

The remainder of A Squadron under Capt P. J. S. Squirrell and consisting of one crew of Sqn HQ, 5 Tp (Rollers) and all administrative personnel and vehicles less Sqn Ldr's Jeep, with driver and three fitters remained behind in Thorpeness.

After about a week in Concentration Areas parties moved to Marshalling Areas and on 3rd June Major Wallace's party left their Marshalling Area at Stanmer Park and embarked in LCT's at Newhaven. Two flails were allotted to each LCT and loading went very well, particularly in view of the fact that crews had not done it before, and was completed by 2000 hrs.

4th June The convoy of LCT's was to have sailed at 0800 hrs but this was cancelled, probably due to bad weather in the Channel. In the late afternoon crews were ferried back to the Marshalling Area Camps for a wash and hot meal, returning on board about 2100 hrs.

5th June Convoy put out from Newhaven starting at 0800 hrs and anchored outside for an hour or two. Convoy then sailed and was under way for the rest of the time. The sea was rather choppy and most of the men (and officers) felt seasick. Maps were issued during the evening when it was known that the operation was definitely on.

6th June (D day). Sea was still rather rough and personnel not in very good form for the coming operation. H hour was 0725 and 8 Flails of Major Wallace's party landed at H plus 3 hours 5 minutes on Queen White Beach at Hermanville-sur-Mer. LCTs were shelled while ~~xxxxxx~~ coming ashore and at least one destroyed. On landing there was considerable congestion at the beach exits which were under mortar and ~~xxxxxx~~ possibly field gun fire. However all flails eventually reached Assembly Area with Staffs Yeomanry just S of Hermanville. On moving forward two flails commanded by Cpl Coop and L/Cpl Davis were knocked out by 88 mm fire from the West. Cpl Coop's tank went on fire and two members of the crew, Tpr Woodhouse and Tpr Kelly, wounded, the former seriously. Lt. Bullock's tank was also hit and the jib and 75 mm gun damaged but was able to proceed. The advance continued as far South as Bieville where the Staffs Yeomanry took up battle positions and engaged about ten enemy tanks reported to be Tigers but later turning out to be Mark IV's disguised as Tigers; about six of them were knocked out. The flails were given the task of covering the left flank and did not actually engage the enemy. The positions occupied were shelled intermittently and had to be changed from time to time. During the previous advance to Bieville Cpl Loveday's tank was fired on and intaking avoiding action went over a sharp drop and damaged the rotor and jib and Cpl Loveday himself became a casualty owing to the turret flap crashing onto his hand and breaking three fingers. A large force of British gliders were seen to land to the East during the late afternoon. About midnight flails went into close harbour with Staffs Yeo and refuelled about 0200 hrs. Of the eight ~~XXXXXX~~ flails of Major Wallace's party five were now left and these had been joined by two of the 22 Dragoons which had taken part in the initial assault at H hour, bringing the total up to seven. Major Clifford was travelling in an ordinary Sherman V.

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It was a long and exciting day, which one felt to be something historic on which one could look back in due course and from the comfort of an armchair feel glad that one had been there.

Capt Beaumont with four flails landed at H plus 5 1/2 hrs with the East Riding Yeomanry and received a slight shrapnel wound on one hand on the beach. Apart from this, this party suffered no casualties and harboured the night at Colleville-sur-Orne.

June 7th. All flails of Major Wallace's party were withdrawn into Brigade reserve at Hermanville-sur-Mer where they joined up with a number of flails from 22 Dragoons who had taken part in assault on the beach. Snipers were still active in the town, which was bombed during the night.

June 8th. Major Wallace and Lt. Hall with four flails took part in mopping up an enemy strongpoint at ~~Col~~ Hermanville-sur-Mer, which was giving trouble to our forces. The defences included at least one 88 mm which had accounted for two AVRE's and a number of flame throwers. Two platoons of Infantry from B Coy South Lancs Regt and two SP guns also took part in the attack which was preceded by an artillery bombardment which probably destroyed the 88 mm before the attack was launched. The job given to the flails was to clear a path through a minefield just South of the gas works in order that the SP guns could advance and engage the enemy positions. In fact the minefield consisting of light French mines was only 200 yards in depth and the SP guns could easily have engaged the targets without entering the lane. Flails and SP guns engaged enemy in houses and in the open with HE and Browning and parties of the enemy started surrendering. The minefield proved not great obstacle and one tank flailed through a thick belt of wire at the end of it. Prisoners totalled about 80 including three officers from 736 Infantry Regiment. Two men from one of our own Commandos captured on D day were released. All prisoners were handed over to B Coy South Lancs for disposal. The number of enemy dead and wounded is not known, there were no casualties to the flails and infantry losses were light.

9th June. Major Wallace and Lt Hall with four flails proceeded to Cazelle and came under command of East Riding Yeomanry for an attack being launched from Anisy on Cambes Galmanch and St Certest. Contact was reestablished with Capt Beaumont's party which was still attached to the East Riding Yeo. Attack secured first objective but no minefields were encountered and flails were kept in reserve. Sgt Wilson however did a useful job of work with his tank in recovering the crew from a tank of the East Riding Yeo which had been hit and set on fire.

10th and 11th June. All flails of Major Wallace's and Capt Beaumont's parties were withdrawn and concentrated in Brigade reserve SW of Hermanville-sur-Mer in an area literally scattered by the Germans with Butterfly Bombs. Attempts were made to flail these but only two were exploded in this way, possibly the remainder were blinds as many appeared to have exploded on landing. Sqn remained in this location until 15th June during this time area was heavily bombed at night and troops learned to dig themselves in well. On 13th June flails were asked to clear an enemy minefield surrounding a strongpoint now in our hands SOUTH of Ouistieham. This would have involved flailing an area containing 400 lorry ~~loads~~ loads of mines and was not considered a worth while task in view of the casualties which would have certainly occurred to the jibs and rotors and tanks themselves. In the end two lanes of one tank width each were made into the strongpoint and the RE were very satisfied. Teller, Belgian, anti tank and 'S' mines were all encountered but no major damage was done to the flails.

15th June. A Sqn rejoined remainder of regiment in harbour at Juay Monday with 19 Flails including five from 3 Tp and two from 1 Tp which were picked up with their crews from Forward Delivery Sqn on the way over. Two flails were left in 27 Armoured Brigade Workshops awaiting repairs with two men per crew.



D day continued.

On completion of the initial assault operation the Sqn rallied in an orchard on the Southern outskirts of VER SUR MER. Five Crabs had reached the rally by 1400 hrs when the Sqn was ordered forward to VILLERS le SEC.

Before reaching there the four Crabs commanded by Major Sutton with the comds Lt. Hoban, Lt. Pear, Cpl McCall were ordered SOUTH of CREULLY. On passing through CREULLY information came over the air that 30 - 40 German tanks were moving NE from RUCQUEVILLE 3 miles away.

The four Crabs took up position on the high ground on the Southern outskirts of CREULLY where they were joined 1 hr later by 7 more Crabs of the Sqn which had been recovered from the beaches. However, the enemy tanks did not come within range and the battle passed a mile to the SOUTH.

At midnight the Sqn moved back just South of CREPON where it leagued for the night.

D plus 1.

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10 Jun

Appx B.

WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS SPECIAL ORDER OF THE DAY.

The Commanding Officer congratulates all ranks of B and C Squads on their exceedingly stout performance in the very forefront of the battle on the beaches.

The determination and fine fighting spirit shown in this, the Regiment's first action of the war undertaken under hazardous and adverse conditions, were most praiseworthy, and give every promise of further successes in the future.

The following messages have been received:--

FROM: General Sir Bernard L. Montgomery.

PERSONAL FOR GEN GRAHAM. General Montgomery wishes to pass heartiest congratulations on achievement of 50 Div to yourself and all ranks 50 Div. Corps Commander also adds congratulations.

FROM: 30 Corps Commander.

personal for Commander 50 Div from Commander 30 Corps. please congratulate all ranks most heartily on first class fighting performance in the face of very adverse sea conditions and stout enemy opposition. All our objectives have now been gained and vigorous reconnaissance thrusts are now proceeding towards vital spots. Well done indeed 50 Div. Gradely Lads Champion.

Commanders 69 and 231 Brigades have also asked that their gratitude for the excellent performance of Westminster Dragoons under their command may be made known to all concerned.

App B. 113

REGIMENTAL ORDERS - PART ONE  
-by-  
Lt. Col. W.Y.K. Blair Cliphant, MC.,  
COMMANDING WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS  
(Royal Armoured Corps.

Saturday 10 Jun 44

Issue No. 1.

1. ROUTINE. While in present Area, daily routine will be as follows:-

Reveille 0600 hrs  
Breakfast 0700 hrs  
1st parade 0800 hrs  
Dinner 1245 hrs  
Tea 1700 hrs  
Supper under Sqn arrangements.

2. GUARDS. Will continue as already detailed. All personnel will know the password for the day.

3. CHURCH SERVICES - Sunday 11 Jun 44.  
A Voluntary Church of England service will be held on Sunday 11 Jun 44 in the Barn 50 yds from HQ at the following times:-  
Holy Communion 0800 hrs  
Morning Service 1000 hrs.

4. MAIL. Mail will be censored by Sqn officers and handed to the Adjt in bundles labelled to Base Censor by 1200 hrs daily. Postal addresses remains unchanged. 1200

5. HYGIENE & SANITATION.  
NO water in France is safe to drink, whatever the inhabitants may say, unless either:  
(a) Certified by an MO  
(b) Sterilized with tablets provided.  
(c) Boiled.

Normally empty water cans will be handed into HQS daily by 0900 hrs for refilling.

Personnel going sick will be reported to HQ by 0800 hrs daily for arrangements to be made.

Severe disciplinary action will be taken against personnel failing to use proper latrines.

6. DISCIPLINE.  
No person will, except on duty, proceed more than 100 yards from camp perimeter, i.e. nearest vehicle in camp and then only in daylight. ALL personnel leaving the camp area at all for any purpose will always be armed.

7. CAPTURED MATERIAL AND EQUIPMENT.  
Nothing whatever may be kept unless permission has been received by an officer to do so. All papers in particular will be handed at once to an officer. To keep these may mean delay in obtaining important information.

8. CODES.  
All codes, link signs and pass words will now change at midnight GMT (i.e. 0200 B).

Field,  
NJS/DEP.

*W. Y. K. Blair*  
Lieutenant,  
Adjutant Westminster Dragoons,  
Royal Armoured Corps.

Appx C 114  
Appx C

Map ✓  
back, slides

1101 13/6

TOP SECRET

COPY No 11

50 (N) DIVISION Operation Instruction No. 6

12 JUNE 44

1. SITUATION.

The general situation is favourable for 7 Armd Div to pass round the westerly flank of 17 LEHR Div, and operate behind them in the direction of VILLERS BOGAGE.

7 Armd Div and one Bn 131 Inf Bde is being disengaged this afternoon and assembling in the area just West R.AURE South BAYEUX.

2. 50 (N) DIV.

a) The task of 50 (N) Div in this operation is to maintain the firm base from incl la BELLE 7669 - Pt 103 8570 wood 8973 and to contain the enemy on this front.

b) Under Comd 50 (N) Div forthwith :-

- 8 Armd Bde
- 56 Inf Bde
- ~~131 Inf Bde (less one Bn)~~ *(Amendment)*
- 86 Fd Regt
- 147 Fd Regt
- One Bty 73 A.Tk Regt

In Support :-

- Arty of 49 Div (up to one Fd Regt at present).
- 5 AGRA

3. METHOD

The firm base will be held by a series of defended localities as follows :-

a) Right 231 Inf Bde with under comd W Dgns

61 Recce Regt. 'C' Sqn 141 RAC

61 Recce Regt will have the task of recce on the right flank.

Bde area incl la BELLE EPINE 7669 la SENAUDIÈRE 7868 - BERNIERES - BOGAGE

7970 - BUTTE du GROS ARME 7971 - Xrds 7772.

In Support 74 Fd Regt  
289 A.tk Bty.

b) 56 Inf Bde with under comd one Bn 151 Inf Bde (other than 8 DLI)  
In Support 86 Fd Regt and 73 A.Tk Bty.

Area River crossing 836702 BUCHELS 8370 - the BOGAGE feature about rd  
Junc 812708 814698 wood 805690.

c) 69 Inf Bde with under comd one Regt 8 Armd Bde  
in support 90 Fd Regt and Arty 49 Div (being built up now)

99 & 288 A.Tk Btys.

Area present bn localities from incl Pt 103 8570 to wood 892731.



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d) 151 Inf Bde (less one bn)

One Bty 73 A.Tk Regt is located present brigade area as a Corps step. Bde will hold present area to which 8 DLI will move under arrangements 8 Armd Bde to day.

e) 8 Armd Bde less one regt will move when ordered to area West of road about 8074 - 8174, and will be in Divisional reserve prepared to operate in support of brigades in Div area.

4. Withdrawal from SAINT PIERRE.

The withdrawal of 147 Fd Regt from area just North of Pt 103 and 8 DLI from ST PIERRE will be coordinated between Comd 8 Armd Bde and Comd 69 Inf Bde.

8 Armd Bde will be responsible for the return of 8 DLI to 151 Inf Bde. A.Tk Arty in area ST PIERRE will be moved by 69 Inf Bde and will remain in support 69 Inf Bde.

5. 2 CHESHIRE

All MG Coys and Hy Mortar Pls revert to comd 2 CHESHIRE and will be in support of the Div front. Comd 2 CHESHIRE will coordinate with Bde Comds.

6. R.A.

Fd Regts will be regrouped under comd CRA. Gun area will be in present 151 Inf Bde area. Arty will support Inf Bdes as shown above. The fire of 5 AGRA will be available on Div front on call through CRA.

7. A.Tk

A.Tk btys will be in support as above and the a.tk layout will be coordinated under arrangements CRA.

8. LAA

25 LAA Regt (less one bty) will protect gun area. One Bty will protect exits BAYEUX.

9. R.E.

Fd Coys will revert comd CRE for work on main routes and will be prepared to support Inf Bdes as follows :-

- 295 Fd Coy ... CLUB Route 231 Inf Bde
- 233 Fd Coy ... SPADE Route 56 Inf Bde
- 505 Fd Coy ... CROSS Route 151 Inf Bde

TOP SECRET  
Copy No. 11..

50 (N) DIVISION OPERATION INSTRUCTION NO 7

12 JUNE 44

1. SITUATION

As the threat of the advance of 7 Armd Div round the enemy's Western flank makes itself felt it is quite possible that the enemy will draw out from the front particularly on our right. In this case he will be followed most vigorously by 50 (N) Div.

2. PLAN

(a) Phase 1.

Code word VIGOROUS

151 Inf Bde (incl 9 D.L.I.) which would revert from comd from 56 Inf Bde and with under comd

One Regt 8 Armd Bde  
In support - One A.Tk Bty  
One Coy MG 2 CHESHIRE  
One Hy Mortar Pl 2 CHESHIRE  
One Pl 505 Fd Coy  
86 Fd Regt 6 AVRE

will advance and secure the high ground and village of HOTTOT S266

(b) Phase II

Code Word ENTERPRISE

231 Inf Bde with under command

in support Det 141 RAC  
One Fd Regt  
One A.Tk Bty  
Pl 295 Fd Coy 6 AVRE

61 Recce Regt and W Dgns will come into Div Reserve area BERNIERES - BOCAGE 7970 from 0700 hrs 13 June 44.

231 Bde - Task to advance and secure the high ground Pt 154 7761 village of FEUGUEROLLES - SUR - SEULLES 8061.

56 Inf Bde with under comd one Fd Regt  
One A.Tk Bty  
One Pl 233 Fd Coy

will advance and seize the area Pt 123 8263 - les HOULLES 8563.

Phase II will start only when ordered by Div HQ using codeword as above.

3. 151 Inf Bde and attached tps will be prepared to move early 12 June to carry out Phase I.

4. Next location HQ 50 (N) Div area about 806750.

ACKNOWLEDGE by IMPORTANT Signal.

TGLC/LWB

TIME OF SIGNATURE 2310

METHOD OF ISSUE by LO to 7 Armd Div, 8 Armd Bde, 151 Inf Bde 231 Inf Bde 56 Inf Bde  
by SDR to W Dgns  
Remainder by DRIS 30 Corps 49 Inf Div 1 US Div 3 CDN Div Comd G  
AQ File Wardiary (2)

*H. C. ...*  
Colonel,  
General Staff,  
50 (Northumbrian) Division.