



D-DAY REMEMBERED

Regretably, a number of page references are incorrect and should be amended as follows:

- Contents page: Nos. 21 - 58 should be 22 - 59
- Page 2 note 1: For '35' substitute '36'
- Page 5 note 2: For '11' substitute '22' and for '56' substitute '59'
- Page 8 note 1: For '49' substitute '51'
- Page 14 note 1: For '47' substitute '48' and for '49' substitute '50 - 51'

Also Lt Ingram's initials on page 16 and the Contents page should be 'D F', and 'Trooper' Lawrenson on page 24 and the Contents page should be 'Corporal'.

RHWB

D-DAY REMEMBERED

**Personal Recollections
of Members of the Westminster Dragoons
(2nd County of London Yeomanry)
Who Landed in Normandy on 6 June 1944**

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WESTMINSTER DRAGOONS 6 JUNE 1944

EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Elements of B and C Squadrons of the Westminster Dragoons were included in the breaching teams which led the D-Day assault on Normandy; 8 flails from 2 and 4 Troops of A Squadron landed a few hours later. "Normandy Landing" is the first of the WWII Battle Honours won by the regiment.

In 1994 when I was preparing to revisit Normandy and parade with the Regimental Association banner before HM The Queen at the 50th Anniversary commemoration at Arramanches, I came across a book called "Voices from Normandy" which consisted largely of first-hand accounts of D-Day; amongst these were two from members of the Westminster Dragoons. This gave me the idea of collecting together, before it was too late, as many such personal accounts as I could from members of the regiment who had taken part in the historic events of 6 June 1944; this booklet is the result.

I have done a minimum of editing, as far as possible leaving contributors' own words to tell their tales - even where there is more than one account of the same event, sometimes not wholly consistent with each other. Some accounts cover events shortly before 6 June and early on 7 June, and I have included these where they seemed particularly interesting; but to keep my task manageable, I have had to resist the temptation to go further despite the many important actions in which the Westminster Dragoons were involved as flails or gun-tanks in the subsequent weeks and months in Normandy and beyond.

I hope this small collection of personal accounts will be of interest not only to wartime members of the Westminster Dragoons, but also to their successors in the current HQ (Westminster Dragoons) Squadron of the Royal Yeomanry. Perhaps they may help to bring alive for others too what would otherwise be no more than some of the dry bones of history.

Richard Bullock
Vice President
Westminster Dragoons Association

TROOPER W J BLACKWELL
CO-DRIVER, 3 TROOP
B SQUADRON

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 Potter¹ 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's², 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

¹ 3 Troop Leader; his account is on page 35

² OC B Squadron and commander of one of the breaching teams; he was awarded the MC for his actions on D-Day.

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.

LIEUTENANT R H W BULLOCK
TROOP LEADER, 2 TROOP
A SQUADRON

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" Hall¹ 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

¹ His account appears on page 10.

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 vehicle¹ 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-driver² 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 5 pm - 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.

¹ This may well have been the Staffordshire Yeomanry MO's half-track - see page 19.

² Their accounts are on pages 11 and 56.

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" Peddie, 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.

LANCE CORPORAL R C EASTWOOD
LOADER/WT OPERATOR
B SQUADRON

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: See page 42; 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 Meauvaines where I believe we mustered four tanks out of the original thirteen.

A very hectic day.

LIEUTENANT M J 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 IO 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.¹

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.

¹ See page 49.

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 infantry¹ 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.

¹ Col W Y K Blair-Oliphant came from the Border Regiment.

LIEUTENANT W S HALL
TROOP LEADER, 4 TROOP
A SQUADRON

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 adrenalin, 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 bad 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 inch 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 dead 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 tracks 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 I 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.

LIEUTENANT B M S HOBAN
TROOP LEADER, 1 TROOP
C SQUADRON

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 à Kempis.

The familiar juddering thud as the LCT ran aground at La Riviere, 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 Bell¹, 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

¹ 2i/c C Squadron; see also pages 47 and 49.

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 from 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 Pear¹ 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 from 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 from 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.

¹ Another C Squadron Troop Leader

LIEUTENANT D C INGRAM
TROOP LEADER, 1 TROOP
A SQUADRON

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 Shermans 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.

TROOPER W H JENNINGS
LOADER/WT OPERATOR, 2 TROOP
A SQUADRON

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 Staffs 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 LCT 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 from 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 5 pm, 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 6 am 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 10 ft 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.

THE LATE TROOPER N T KELLY
CO-DRIVER, 2 TROOP
A SQUADRON

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 arrived¹). 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 crew² 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.)

¹ A whimsical reference to the cinema epic "D-Day 6th of June". Ed.

² Of 4 Troop - see W S Hall's account on page 10.

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 water's 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 SBA¹ 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.

¹ Sick Berth Attendant.

TROOPER E LAWRENSON
LOADER/WT OPERATOR
B SQUADRON

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.¹

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.

¹ In readiness for flailing, the gun had to point rearwards, in which position the turret prevented their hatches from opening.

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?

THE LATE TROOPER J MINOGUE
GUNNER
B SQUADRON

(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 judgement 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 judgement 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 Poole¹ shouted "You nearly blew my f_____g head off".

¹ The tank commander.

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 RE¹ 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.

¹ Commander of one breaching team.

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 Meuvaines, 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.

² A slightly different account of this incident is given by Lt Potter - see page 44.

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.²

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 Brecy, 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 Brecy 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 rolled 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 tin 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 Brecy 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

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 13th/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.

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.

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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, ebbd, 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 NCO's 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.

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 Riviere) 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?

TROOPER C T SMITH
DRIVER 1 TROOP
C SQUADRON

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's¹ 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 followed 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 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 surrendered². 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"

¹ His account is on page 14.

² Tpr H W J Smith's own account follows on page 50.

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

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 Bell¹. The sea was too rough for any amphibious tanks to be launched, so it was all in the hands of the landing craft.

¹ The tank commander and 2i/c of the breaching team, who was awarded the MC for the action described here.

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 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 bad 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.)

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 5 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 a 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 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 2" 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 suit-case! 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.

TROOPER J M WADEY
LOADER/WT OPERATOR, 1 TROOP
A SQUADRON

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 "compo" 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 Bernieres-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.

THE LATE TROOPER L WEBBER
LOADER/W/T OPERATOR
A SQUADRON 4 TROOP

(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 at page 10.)

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 "Tank Landing Craft"; 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 name¹ 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.

¹ Editor's Note: Hermanville-sur-Mer.

TROOPER G H W WOODHOUSE
DRIVER 2 TROOP
A SQUADRON

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 Kelly¹, a Liverpudlian 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

¹ His account is on Page 22.

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 2 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.

POSTSCRIPT

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.

RHWB

NOTE ON 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° 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 1 ¼ mph - slow walking pace.

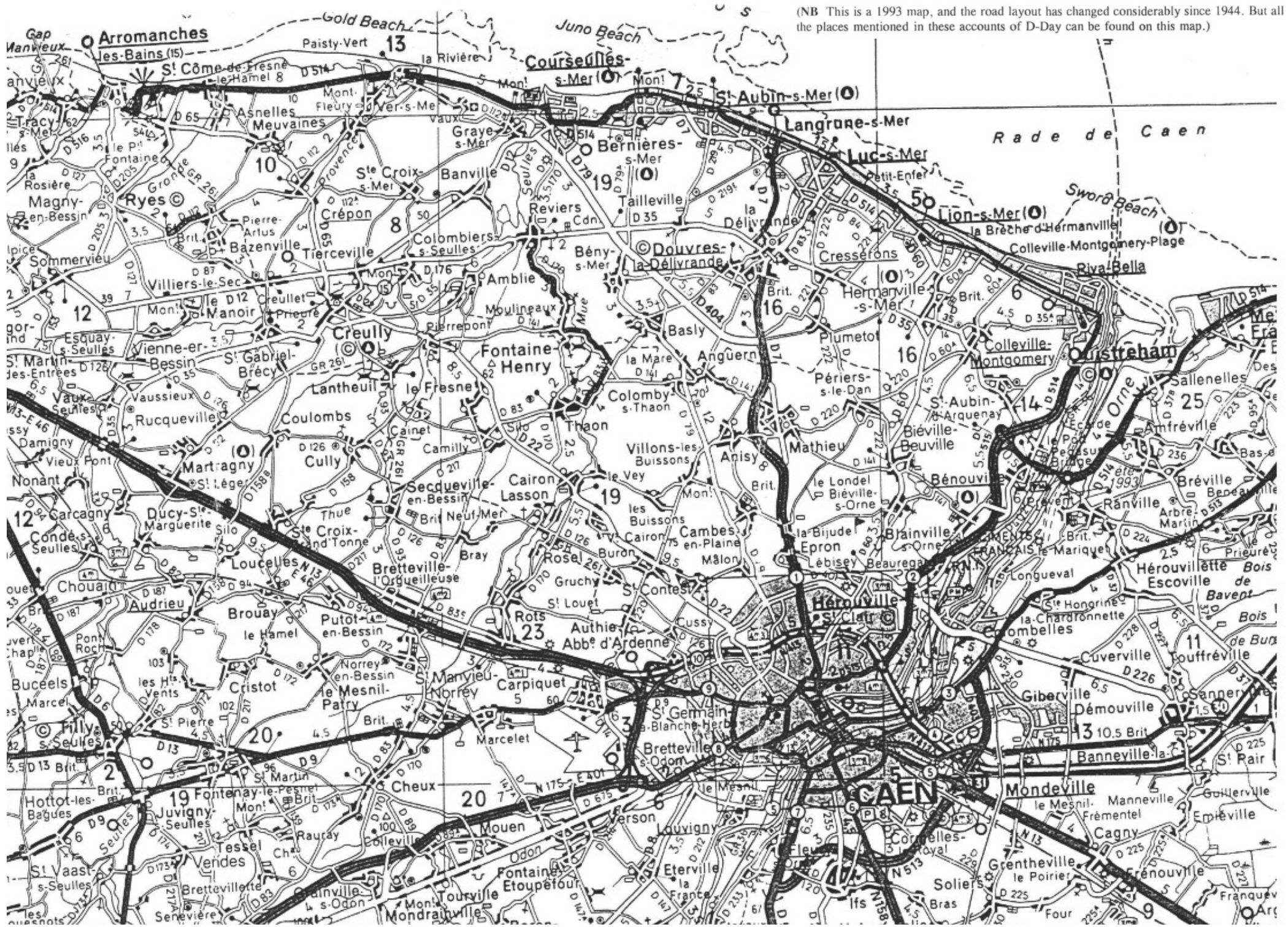
In its turret the Crab had the standard 75mm gun firing AP and HE, and a .300 Browning MG; on top it had a .5 Browning AA machine gun for the commander's use. The crew numbered 5 - commander, gunner, loader-WT operator, driver and co-driver, but the latter did not have the standard Sherman's hull-mounted .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.

GLOSSARY

<u>ARV</u>	Armoured Recovery Vehicle: a turretless tank used by fitters and REME recovering damaged or broken-down vehicles.
<u>AVRE</u>	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 to be 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).
<u>Churchill</u>	Heavily armoured British infantry tank on which AVRE was based.
<u>Crab</u>	Code name for flail tank based on US Sherman Mark V.
<u>DUKW ("Duck")</u>	Wheeled amphibious load-carrier (US).
<u>Flail</u>	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.
<u>LCR</u>	Landing Craft Rocket: LCT filled with rows of rocket launchers to attack beaches.
<u>LCT</u>	Landing Craft Tank: Flat-bottomed shallow draught vessel with ramp at front to land tanks on beach or in shallow water.
<u>LST</u>	Landing Ship Tank: Similar to LCT but much larger.
<u>Squadron</u>	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.
<u>Troop</u>	Smallest unit of a flail regiment, normally 5 tanks commanded by a subaltern.
<u>19 Set</u>	Standard tank wireless set, with 2 elements - 'A' Set for medium range communication and 'B' Set for short range (within troop).
<u>38 Set</u>	Infantry "back pack" wireless set; also used for communication between infantry and tanks.

Map of the British (including Canadian) sector of the invasion area.

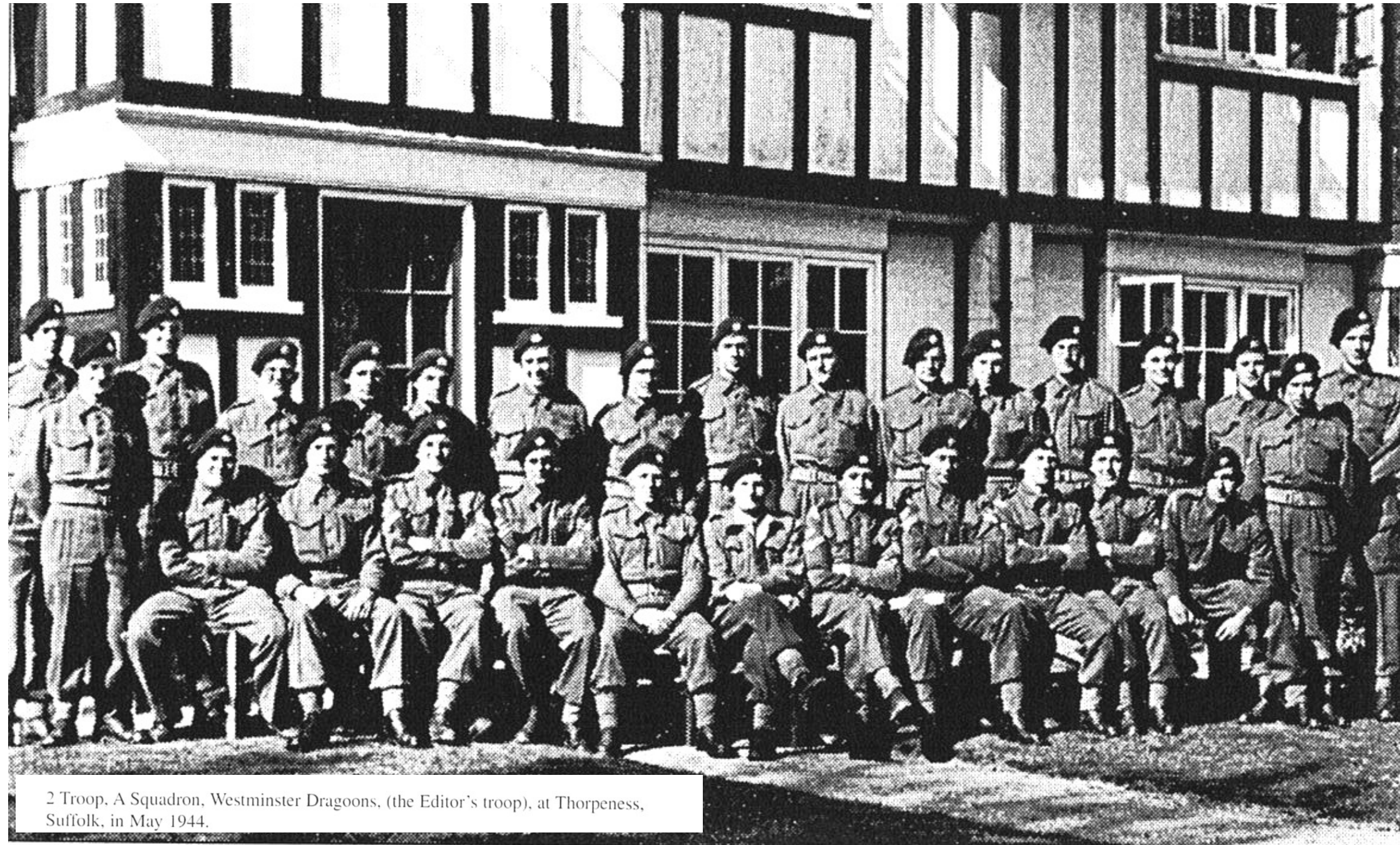
(NB This is a 1993 map, and the road layout has changed considerably since 1944. But all the places mentioned in these accounts of D-Day can be found on this map.)



ILLUSTRATIONS

- I - 2 Troop, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons, at Thorpeness, Suffolk, May 1944.
- II - The official caption to this photograph reads "AVRE Churchill Carpet-Layer Mark III comes ashore with a flail tank of C Squadron Westminster Dragoons opposite La Riviere". But the amount of smoke around the flail suggests to the Editor that it was one of those hit during the landing, possibly that of Sgt Birch or Cpl Rider - see page 185 of the Regimental History. (B 5113)
- III - The flail of Cpl McCall (C Squadron) stuck in the clay of the beach and abandoned on 6 June 1944. (B 5141)
- IV - The official caption reads "This picture is thought to be of A Squadron (8 flails) Westminster Dragoons, landing on Queen Sector of Sword Beach with the tanks of the Staffordshire Yeomanry just north of Lion-sur-Mer" on 6 June 1944. (MH 2024)

Note: Photographs II - IV are reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London, and the numbers in brackets above are the IWM reference numbers.



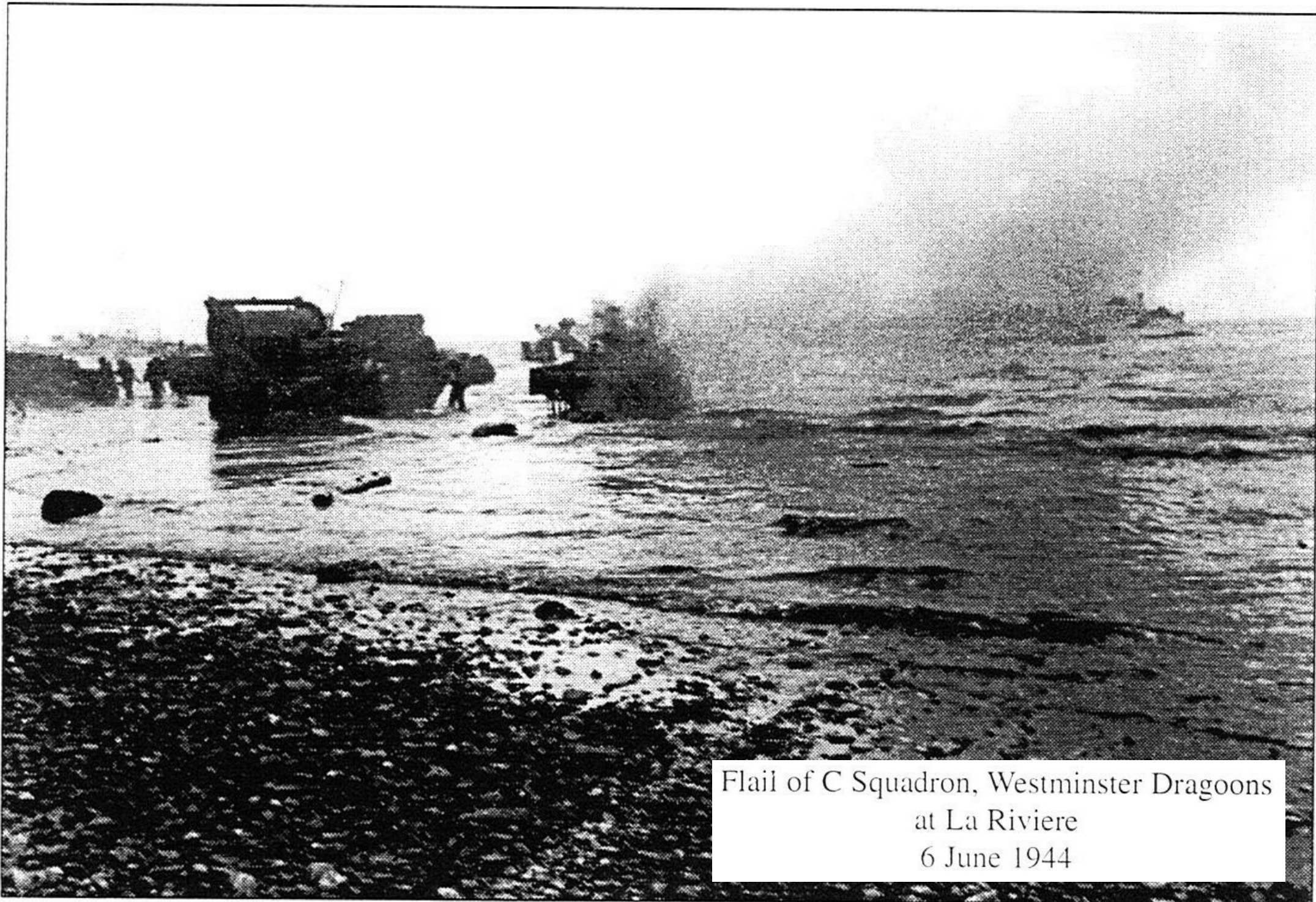
2 Troop, A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons, (the Editor's troop), at Thorpeness, Suffolk, in May 1944.

Back Row - Left to Right

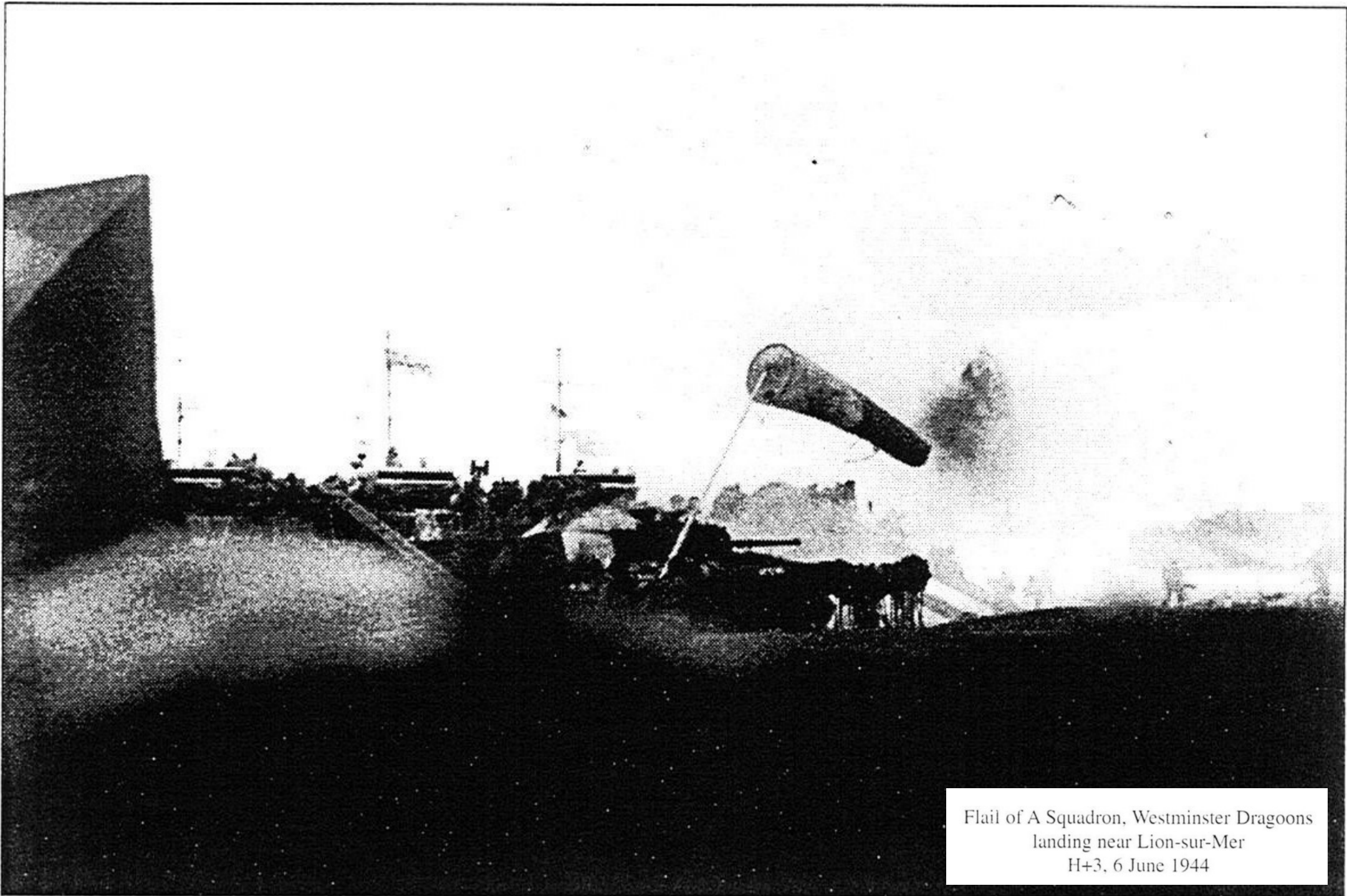
Arbour, Gibson, Fisher, Pimblett, Woodhouse*, Kelly*, Jennings*, Cpl White, Mercer, McLean, Peddie, Radford, Stedall, Mayes, Reveley, Hardwick.

Front Row - Left to Right

Allen, Davies, Cpl Hunt, Cpl Loveday, Sgt Wilson, Lt Bullock*, Cpl Coop, Cpl Easterbrook, Wells, (Unknown), Thorpe.



Flail of C Squadron, Westminster Dragoons
at La Riviere
6 June 1944



Flail of A Squadron, Westminster Dragoons
landing near Lion-sur-Mer
H+3, 6 June 1944