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D-Day: A Personal Account

A seagull with good night vision, soaring high above the English Channel on the night of June 5th and 6th 1944, would have witnessed a scene worth of passing into seagull legend. Thousands of ships and craft, streaming from ports along the English coastline, before forming up in mid-Channel, then setting their collective bows along a 60-mile front, towards the Normandy coast, along which the Nazi fortress chain guarded and imprisoned the heart of France; while between the seagull and the stars fleet of aircraft, some bearing paratroopers, others towing gliders, were headed in the same direction.

But the viewpoint of an Able Seaman, on a tank landing craft carrying a cargo of five DD tanks and their crews, is much more limited, largely impeded by steel walls, the bulkheads of the crews quarters, aft of the engine room; quarters about the size of a modest lounge room, but with less head space, where, with nine other crew members, he lives, eats, and at night slings his hammock, one among the row, like white cocoons.

Exit from the mess deck is via a steel ladder, leading up to a narrow corridor alongside the galley where, with only the training his mother gave him, he is rostered, with other crew members, to cook meals when the ship's cook is off duty.

Directly opposite is the officer's wardroom, occupied by the craft's commander, Lt. Lane and Midshipman Smith. The Skipper, because of his breezy personality and fatherly concern for his crew, had earned their respect and affection. His fellow officer, a decent enough chap, has the disadvantage of being around the same age as most of us, about 19; a difficult gap to bridge.

Forward of the corridor is the wheelhouse, where the Able Seaman's view is expanded by a single porthole in front of the wooden-spoked steering wheel, plus portholes to port and starboard. The Coxswain takes charge of the wheel entering and leaving port and when beaching. A wiry Geordie, several years older than most of us, the Coxswain is the naval equivalent of an army NCO, overseeing the men and responsible to the officers. At sea he is relieved at the wheel by other seamen, as rostering during the four hours on and four hours off routine when out of harbour; the helmsman receiving orders from the duty officer on the bridge above, via a copper voice pipe, funnelled at each end, from the bridge to a point just above the wheel.

To the right of the wheel is the telegraph, to convey to the two stokers in the engine room below, the officer's orders; slow, half or full ahead, or astern, or port and starboard engine independently. (Maritime movies focus on ships telegraphs at crucial moments) There is also a compass slightly above the helmsman's eye-level, to steer by, should the bridge officer so order.

Forward of the wheel-house, engine room and Bridge, yawns the great cavern of the tank deck, in which, on this epic day, squat five DD Tanks, Shermans, each skirted with a concerting of canvas which, when inflated by rubber pillars, convert the tanks into rather ungainly boats, propelled via a shaft off their engines. Their crews are seasoned gladiators from other battlefields in

other countries. Their French objective is Bayeaux, before fighting their way towards Germany.

Entry and exit to and from the tank deck, for the LCT crew is through a small hatch, then down a steel ladder. Exit and entry for the tanks is via the ramp, a great ribbed slab of steel at the blunt bow of the craft. This is raised and lowered by steel cables hauled up and lowered down by winches housed partly under cover each side of the bow, operated by seaman bending their backs to steel handles, ratchets clattering on cogs as the ramp is slowly raised; the ratchets being released for the swift descent of the ramp to the full extent of supporting chains. Down here in the tank deck, the seaman's view is enclosed by steel walls until the lowered ramp provides a scene of the immediate forward area.

The dress circle seat of surrounding panorama is the bridge. It is also the most exposed. The Skipper presides here, bending over the copper funnel of the voice-pipe passing instructions to the wheelhouse and using a megaphone to call instructions to the men on the winches. The 2nd Lieutenant gravitates between Bridge, ramp and kedge anchor operations. Also present on the Bridge is the signaller, "Bunts", Bill Dyer, trained in the use of Morse code and signal flags (bunting).

Behind the Bridge is the smokestack, belching diesel fumes, and aft of that, to port and starboard, are mounted two 20mm Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns, courtesy of neutral Sweden, who democratically sold their weapons to both sides of the conflict. I was one of the two designated Oerlikon gunners, but the only chance I might have seized to get serious with it was months later, when, while ferrying supplies across the Channel, A German V1 "Buzz-bomb" flew low overhead. But it had come and gone before we realised what the damn thing was. Londoners could have told us.

These guns are screened against firing forwards, to prevent decimating the smokestack and decapitating the Skipper. Ammunition lockers flank the area, which is patrolled by the man on watch duty. Recalling hours spent on watch in this area, I wonder how we survived the diesel fumes from the funnel, let alone what the enemy chose to hurl at us. On one night duty at this station, wearied by 4 hours on, 4 off rosters and dazed by the fumes, I literally fell asleep on my feet, awakening to find myself prone on the deck.

Peering over the ammunition lockers, to the after deck below, the watchman looks directly down on the capstan, a grey, electrically-powered winch, round which is wound a steel cable, leading to the kedge anchor on the stern of the craft. On the run in to the beach the kedge crew, on orders from the Bridge, plunges the kedge to the sea bed, to facilitate, in conjunction with reversed engines, withdrawal from the beach when the cargo is disembarked.

Now, in the shrouded darkness of this momentous night, the Skipper can, in slight measure, relax, His craft, one of 12 in the 15th Flotilla, is surging along in line-ahead formation (follow my leader). The seaman at the helm has his instructions; follow the faint blue light of the craft directly ahead. In peace-time, the light was white, designated as being visible to a certain number of compass degrees. In wartime, blue is more discreet.

Of that night's voyage across the Channel, I retain only faint memories of tense, anticipatory darkness, faint blue slights swaying ahead, a sense of immense presence, of the armada around us and the majestic sense of purpose behind this voyage. As a teenager living in outer London, in

Kingston-on-Thames, where the Hawker aircraft factory may have been of passing interest to the Luftwaffe, I knew the drone of their planes, the sound of their falling bombs, the lift and surge of the earth as they struck. It now felt so good to be part of the great retribution, the liberation of Europe, the final demolition of Hitler's "Thousand year" Reich. Were we apprehensive? Of course. Anybody who says they weren't in this situation is a liar or mad.

I don't recall sleeping during the night, but the accustomed 4 on, 4 off, would have deemed it sensible to nap. My next clearest memory was of action stations at dawn, revealing to our astonished eyes more ships and craft of myriad designs than the mind could grasp. **AND THE NOISE!**

The air shuddered with gunfire, explosions that pummelled the senses as we set to our allotted tasks; one man each side of the bow, unwinding the wheels to release the dogs securing the ramp, before joining crew beneath, manning the winches, while others stood by the capstan.

The DD tanks were, of course now poised for action, their canvas skirts hoisted to just below the muzzle of their guns; engines roaring. Responsibility for their launch now rested on the shoulders of the Skipper, manoeuvring his craft, via the voice pipe to the wheel house to engine room, closer, closer to the beach, to give the tanks and crew the best chance, with the least water to cover before hitting the beach, finally bringing the craft to as steady a position as possible, before bellowing over his megaphone, **'DOWN RAMP!'**

The winch crews, coordinating their efforts under the 2nd Lieutenant's guidance, lowered the ramp to the extent of their supporting chains, just above sea level, allowing the first two tanks, one behind the other, to rumble up to, then, cautiously, into the heaving sea, before wallowing away, propellers churning, impossibly supported by those frail yards of canvas.

Fascinated by their departure to the battleground beyond (or was it interest in the partially broken bottle of um they left behind?) I was now standing alongside the starboard flank of the third tank when a German shell, probably a mortar, landed alongside the tank's port flank.

TIP; If you must get this close to an exploding shell, make sure there's a bloody great tank between you and it. All I got was a bit of the blast at my legs through the tracks, plus ringing in the ears. But one other crew member was less lucky.

As the shell landed, our cook, "Cookie", was bending down to exit the tank deck hatch, thus exposing to the enemy his rear end, which was punctured by shrapnel from the exploding shell. Discussing this later, perhaps unsympathetically, we thought it typical of Cookie to get wounded in such an area. A useful pianist, he often entertained us in the pubs, but quirkily insisted on capping his performance with a jazzed up version of the National Anthem, which was apt to bring down the wrath of the monarchally reverent.

But now, apart from bandaging and bedding Cookie down till he could be deposited on a hospital ship, we had other serious concerns, namely, the shell had shredded the canvas surround of the third tank, making it unfloatable, I bellowed this news up to the Bridge while trying to untangle wire cable that had been blown among the tank tracks. Visions of that tank towing us to Berlin didn't bear thinking about.

After confirmation of the damage by the 2nd Lieutenant, the Skipper's prompt response was, **"UP RAMP. WE'RE GOING IN TO THE BEACH!"**

This was probably good news to the battle-hardened tank crews, who had been smiling tolerantly down from their turret at this young sprog, using language his mother would have boxed his ears for, as he hauled out the cable tangled among the tank tracks, before joining the winch crew. To the tank blokes, roaring off the ramp on to dry land would have seemed preferable to navigating a tank incongruously converted to boat, through unstable sea.

Nevertheless, the beach ahead was murderously spiked with the beach mines that the Skipper had to thread his craft through, if possible.

It wasn't. As we surged through the obstacles, without kedge cable streaming behind us, a beach mine blasted a hole in our port side, already damaged by the shell, flooding tanks on that side and splitting the inner bulkhead of the tank deck, through which water was now spurting. But we were on the beach.

"DOWN RAMP, DOWN, DOWN, DOWN!"

And secretly, inside our heads, "Let's get these tanks off and get the bloody hell out of here". But spare a though here, for the tank crews. Our job in delivering them was all but done. These blokes had theirs ahead of them; all the way to Germany. Our fervent wishes went with them as they clattered down the ramp and growled up the beach. Our craft so much lighter now, we turned to the winches, hauling up the ramp, while the kedge crew stood by the capstan, preparing to wind in the kedge, and the engine room crew awaited the telegraph signal to go astern.

Then we were rammed on our port quarter by another LCT which came careering in, ripping away some of the stanchions supporting that side of the bridge, before scraping along our port side, seeking to identify the Skipper guiding the apparently feral craft, all I could see of his presence was the peak of his cap and a telescope, peering above the Bridge rail.

This, when our beleaguered Skipper was defiantly upright in full view of the enemy, was an affront, which I expressed to the offending cap and telescope at full volume, including references to lack of internal organs and doubtful parentage. Well what could he do? This was D-Day, all chums together. Plus I had a ready excuse; the rum the tank blokes left behind, putting temptation in the path of a young sprog wet from his Mum's tears.

But now another problem hindered our exit from the beach; our kedge anchor had fouled, possibly with that of the other craft. Again our Skipper was decisive. **"CUT THE CABLE!"** An axe, under the direction of the 2nd Lieutenant, rose and fell on the fraying strands of the cable, stretched through a hawsehole, then we were free, engines churning as we reversed off the beach. Months later, to demonstrate that the Royal Navy kept tidy accounts, the Skipper was charged with the cost of the lost kedge anchor.

But our immediate tasks were to hammer wooden wedges and cotton waste into the split tank bulkhead, to keep the spurting sea at bay, while searching for a hospital ship on which to deposit the wounded Cookie. This accomplished, we headed thankfully for home, albeit with a pronounced list to port because of the flooded tanks.

Homeward bound, there was now time to tune in the radio to the BBC to see if we were famous. After hearing the first sober and restrained account, I went excitedly to the Skipper "Sir, it's all on the radio, about D-Day."

Amiably, the Skipper asked "And did they say that 442 and its crew pushed on?"

Recalling the craft that rammed us, I replied, “No sir. They said we was bloody pushed on.”

He seemed to enjoy that, and shared our combined glow of achievement, as our craft limped back into harbour, the blackened hole in its side clearly advertising, to spectators lining the wharf, where we had been, and why. As Shakespeare put it in Henry V:

“He that outlives this day and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip toe when this day is nam’d…”

While LCT 442 was docked for necessary repairs, the crew were given leave to return home to families anxiously awaiting news of their sons. And if our high-flying seagull followed this crew member to a Surrey council house, where the key, in those trusting days, was still under the front door, the gull could have observed me turn the key and quietly enter, to see my father, a small but indomitable veteran of the war to end all wars, with ghosts of Flanders in his memory, seated in his chair by the window, peering through spectacles at newspaper stories and photos of the battle across the Channel, unaware that the one face he wanted to see was standing a few yards away.

“Dad”, I said quietly.

“BLOODY GOD ALMIGHTY!” As my father started up from his chair, to greet his first-born son, home safe and unharmed from Normandy.