

Arthur Henry Nions

D-Day Landings In Normandy June 6th 1944

I joined H.M.S. Empire Battleaxe on the 22 December 1943 in Glasgow, Scotland. We then carried out invasion exercises near Cromarty in the north of Scotland. We then sailed to Southampton after all the training. Three days before we left for the invasion we were sealed to ship, which means no shore leave. At 9pm on the 4th May 1944, we set sail from Southampton for the invasion of France. The weather was very rough with heavy seas and we were ordered to return to port. At 9pm on the 5th June 1944, we once again sailed from Southampton harbour towards the French coast.

In our flotilla were H.M.S. Glenearn, flotilla leader, Empire Battleaxe, second in line (commodore ship), Empire Broadsword and Empire Cutlass. All these ships in our flotilla were (L.S.I.'s), which stood for Landing Ship Infantry. The ships carried 16 L.C.A. (landing craft assault) and 2 L.C.P. (landing craft personnel). We carried on board Royal Marine Commando's and infantry troops.

We arrived off Gold beachhead before daylight on the 6th June, as one of the missions of the marines were to clear the beaches of mines and obstructions before landing our troops. As daylight broke over the beachhead, the sight of the masses of ships and landing craft was unbelievable, if not actually seen. We disembarked the Royal Marines into the landing craft; they went into the beach first to clear mines and obstructions. After that, all of the ships in our sector began loading the landing craft with troops; the sea was swarming with ships and landing craft of all types, carrying tanks and soldiers.

Whilst this was going on, the Royal Navy ships were bombarding the shoreline, also rocket launching craft (which carried 1000 rockets on each craft), we had 100 of these in our sector. They were firing their rockets onto the shore, it was so intense that it was thought that nothing could survive the barrage. All our troops disembarked, we then waited around until our entire flotilla had done the same. It was then that we were fired on by big shore gun batteries. Our ship was in their barrage pattern and it would only be a short time before they found their target. We lined up our 4-inch gun, which was on the rear of the ship onto the shore gun battery but did not fire because we estimated that the guns on shore were out of range of our 4-inch gun.

At that moment, the battleship H.M.S. Nelson came steaming past with its 9 sixteen inch guns swinging around onto the shore guns position. The 9 sixteen inch guns fired all together, (awesome sight), nothing was heard from the shore guns again. Nearby, a Norwegian destroyer was torpedoed, broke in half, and sank quickly.

Aircraft came steaming over us from Britain, some towing gliders full of troops to be dropped behind enemy lines; the sky was dark with aircraft of all types. After all the troops had been disembarked onto the beach, the landing craft began to return to their mother ships. One of our landing craft came alongside and we saw that it had a dead British soldier caught up in one of its propellers by his arm, his head was missing. The craft was hoisted on board and the body was taken away. The surviving landing craft were hoisted on board and our flotilla began to steam in line ahead towards England.

Suddenly, another shore gun battery began firing at us and the H.M.S. Glenearn was hit by one of the shells, but was able to carry on. A short time later the H.M.S. Broadsword struck a magnetic mine, it sank in less than half an hour. We picked up survivors and bodies from the water with our landing craft. We then set sail for England and arrived safely back in Southampton. That night, enemy V Rocket bombs began falling on Portsmouth and Southampton. One of them fell close to H.M.S. Cutlass and put it out of action. The Battleaxe was the only ship of our flotilla to come out unscathed. We did 5 more trips with troops to the French beaches. I left the ship in August 1944; it was nice not having to take the pep pills they gave you to keep awake, as at times we were closed up to action stations for 3 days without a break.