

Invasion of France

D-Day of the South, bad landing, air attack, meeting the Resistance, a bit of leave, more problems with Americans, party in Naples and home soon after four years abroad

August 1944 to November 1944

Landing near St Tropez

The sea was perfectly calm and my seasickness was easing when we woke up to a sunny day on the sixteenth of August. At eight thirty, we saw the first sight of land and we heard the sound of gunfire as we approached the beach between St Tropez and St Maxine. We were unable to go to our appointed beach because an earlier craft had been sunk at the approach. We were sent to a site to the west of St Maxine and all of the drivers were on the lorry deck, the bow doors were open and the seal was half way down to ventilate as we were travelling at full speed towards the beach, when there was a terrific bang and the front of the ship rose several feet in the air. Alarm bells were ringing, the seal and doors were closed, and the public address advised all troops to stay where they were until the cause was investigated.

After ten minutes, no leaks were found and it appears that we have hit a sand bank and there was no damage to the hull. Unfortunately we were driving in so hard, that we are unable to reverse off the sand bank unaided. The American built L.S.T.'s have an eight to ten feet draught, but this ship takes fifteen feet draught because of the extra space for the two extending ramps. On the other L.S.T.'s, the seal just drops down into the water and the lorries drive straight in.

A tug had been ordered but before it arrived, a small L.C.T. (Landing craft, Troops) reversed rapidly and hit the side of our ship and put a small hole just above the water line so we had to wait for that to be welded before we could be towed off. During this time shells were being fired in both directions and some were landing on the beach quite close to us. We were stuck about six hundred yards from the shore, so the ramps

were extended to their full length, dropped to sea level and the depth of the water checked and was found to be five feet three inches. If we had not cut those exhaust pipes, we would have probably got enough vehicles off to allow the ship to get off the sand bank unaided. How I wished that I had that Pilot Officer on board then, I would have willingly thrown him over the side of the ship and made him walk ashore.

At the beach, under air attack

A lot of heavy shelling took place at the beach and suddenly a small L.C.T. received a direct hit as it was reaching the end of its approach. We were still stuck on the sandbank and we became aware that some torsos, decapitated heads and limbs were floating by as a result of the shelling. Most of us were violently sick and thankful that we were not in that part of the shore. Two me 109's came over and strafed our L.S.T. but we were under cover, and as they passed we saw two Mustangs coming in fast behind them and we learnt later that they had destroyed one just off St Tropez.

The welding completed, the tug pulled us off the sand bank and we made our way to a deeper channel. This time we ran aground as planned and we started getting the lorries off. After about ten lorries had left the ship, I noticed that one lorry had stopped just as it left the first ramp, so I rushed out to see what went wrong. The engine refused to fire, so I called the next lorry along and told the driver to push the disabled lorry off the ship and park it off our line to the road. He then told me that he was a spare driver and he didn't think he could do it. Not wanting him to push it off and then get stuck in the water, I told him to get in the other seat and I would push the disabled lorry off.

A Corporal had been left to take over when I left to see what was wrong so the unloading could go ahead without me and I pushed the lorry to the beach out of the way. I decided to check the lorry and I found that the driver had just taken off the bonnet panel in the cab to make sure that all was ok and when he refitted the panel, the low tension wire from the coil to the distributor had become trapped and had shorted out the ignition. I always carry a roll of insulation tape and yellow wax crayon in my pocket, so I taped the wire, started the engine and told the driver to go to the site. I now realise that I am on shore and my lorry and trailer are on the ship. I undid my belt with my revolver and holster, lifted it above my head, took

my pay-book and wallet out of my shirt pocket and waded the forty yards back to the ramp.

The water was up to my chest by the time I reached the ramp and I had to climb up on to the frame of the ramp every time a lorry came along. However, I reached the end of the ramp without mishap and took charge of the unloading. Because we had lost time with the disabled lorry, I arranged for the next lorry to enter the first ramp when the first lorry had entered the second ramp. The Captain had said that he did not want two vehicles on the ramp at the same time but in this way we were able to get the vehicles off more quickly. We took forty-five lorries, some with trailers, off the ship in ninety minutes and that was better than the normal time allowed.

Getting ashore

After getting ashore for the first time on the continent of Europe, I found that we were in a box about four miles square and there were many similar sites along the coast from Marseilles to Nice. I changed into my dry uniform as soon as possible and I was thankful that this invasion was in August and that the sea was calm and very warm. We parked our lorries in groups of four or five covered them with camouflage nets and then went for a meal. The ground was too hard to dig slit trenches, so we just hoped that we would not need them. The Americans had occupied a site two fields away and left about one hundred lorries in two lines like Guards on parade. Two 109's came down and severely damaged most of the lorries. The shelling continued during the night but later in the next day, our armies had moved forward and the guns retreated out of range. We were all thankful that we had landed without any real problems. We slept under our lorries that night. .

The next day, three of us went into St Maxine to examine one of our lorries damaged in an accident, and after making temporary repairs, we decided to have a quick look around the town. In the town square there were a lot of people standing in a roped off area, and a dais was at one end. It appeared that they were holding a "Kangaroo Court" for the collaborators and as they were brought to the dais, the people decided if they were guilty and if so, their clothes were removed, their heads completely shaved and then they were made to run a gauntlet of angry locals who had knotted ropes, bicycle chains and sticks and they were

beaten all the way to the road. Some of the victims had very bad injuries and men and women were treated exactly the same irrespective of age, and unfortunately we could do nothing about it. We returned to camp, wondering how many people these collaborators had caused to be killed.

With the rapid increase in air-borne troops and further equipment and tanks, the move further north was very rapid and reasonably trouble free. We passed Aix-en-Provence, Avignon, Orange and Valence where we stayed for a short time. In the field next to our site, I saw a large lorry with some equipment on the back. The Lorry was a French Bernhart 20 ton lorry with a flat platform deck. It was eight feet wide and could seat five across the front bench seat. It was powered by a British Gardner Diesel engine and it would be ideal for our stores crates, plus towing a large trailer that I had acquired.

Meeting the Resistance

We removed the equipment and brought the vehicle back to the camp, where I checked it over. The lorry was painted with the usual spotted grey and green camouflage of the German army, but I thought that I would try it out on a stores run before making it an official vehicle. I was driving down a straight road when suddenly a Black Citroen Light Fifteen swung across the road blocking my path.

I had to stop and a man jumped on to the running board on the opposite side to me, and was waving a Mauser 9 mm automatic pistol at me. He said, "Je suis Macquis, Essence, S'il vous plait." Realising that the lorry was a diesel, I would be unable to give him any petrol so I said, "Pourquoi vous avez un pistol a moi? Je suis soldat Anglais cette Cameon est Mazout. Diesel, pas des essence." He waved the pistol at me again and then I saw the Cross of Lorraine painted on the door of his car. I pulled my tunic towards me, took out my pay book with the R.A.F. Badge on the cover and said "Regardez, je suis soldat anglais, le R.A.F., cette Cameon est mazout, sans essence" and then he said "Bon, je comprend , mais pourquoi vous avez un cameon Bosch?" "C'est la guerre mais vous etes un cochon francais". I drove for about two miles further and pulled into a lay by and started shaking. I had just realised that I had called him a "French Pig" when he had an automatic pointed at me. My companion could not understand at first until I told him that it was a member of the

Macquis and that he had a gun pointed at me, and that I had called him a French pig.

We returned to base and settled in to routine work and after about a week we were on the move again and this time to a site about four miles from Lyon and the day after we arrived we went into the town. The seven bridges had been blown up by the retreating German army and the British engineers had put two Bailey bridges across the river to allow the traffic to move. When we arrived in the town, it was amazing to see the lights, everyone was celebrating Bastille Day two months late and there were Fairgrounds and street entertainment everywhere.

As soon as we were recognised as British, the locals couldn't do enough for us. We were feted everywhere, every fairground ride was free, free drinks were offered everywhere and there was dancing and music around every corner. It appeared that they had received terrible treatment from the Germans and the first thing our people did was to let them celebrate. It is now past midnight, and we suddenly realise that all the buses had gone and also our Liberty wagon, so we set off on a four-mile walk home. It probably sobered us up, but it was worth it. It was the first sign of happiness that I had seen in the whole of my time overseas.

The main unit caught up with us a week later and we managed to get some other British Senior N.C.O.'s in for a Social evening and it was good to be able to hear how they had been getting on. Several had musical instruments that they had been lucky enough to keep with them and it was a far better show than the ENSA shows we had in the past.

A little bit of leave

Leave had started in northwestern France, and some were lucky enough to get forty-eight hour passes from Calais to go to the U.K. Being almost "Tour expired" (having served four years overseas), I asked my Adjutant if it was possible for me to 'hitch-hike' to Calais and then report to R.A.F. Uxbridge to end my overseas service. He checked with H.Q. and was told that because I was Middle East Command, I would have to go back to Italy and be sent home from there, I was disappointed but I did have a trip to Dijon for a few days.

Now that the Americans from the south had met up with their counterparts from Cherbourg, we were no longer required and we heard that we would

be returning to Naples in the near future. We departed for Marseilles a few days later and we stopped at Aix-en-Provence for a few days. One of our men had been murdered in Lyons when a French soldier returning unexpectedly, found him in bed with the Frenchman's wife. A court of enquiry was launched and our Adjutant had to stay at Group H.Q. while this was started. Because he had drawn his money out to spend a week at Monte Carlo, he decided to take the signals Officer, Paddy and myself out for a night in Aix, now that he was unable to leave the area.

Americans again

At one large dance hall, about twenty of our airmen were dancing with the local girls and having drinks with them. There were also a large crowd of American soldiers as well. At exactly eleven pm. several American Service Police arrived and told our airmen they had to leave because there was a curfew on the town and they were enforcing it. We four went along to see what was going on, because all of our men had permanent passes which allowed them out until eight am, every day. I pointed this out to the M.P. and he turned around and pointed his sten gun at me and told me to get my "butt" out of there. I pointed out that I out-ranked him and that he had no right to talk like that.

With that he pushed the sten into my stomach and repeated his remark. I was just about to disarm him when the Adjutant who was watching said, "Hold it Flight, and that is an order". I relaxed and the Officer approached the M.P. and asked why there was a curfew, because we had no knowledge of such an order and told him to put his gun down while he was talking. The M.P. produced a letter from the American High Command stating that a curfew had been placed on the town because of troubles with some of their troops.

When I asked why our airmen were being singled out to leave, he said that they were the smallest group and once they were out, the American troops would follow. I approached the microphone and told our airmen what was happening and that our Adjutant would get it sorted out in the morning. I told them to say goodbye to their friends and show the others that they could leave in an orderly manner with dignity and come back tomorrow. They said goodbye to their friends and left in the truck outside. The Adjutant approached H.Q, and was assured that the curfew would be lifted for British troops but two days later we had to move to Marseilles.

The weather had now broken and as the L.S.T. left Marseilles, it seemed the signal for the rain to start and within a few hours we were in a force nine gale and I was seasick again. I vowed that when I got home I would never go on a ship again. We landed at Naples two days later and made our way to a transit camp on the outskirts. We were in reasonable wooden huts and the weather had improved but it was still very cold with intermittent showers.

All of our vehicles were prepared for the Motor Pool and just as our two oxygen plants were leaving, I was handed a small parcel containing a flexible synthetic rubber coupling for an Oxygen plant, together with a Certificate saying that I had fitted it. I knew the war could be over before some of these spares came through, and I thought, supposing that I had left the vehicle in Corsica unserviceable, just what would it have cost to keep sending an aircraft with oxygen to our unit. I told the orderly room Sergeant that I was "tour expired" and that the vehicle had gone to the Motor Pool and it was no longer my responsibility. I asked him to keep the parcel for a few days and report back to say that I had left for the U.K. and then arrange for the parcel to be put in the truck at the Pool.

Party time in Naples, and home soon

On my last day overseas, I was approached by one of 'my' Corporals who said that the M.T. Section would like to hold a 'going away Party' for me if I would care to contribute half the costs of buying in the food for the meal. I replied that I would be glad to, but they had to get the permission from the M.T. Warrant Officer, who would then have to get the C.O.'s permission to hold the party.

It would cost me about three weeks pay, but I thought it was a nice gesture. The permissions were granted and the cooks put on a very good meal of chicken, chips and veg and Christmas pudding to follow. Just as the meal was finished, the C.O. came in to see how things were going. I got up to greet him and the Adjutant and offered them both a drink, and the C.O. gave a very nice speech saying that it was unusual for the men to give a party for their senior N.C.O. as a leaving present but he was pleased that there was such harmony in the M.T. Section. The Corporal who organised the party got up to say a few words and the Officers left and told us to have a good time.

Just before I said goodbye to the men in the Sergeants mess, I was handed four bottles of the stock from the bar and four hundred cigarettes. When I joined the unit, every member gave one pound to the bar as their contribution to the bar stock, and as time went on this accumulated into a very healthy 'pub'. When any member left the unit they were given their share of the bar. At that time there were twelve members in the mess and I received one twelfth of the bar plus a twelfth of the cash which amounted to twenty pounds., so my party did not cost me much after all. I wrapped the bottles in two socks each and placed them in my kit bag after wrapping a couple of spare shirts around them, and then carefully packing all soft goods around the outside of them to prevent any damage if any one threw my kit bag about. The special tools I had purchased in Tel Aviv three years before were put into my lower back pack, spare shirts and underwear in the top pack, then assembling this to the harness and then I tried it on. It weighed sixty-eight pounds and I just hoped that I wouldn't have to walk far with that load and my kitbag. I was driven to the docks and boarded the troopship, the Alcantara, for my journey home.

As we left the docks at Naples, I looked back and realised that I was turning my back on four years of my life, and it left me feeling quite nostalgic. We had to wait at Gibraltar for the convoy to be assembled but after three days we were on our way home. As we follow the coast, we get to the Bay of Biscay and the weather is venting its anger against me once again. A small aircraft Carrier in the convoy is pitching so much that at times the bows are under water and the propellers are out of the water, and the next, the bows are out of the water and the stern is flooded. Thank goodness I joined the R.A.F. I am seasick once again but this time it is not so severe. Perhaps it is because this will be my last trip. We arrive at the docks in Liverpool at eleven pm. on the thirtieth of November 1944, dark, raining and depressing and we were greeted by a Military band who played one verse of "Land of hope and Glory" before moving off to the next ship.

Whilst on board, we were visited by Customs Officials who asked if we had the usual goods and I said that I had four hundred cigarettes. I was told I could only bring in two hundred, so I said that I would pay the duty on them. I was told that the limit was two hundred only and when I told him I was getting married as soon as it could be arranged when I was on leave he looked at my hands and I said I was a non-smoker but these

were for the guests, he said, "Take one out of each packet of the two hundred pack and give them to your friends, O.K.?" and then told me to go. The next airman said he only had two hundred cigarettes, and was asked twice if he had any more but he said no. The Customs man took one look at his nicotine stained hands and asked one of his colleagues to check his kit and found over one thousand cigarettes, jewellery and other contraband. He was then marched of to the police station. On leaving the ship, we were then taken to R.A.F. Wheaton where we would be checked over before being sent on leave.