

Jack Patterson, mechanic RASC

The following article is taken from a publication called "We Remember D-day" compiled by Frank and Joan Shaw. This booklet contains personal stories from over 130 D-day veterans and we hope that including Jack's story here will not breach any copyright laws.



I was an Amphibious Vehicle Mechanic in 299 DUKW Coy, R.A.S.C., part of the 3rd British Division. With a full complement of DUKWs, equipment and personnel on board L.S.T's 213 and 214, we sailed to a rendezvous in mid-channel. At the break of dawn I decided to go up on deck and, to my amazement, ships of every size and description had assembled overnight in preparation for the D-Day Invasion. The quiet was shattered by ear-splitting crashes as salvo after salvo was fired at the coastal defences. I felt a sense of security being part of such a massive fleet, supported by air cover overhead. The noise was deafening and the faces of my comrades told their own story. It was nearing time for us to disembark. At twenty years old, it suddenly

dawned on me that I was a bit young for all this, although I was fully trained in beach landing. I was feeling sick and, I don't mind admitting, scared as well. As the battleships Warspite and Ramillies sailed past the L.S.T., all hell was let loose. This was no place for a "rookie"! The coastline of Sword Beach was almost visible.

After calling us to the lower decks, the Padre conducted a short service. Afterwards, our O.C. Major Person briefed us on the day ahead and added: "God Bless you all and may you reach the Normandy coast safely."

We climbed aboard our DUKWs as the huge doors of the L.S.T. opened. Each DUKW in turn moved forward slowly and went down the ramp into a very rough sea. I didn't like the look of the sea but I tried to remain calm as we tossed around like a cork in the water.

I felt really sick and I removed my haversack and the remainder of my kit, thinking I would eventually have to swim to survive. Visibility was deteriorating along the foreshore because of smoke pouring from houses along the beach which were set on fire by the assault. As we approached the last hundred yards or so, still chugging along, I could see the difficulties ahead.

The 6th Airborne Division were providing plenty of air cover — not an enemy in sight — as they dropped thousands of troops over a wide area of the Normandy beachhead. The troops from the initial assault, by then tired and hungry, must have thought this a Godsend. Reinforcements were always welcome. The planes returning from the dropping zone, flying low over the housetops, were picked off one by one by sniper fire. One plane landed along the water's edge, another crashed into the sea on our port side, with no survivors. A few planes crash-landed into the shallow waters and a rescue launch manned by the R.A.S.C. was there in a flash to pick up any survivors.

After approaching the beach cautiously I could see enemy soldiers assisting the Royal Engineers, Pioneers and the beach clearing units to tow the large metal objects, with teller mines attached, out of the way. A flail tank was detonating as many mines as possible, so we followed it for the remaining 30 yards before we reached sand. A temporary track was being laid on the sand dunes directly in front of the entrance to Hermanville.

I could not believe what I saw along the dunes. The beach was littered with dead and wounded, wrecked vehicles and many other craft which had beached. There was chaos everywhere. This was a sight I would never forget. I can assure you that my comrades and I were sickened and upset at seeing the loss of so many lives. On reaching the sand, I immediately jumped out of the DUKW — why, I don't know! Dazed and shell-shocked, I wandered round until I found the "DUKW Control Post". Many dead soldiers were laid on a large tarpaulin; some had drowned before reaching the beach. Tank crews were lying beside their wrecked tanks. There was worse to come as I zig-zagged over and around the dead bodies who had perished in front of the Hermanville strongpoint. One soldier lay dead with his accordion by his side. Another in a crouched position with his rifle holding him in balance, but dead. Feeling sad and desolate I suddenly remembered the words of Hymn 581 "The sands of time are sinking".

The complete length of Sword Beach from Ouistreham to Lion-sur-Mer was a sitting target for occasional air attacks and shelling. To ease the tension barrage balloons were erected to shield us from further attacks. Large duplex drive tanks which were causing congestion on the beach were towed aside to make way for us. An entrance to Hermanville was now ready to use, so cautiously we moved onto a rugged track. I remember saying: "Thank God we got off the beach." It was a real boost to all of us. A few houses by the roadside were still sheltering snipers who immediately attacked us. Fortunately, a group of commandoes appeared with bayonets at the ready and forced their way into the buildings. A few shots were fired then a yell or two. Afterwards a commando instructed us to move on to the unloading depot.

After unloading their cargo, the DUKWs returned to the beach and started to ferry the wounded to hospital ships anchored in the bay. Many vehicles were damaged by mines during the evacuation. Trees and hedgerows were almost non-existent owing to the continuous bombing and strafing during the assault. Now and again we encountered a few civilians. Many stayed in hiding to await the outcome of the day. The noise of battle was never ending as the infantry fought to consolidate the land along Perriers Ridge. The enemy were still holding on around Lion-sur-Mer.

We were now at Hermanville where we commandeered the local farmyard to set up a temporary workshop to repair and service the DUKWs as required, to keep them seaworthy.

In a field nearby were about 30 dead cows but the bull was still alive. As it did not attempt to get up on its feet I assumed that it was shell shocked. Intermittent firing from the church spire accounted for the loss of many soldiers who were drawing water from a tap in the square. As a sniper could not be located it was decided, after consideration, to remove the spire by shellfire.

The first burial ground was opened in a field adjoining the workshop. A continuous convoy of lorries brought in the dead for burial. I watched the Padres removing identity discs and personal belongings which they placed in small individual containers. After the bodies were laid to rest, side by side, a service was conducted. All this was very disturbing and depressing, but made us all realise that we had survived the first ordeal. I remember saying: "Thank God for sparing me during the first day on French soil."





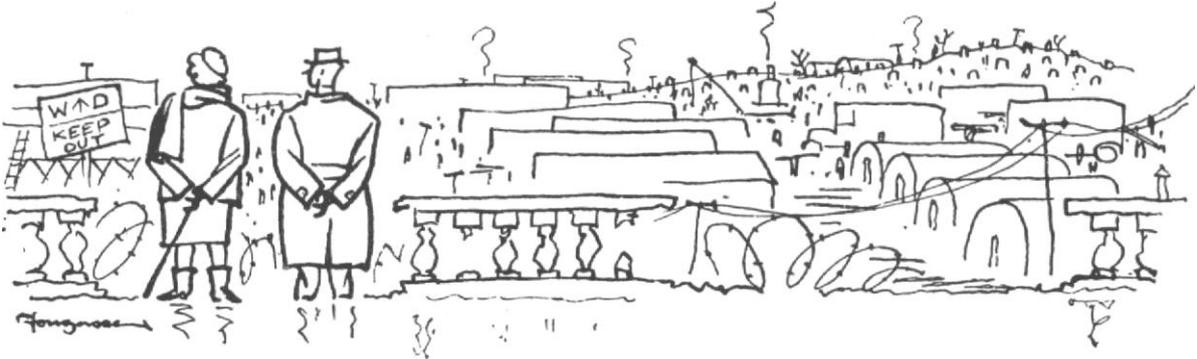
The farmyard buildings were made of stone and mortar. The yard contained a dwelling house, byre, implement shed and a few other barns, all in poor condition. The farm buildings survived the D-Day bombardment with little or no damage. We had a feeling that we were unwelcome probably because the farmer felt the army was responsible for the loss of his entire herd of cows. He showed no appreciation for the freedom we had brought to Normandy. It was almost dusk.

Tired and hungry, my comrades Billy and Staffy assisted me in digging a trench to secure our safety for the night. With sweat pouring from our faces we opened our emergency packs and with apples from the orchard and cider from a barrel in the farmyard shed we had an appetising meal before we decided to kip down for a well-earned rest.

At midnight a despatch delivered to O.C. Workshop informed us that the DUKW Control Post on the beach received a direct hit killing the entire H.Q. staff. This was our saddest moment of D-Day.

No wonder it was later called "The Longest Day".

Jack Patterson, Mile End, Gatehouse of Fleet, Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland.



"Pity you couldn't have seen the garden a fortnight earlier."