

Len Butt – Royal Engineers

D-Day Veteran – A Sappers Day on D-Day

Len was born in Emsworth on the 3rd August 1925 at 1 West Street, at that time, a row of cottages on the site of what is now Lloyd's pharmacy.

On the 17th April 1943 Len joined the regular army, aged seventeen. Called to the colours on the 21st May, he underwent the usual initial training, followed by training as a Sapper (Engineer) and a six week battle training followed by one weeks leave in Emsworth.



Len's recollections of Emsworth during this short seven-day leave are of a local countryside bursting at the seams with troops and military vehicles. Most of all with large numbers of Canadian troops camped in bell tents in the woodlands and their vehicles and half tracks parked along many roads in north Emsworth.

"With less than one year's service, I found myself posted to 184 Field Company (Royal Engineers) stationed on Netley Common, near Southampton. A large, tented camp which the Unit shared with the Nova Scotia Highlanders of Canada and a Canadian Engineer Company.

On arrival I was to discover that my Unit, together with the 83 and 84 Field Companies and 619 Field Park Company (i.e. bulldozers, plant etc) were the Engineer element for the 3rd Canadian Divisions Beach Group and as such we would be at the forefront of the Division's assault on the "Atlantic Wall".

The remaining days left to us before embarkation were hectic and an intensive whirl of final preparations, briefings and issuing of specialist equipment we would carry with us.

Among these specialist items were what were know as "prepared charges", explosive devices for demolition tasks. Each of our Sections would be required to carry a 25 lbs "prepared charge". Our Section Corporal held a ballot for the item and I drew the short straw. Sgt. Brown, my Platoon Sgt. was most comforting. We were rehearsing loading and wearing our kit, some 100 lbs in weight. He stopped to check me over and patted the "prepared charge" on the top of my rucksack, cheerfully informing me that the charge was quite harmless until primed with detonator and fuse, even if hit by a bullet, and then added, "unless it's a tracer". My reply to his humorous aside is unprintable.

The maps and models used for our briefing were in incredible detail. Those together with the aerial photographs, many at sea level, enabled us to form a very clear picture of our particular stretch of beach, including beach obstacles and the strong points awaiting us.

We discovered that we would be landing on Juno-Nan Beach, right in front of Bernieres-Sur-Mer, and that on disembarkation we had to rendezvous by the sea wall. There we would be met by our Platoon Officer (Lt Phillips) and the reconnaissance Sgt and party,

who would have landed with the Assault Infantry (Queen`s Own Rifles of Canada). We were due to land 30 minutes after the first assault.

Saturday 3rd June

We awoke to discover the camp placed on instant readiness. Just before last light, a large company of TCV`s (Troop carrying vehicles) rolled into camp. Within a short time, we were loaded and on our way to Southampton docks.

As we approached the dock area, convoys were converging from all points of the compass; it was incredible. Yet such was the organisation and control that in a comparatively short time we had threaded our way to our allotted dock basin, we were unloaded and eventually embarked on our LCI, the same one we had used on the "Fabius III" exercise. No mean feat in near darkness loaded down, we had to scramble over several craft to reach our own vessel.

Morning, 5th June

With orders to leave our kit onboard we disembarked on the quay to feed and stretch our legs. We were confined to the dockside warehouse for this purpose. Early afternoon we reembarked and late afternoon saw us under way. We were fortunate in being allowed on deck at this time, for as we progressed, what a sight to behold! Before our eyes the Solent was filling with ships and landing craft. From the enormous dock complex of Southampton, from Portsmouth harbour, the Hamble and every conceivable inlet, endless streams of vessels were converging and forming into convoys.

At approximately 8 pm our flotilla was sailing in line fairly close to the Isle of Wight shoreline. Sailing close to and parallel with us were lines of "Fighting Chasseurs" carrying the 1st Special Service Brigade commanded by Lord Lovat. As we passed Osborne House with its manicured lawns and its buildings glistening in the evening sunshine, to the sound of Bagpipes echoing across the water, played I believe by Piper McEllen, cheers rolled across the Solent. It was a moment I would never forget.

As we cleared the eastern tip of the Isle of Wight, we became fully aware how rough the seas still were in the aftermath of the storm that had delayed D-Day. Our craft was buffeted by waves 5ft to 6ft high and we were all very soon reduced to a state of inertia. By morning "NOTHING" would deter us from leaving our storm-tossed craft and landing on Terra Firma.

From approximately 10 miles out we started our run into the beach. What an astonishing sight to behold! First, we passed close to HM ships Warspite, Ramilles and the Lord Roberts, all engaging shore targets with their main armament. Next, we passed very close to HMS Scylla, flagship of the Eastern Task Force, then cruisers HMS Belfast and Diadem, and finally through a destroyer and gunboat screen. Everyone seemed to be shooting. The noise was deafening.

With about a mile to go we received the warning for beaching and, hitching up our kit, we awaited events. I was fully aware of the 25lbs of explosive perched on my back.

With a hard jolt we beached, and I found myself instinctively following Sgt. Brown down the gangplank, plunging off into chest high water we waded ashore. To my amazement, there in front was the sea wall at Bernieres. We had landed exactly as planned during briefing.

As previously ordered, we quickly gathered by the sea wall and began to take stock. Sgt. Brown issued orders and I found myself with my section ordered to clear mines from the dunes on top of the sea wall. The rest of the Platoon were set to work on the mass of obstacles along the foreshore, many of these being mined. Armoured bulldozers were already at work. AVREs had already flailed and blown two exits off the beach.

Landings at Bernieres had been delayed by bad weather, starting some 30 minutes late. This caused a considerable handicap in the beach clearance; the tide was racing back in to cover many obstacles before they could be cleared. Nevertheless, sufficient progress was made to enable the follow-up Brigade and Artillery units to start landing some two hours after H-Hour.

On starting our clearance task, I found myself as No1 in a clearance team – i.e. operating a mine detector and started to sweep the area chosen. Thus equipped I started to sweep the area and stopped almost immediately. There staring at me was my first mine, but neither I nor my number 2 had every seen this type before, (it turned out to be Belgian). This type of problem would occur again before the end of the day. Too late it was realised that during our training many of us had only seen and handled British German and Italian mines. The problem was overcome but at the expense of unnecessary casualties. The work had to proceed.

On landing, few of us paid much attention to conditions on the beach, being intent on reaching our RV point by the sea wall, but now, as we got down to work, we began to realise how fortunate we had been. There were a considerable amount of casualties around, as well as wrecked tanks and landing craft all along the beach. We discovered that all our reconnaissance party were among the casualties. Lt Phillips, the Sgt. and two sapper were dead. By the end of the day 20% of the Platoon would be among the toll.



Second wave landing on Juno Beach at 11am - Len Butt is by the Sea wall waiting for the tide to recede to clear obstacles one of which can be seen in the water in the bottom left corner.

About two hours after H-Hour, the follow-up Brigade started landing. We were surprised when from a fresh wave of LCIs the Nova Scotia Highlanders came streaming ashore carrying folding bicycles. At the time, Jerry was still barely a mile up the road and one of our wags called out that they wouldn't be able to claim mileage allowance. Nevertheless, they would have the last laugh by making the deepest infantry penetration of D-Day.

Early evening an alarm was raised to the effect that a German counterattack had broken through to the beach between us and Sword beach. Everyone stood to and awaited events with some apprehension. Time ticked by with tension mounting. Suddenly from across the channel came the sound of many aircraft, the noise getting clearer and louder, rising above the current sounds around us. And there was a sight to behold! The 6th Air Landing Brigade coming in to reinforce the 6th Airborne Division. Some 500 tugs with gliders in tow. As spontaneous cheering echoed around the beach, the gliders were detaching and swooping into land. Although the sky seemed to be filled with anti-aircraft fire, very few aircraft seemed to be hit.

With the arrival of the Airborne reinforcements, all tension had vanished. Just before last light some four or five German bombers appeared, dropping bombs at random; all being shot down for their cheek. It seemed to put the seal on D-Day, although, not quite. As a young green sapper, I hoped I had played my part in an “Historical” day. I had been lucky and seen the D-Day sunset. Some did not.”

Len and his fellow engineers continued their clearance task “non-stop” for some 36 hours and it was later calculated that his Royal Engineer Company cleared (in the first 36 hours) some 2,000 mines and booby traps, several hundred beach obstacles, besides opening exits off the beach.



Len Butt at the 70th D-Day Anniversary Exhibition in 2014 pointing out his position in a photo of Juno Beach on D-Day

In the follow up during the next four months, Len was blown up twice and as a result was hospitalised, returned to the UK and invalided out of the Army in January 1945.

He subsequently took a commission in the Army Cadet Corp, commanding the Chichester Corp for many years with the rank of Captain.