

Lieutenant Ronald F Eades RNVR

D-Day and Role at Pointe Du Hoc Landings

Background

Ronald Frank Eades, known as Ron, was born in Emsworth on October 1906, and lived variously at Sultan Road, Victoria Road and Record Road. In early 1940, Ron joined the RNVR as a Sub Lieutenant (Special Branch).

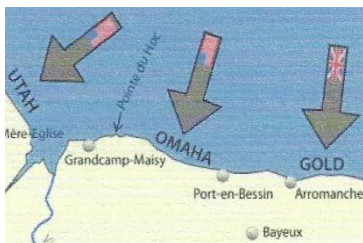


Department of Miscellaneous Weapon Development (DMWD)

On completion of his training, he was appointed to the Department of Miscellaneous Weapon Development (DMWD). DMWD was a newly formed wartime outfit, often referred to as Wheezers and Dodgers. Its purpose was the development of the less conventional requirements of naval warfare. During 1943, their responsibility was to solve the numerous problems in mounting the invasion of France, and particularly those associated with amphibious assault. Many unusual projects began to take shape: floating roadways and airfields; harbours created by bubbles; rocket-propelled monsters to breach seawalls; invisible boats; and cliff-scaling devices. Their largest undertaking was to build two Mulberry harbours; then, to take them to France in a matter of days.

Planning for D-Day

As plans developed, of major concern were the numerous fixed artillery batteries.



Notable amongst these batteries was the report of six 155mm guns installed at Pointe du Hoc, whose range of 24,000 metres made them a major threat to Omaha and Utah Beaches in the US sector and to the naval and assault forces offshore. Considered by the Germans to be unapproachable from



seaward, the battery was heavily defended and mined on the landward side. It was manned by about 125 infantry and 85 gunners. Whilst this target could be bombed, as it was in April 1944 and again on D-Day, that gave no assurance of neutralisation. It was too big a task for Special Forces and it was decided that it had to be taken by infantry on D-Day.

Cliff Scaling and Rocket Grapnels

The key to success was to achieve surprise by taking the unexpected route, scaling the cliffs directly from seaward. DMWD were given the task of finding a solution. The plan was that an assault force would land in Landing Craft Assault (LCA); and two methods were devised to get them up the cliffs: rocket grapnels and DUKW fitted with fire-engine ladders.



Lieutenant R F Eades RNVR. Installation of a trials rocket



Fire fighting ladders fitted to a DUKW

A certain amount of work had been done by DMWD on rocket grapnels the previous year for a task that had lapsed. Ron Eades was given the responsibility for dusting off the earlier plans and to developing an operational model. He was joined in this task by a Colonel Tom Trevor, a commando trained officer, who was developing tactics that required similar skills.

2" Battalion US Rangers

Coincident with these activities was the arrival in UK of the 2nd US Rangers (Lieutenant Colonel James E Rudder) in December 1943, who, in early 1944, were given the task to prepare for the Pointe du Hoc attack as an integral part of Force O, the OMAHA Beach Assault.

So for the first time, the troops were introduced to the equipment they needed for the landing. From this point on it seems that the paths of the 2nd Rangers and that of Colonel Trevor and Ron Eades, and probably many others, were constantly overlapping. Training sites at Bude, in North Devon, Swanage in Dorset and Tennyson Down on the Isle of Wight, where the cliff geology and environment matches that in France, finds all three present at similar times.

The Plan for the Assault of Pointe du Hoc

The operational plan was that before H-Hour the battery would be attacked by 18 Bombers followed by bombardment from the battleship USS Texas and HMS Glasgow. This would start 40 minutes before H-Hour and last until H-Hour minus 3 minutes.

At H-Hour, 0630 on 6th June, three companies of 2nd Rangers, using ten LCAs, would land at the foot of the cliff under Pointe du Hoc. They would climb the cliffs and take the battery. If their attack was successful, and they signalled the fact that this had been achieved by 0700, then the remaining companies of the 2nd Rangers and the 5th Rangers Battalion, would land at the Pointe; thereby trebling the size of the attacking force. However, if no signal was received by the due time the reinforcements would divert and land with other units at OMAHA beach some six kilometres east. Timing was everything.

After landing the Rangers were to destroy the guns and set up a roadblock to prevent German movement along the coast road, preparatory to the combined 2nd and 5th Rangers Battalions moving off to the west to Grandcamp Maisy and Isigny to join up with US forces from UTAH beach. The main parts of this plan had a full-dress rehearsal, including live firings, in late April and early May culminating in cliff assaults near Dartmouth; following which the units returned to their marshalling positions in Dorset in preparation to embarkation at Weymouth. It is during this period that Ron last visited Emsworth.

Crucially, the sea conditions caused the LCAs to ship a lot of water. First, LCA 860 sank, but the 20 Rangers were rescued. Then, in fairly short succession, the two support/stores LCAs sank. This was a serious blow which would have significant consequences in the following 72 hours.

It then became clear that ML 194 was leading the LCAs to the wrong headland and that, despite a major alteration of course, the group would not be able to land at the pre-arranged time. As a result, the planned reinforcements would be diverted to OMAHA beach.

Nevertheless, by 0700, only 30 minutes after the planned landing time, the flotilla of LCAs arrived at the Pointe du Hoc and were under small arms fire from the enemy, who had emerged from their bunkers following the aerial bombing and naval gunfire support from USS Texas.

Nine LCAs beached in quick succession, rocket grapnels were fired and cliff scaling started, with some leading troops in action on the cliff top 15 minutes later. Minutes later the DUKWs, which had launched from LCT 415, arrived at the assault position. However, the intensive bombing just before H-Hour had cratered the beach and caused cliff landslides, which prevented the DUKWs from immediately making it ashore on to stable ground. Regardless, ladders were extended and firing on to German positions took place. Somewhere in this melee Ron Eades, who by now it is understood was dressed and equipped as a Ranger, was making it ashore from one of the DUKWs.



Rocket Grapnels being fired on D-Day

Whilst the assault was successful, a number of Rangers lost their lives on the beach or were severely wounded as a result of German grenades and machine gun fire from the cliffs. The Rangers reached the cliff top within 30 minutes of landing. The assault was back on track, but without the prospect of reinforcement; a factor which was greatly to influence the next 48 hours.

On reaching the summit the sight that met the leading troops was one of a lunar landscape of unimaginable confusion, the consequence of the heavy bombing and naval bombardment before H-Hour. Whilst effective, it had not destroyed the underground tunnels from which the enemy was re-emerging. The Rangers immediately formed small

teams and started clearing crater by crater as they advanced with some further casualties. They soon discovered that the gun emplacements were empty.

At the same time other units had moved off to clear the farmhouse and the set-up roadblocks along the coast road. These met and overcame the resistance of small enemy groups who had withdrawn from the battery and were trying to establish a defence line.



WRECKED EMPLACEMENTS on the Pointe. Photo taken June 1944.

Generally, these were successful engagements but not without further Ranger casualties, which added to the rising attrition of fighting personnel.

The Enemy's 155mm Guns

After reaching the coast road, two sergeants went to investigate a narrow lane leading south, where enemy activity was apparent. At about 200 metres they came across five of the 155mm guns, together with ammunition and set up to bombard UTAH beach to the west. These guns were put out of action with thermite grenades and the ammunition set alight. It was now 09.00 and the Ranger's objectives for D-Day had all been achieved.

However, the Rangers were in a very weak position. Counterattack threatened, they were very low on ammunition, food and water, without heavy weapons, and had taken a significant number of casualties and prisoners for whom they were responsible. Communications had largely been lost due to water damage to radios. Some re-supply from the destroyers was arranged but the vast amount of the expected re-enforcement was either lost or diverted elsewhere.

Any assessment of relative strengths must have concluded that the Rangers were unable to mount an offensive; it would take all their resources to contain counterattacks which would soon follow. This situation was to last from late on D-Day until some 36 hours later, when on the morning of 8th June, the relieving force from OMAHA Beach arrived along the coast road.

Pointe de Hoc to Port-en-Bessin

The arrival of the relieving force is the first opportunity that Ron Eades had to leave the Rangers operations and re-join the British sector some seven miles east. The Rangers were to turn west to take Grandcamp and Isigny. He probably went first to OMAHA Beach from where he was likely to find transport to Port-en-Bessin. It seems that he took passage in a landing craft that was operating along the coast.

Port-en-Bessin

The land forces comprising 1st US Army to the west, and 2nd British Army to the east were demarcated by a line drawn through Port-en-Bessin, where a liaison HQ had been established between US V Corps and British XXX Corps. A very busy place.

Ron was probably aware that DMWD colleagues would be operating in or close to Port-en-Bessin and that shipping returning from there to UK would be heading for the Portsmouth and Southampton area, probably his preferred destination.

He arrived at the port on the morning of Saturday 10th June where he met, apparently by chance, Commander Dove, a Deputy Director at DMWD, who was on the point of returning to England. Commander Dove later wrote to Ron's Mother:

"I exchanged a few words with your son on the morning on Saturday June 10th.

I was standing on the quay when he drove up in a jeep. I did not recognise him at first when he spoke to me because he was dressed as an American Ranger and had a black eye and a hole in his trousers where a bullet had passed through.

He was absolutely on top of his form, having put up, I discovered from his companions, an absolutely magnificent show in helping to scale the cliffs."

Commander Barry Brannen USNR

It has not been possible to establish how, or when, Ron met Barry Brannen, who is a vital figure in this account because he was with Ron when he was killed and the only source of information of his death. Brannen was on the staff of Rear Admiral John Hall, Commander 11th Amphibious Force anchored off OMAHA with the other assault ships.

Brannen later wrote that he had been with Ron in a US ship some days earlier, whether this was the rehearsal for D-Day or the invasion crossing in the LCT is not known. It is assumed that Brannen went ashore either to OMAHA or to Port-en-Bessin, and it is possible that Ron made the boat trip from the beach to Port-en-Bessin with Brannen.

It seems likely that Brannen and Ron Eades spent the remainder of Saturday and Sunday celebrating; Bayeux, which was only five miles away, had been liberated and was a natural magnet.

On Monday, 12th June, with Commander Barry Brannen, and for reasons which are unexplained, Ron headed inland from Bayeux towards Tilly-sur-Seulles. The allied advance in this area had been swift across the flat farmland which turns into undulating hills and close country in the vicinity of Tilly and the Seulles valley. Royal Marines commandos had taken this area but were now held up by considerable stubborn resistance which would take several days to dislodge. It was here that Ron was hit by a machine gun burst and died. He is buried in the Commonwealth War Cemetery at Tilly where some 990 British and Commonwealth servicemen lie.

Later in 1944 Barry Brannen, after his return to the United States, wrote to Ron's Mother to provide a more complete account of his last days in France. He also had this to say:

"I regretted his death particularly as he was serving as a volunteer with the American forces. It seemed to me then, and since, that his epitaph was written by Alan Seager, who died in the last war (WW1) as an American volunteer in the French Army.

*To thee (France) we render thanks
Seeing as we come for honour and not for gain
Who opened up your glorious ranks
Gave them that grand occasion to excel
The chance to live life most free from stain
And that rare privilege of dying well."*



Headstone at Tilly-sur-Seulles

Memorials. A memorial stone has been incorporated into his parents' grave at the churchyard of St. Thomas a' Becket, Warblington. Ronald's name is on the World War II memorial to the left of the altar at St. James' Church, Emsworth and in the Memorial Library at Portsmouth Grammar School.