

Memoir of Capt. Wynham Fletcher, M.C.

Father of Sally Maclean

D-Day Invasion

We embarked on our LST on the very late afternoon of June 1st from a hard at Southampton. My party was the recce group of the battery and consisted of myself, Alan Pratt my B.H.Q. (Battery Headquarters) subaltern, 2 A/T (anti-tank) operators, a D.R. (dispatch rider) and a clerk, all in a 15cwt truck. Our poor vehicle looked like a jumble sale on wheels, packed with stores, from a W/T set, PIAT and ammo, Bren and ammo, rolls of signal wire and a lightweight motorcycle lashed to the roof, to our personal kit and a bottle of whisky. In addition, each of us was armed to the teeth; I had a rifle as well as my revolver, my performance with the latter being mediocre to say the least of it!



On board we were a very mixed bag of different arms, chiefly the recce groups of the Beach Group, with a complete troop of A/T 6 pounders of the Airborne Division, about 300 soldiers all told. The ship was of course crammed full of vehicles as well, and there was hardly room to move. I was lucky enough as senior military officer on board to get a bunk in a cabin with three of our majors, but the men were very cramped.

As soon as we were loaded, we moved out to our berth in the Solent and became one of an invasion fleet of ships of sizes and types. I had resolutely refused to believe until I was on board that the invasion was really on, but now that one was really at sea I experienced a great sense of relief and freedom from responsibility. The battery that I had commanded and trained for exactly three years to a day, eighteen months of it in preparation for this operation, was now for weal or woe committed to battle with the enemy.

Time passed quickly for the first 48 hours, although there was nothing really to do. The captain, an R.N.R. Lieutenant Commander, used to ask me to share a drink with him every evening, a privilege much appreciated, there being no drink on the ship, and I was keeping my own stock for the battle. We had a "brains trust" broadcast on the ship's loudspeaker, which was a great success, eat the excellent food, slept, read and wrote letters.

We had been briefed for the operation on genuine maps but with dummy names to that officially I did not know when or where we were going, but one of my brother officers has done some sailing in the area before the war and had recognised it; his guess proved correct!

On the 4th, the captain, who had been at Salerno and Anzio, called me to his char room and told me where we were going and that we sailed that night. The weather was getting worse and worse, and sure enough a postponement order came through that afternoon, together with a ghastly rumour that if the operation was postponed again we would have missed the high tide and would have to disembark and wait for the next one; my heart sank. However, all was well and although the weather was still bad we weighed anchor about 6 o'clock and the evening of the 5th. We took our place in the convoy as we gained the open sea, and at once started to pitch and roll. I went to my bed in a hurry.

I slept fairly well, though the once or twice I did wake I could feel the ship moving more than was good for the stomach. I was told later that the ship was straddled by 16" shells as she approached the coast of France but I heard nothing.

About 7am the ship stopped and everyone got up in a high state of excitement, except your humble servant who lay prostrate with sea sickness and diarrhea which I contracted during the night. No one ever felt less like an assault landing or a liberator.

Eventually about 09:30 I staggered to my feet and went out on deck feeling a little better. A most extraordinary sight met my eyes, hundreds of craft of all sizes, mostly anchored as if still in the Solent, and in the foreground, silhouetted against the coast of France, the great bulk of the Warspite and the Resolution, orange gouts of flame shooting from their sides every few minutes, followed by a few terse seconds by the crash of the discharge; cruisers and destroyers on their flanks added their lighter pieces comparatively rather puppyish yelps! The sea was obviously rough for an operation of this type and I watched with a rather sinking feeling an L.G.I. badly down by the head towed away.

We were due to land at midday but nothing much seemed to be happening, and, apart from one or two fires, the coast and beach at a distance of 3-4 miles looked quite peaceful. The ship was not to beach, and we were to land from a rhino (an enormous raft with its own engines), which we had towed over behind us. The owner of this rhino, a young R.E. captain, had told us airily that it would only take 20 minutes to bring his unwieldy craft round from the stern to the bow, where it could be secured, the ramp lowered, and the vehicles driven on. In practice it took five hours, and it was not till about 3 pm that we drove on, feeling very naked, as by this time a few shells were falling round and the first dog fights were taking place overhead.

It took an hour to reach the shore and the nearer in we got the rougher it appeared, and one could see the terrible battering the houses lining the beach had received; the beach seemed a chaotic mess. We landed through four feet of water, the engine for one tenth second nearly stalling, and at least I was on the soil of France, four hours late, feeling sick, depressed and my first urgent requirement some quiet spot I could use a lavatory!

I went in search of the C.O. whom I found at the planned spot., sitting in a hole in the sand, and looking wan and tired. Peter Tiarks was there too, his hand bandaged where he had stopped a bit of mortar and obviously in pain. He told me things had been pretty bad and he had lost an officer and some men, but they were improving now. The C.O. said the Germans had a strong point still holding out where my B.H.Q was to be established and my F Troop deploy, but my three Troops and H.Q. due to land that evening would certainly not do so owing to the two or three German strong points still in existence, there was no lateral communication with the two beaches (all my battery were due to land on the next beach to myself.)

There was a Boche strong point within 700 yards of where we were sitting, being engaged at point blank range by two 4" L.C.G.s. There was a certain amount of shelling, mortaring and small arms fire going on, a depressing vista!

I decided to leave the beach and find another B.H.Q. My vehicle stuck in the sand but was pushed out by the willing hands of a squad of Boche prisoners passing at the moment, looking very unlike herrenvolk!

I found a possible B.H.Q. in the courtyard of a farmhouse in a village two miles from the sea, Hermanville, and started unloading the truck. The French people were delighted to see us and said the Boche had left at 3 a.m. that morning. We gave the children some chocolate, which they had not seen for three years. The Second-in-Command turned up, saying that the C.O. wished me to establish my H.Q. alongside R.H.Q. until my troops appeared; this was in an orchard far from my present location. I told Alan Pratt to take the truck to R.H.Q. and get established, while I myself went off on the lightweight m/c to a recce of the area where our B.H.Q. should have been established.

This involved reconnoitering the area near the German strongpoint, and it became obvious that to establish an H.Q. and deploy a troop in that part of the world was unwise! Quite heavy mortar fire was coming down on the road and Commandos were forming up for the attack. Having decided that redeployment would be necessary, I carried out a fresh recce, both for this troop and the other two, all without incident. By this time, it was getting late, and I was very tired and hungry, besides being still worried with diarrhea. On getting back to R.H.Q. I found Alan and the others ensconced in a ditch, having tea of the powered variety but none the less delicious. I had two cups, some concentrated cheese and chocolate, and felt much better. We were further cheered by the unforgettable sight of hundreds of gliders and their tugs coming over to reinforce the Airborne Division; the gliders coming down in turn followed by hundreds of different coloured parachutes dropped by the tugs.

It was then getting late and as there was nothing more we could do, we decided to turn in, and slept the sleep of the just in the ditch, occasionally disturbed by rather alarmingly close rifle shots. This phenomenon continued for some days and nights after D Day but though there were snipers about (I was shot at and felt the wind of a bullet on at least four occasions), I am sure most of the noise was caused by the itching trigger fingers of our own soldiery.

The next day (D + 1) I decided that I must try and find out if the Battery had yet landed on the other beach. The Germans still had two strong points holding out on the coast road, so it was useless to attempt that, and no one knew for sure if the next road inland was clear.

I set out with my recce party in the truck and arrived in the first village we had to pass through without incident though there was none of our soldiers about. The inhabitants received us rapturously and pressed cider on us which was gratefully drunk. The next place we got to was a little town and here the infantry were still about the streets in the process of mopping up. We were the first vehicle to go through, and the whole place was lined with cheering people, clapping and throwing posiers. It was very moving. At the entrance to the next village we had to wait half an hour or so while it was cleared by the infantry, and it was a bit nerve wracking as the countryside was completely deserted. However, we eventually got through with only one sniper bullet, which missed, and arrived at the next beach without further incident.

There was no sign of the battery, and after scouting for a couple of hours I gave it up as a bad job. We were stopped in the small town (Le Deliverande) on our way back by a very excited old Frenchman who knew of four Boche who wanted to surrender. Amid the cheers of the populace, we started off with the old man as a guide. I was terrified, feeling that we might be led straight into a trap. After twisting and turning through some very narrow streets, we came to a farm; the old man told us to wait and left us fingering our guns nervously not knowing what to expect. In a very short time, the old man returned with four seedy looking Boche, one of them slightly wounded, and all cringing and anxious to please. The farmer now appeared with his large family and a bottle of Calvados which we, including the prisoners, drank. The farmer said they were "sympathetic" to "Victoire" and "La France".

Our guide now said that he knew of a German doctor in a nearby house whom we should take in. We crammed the four prisoners in the back of the truck, nearly breaking the springs, and started out again. We arrived at a large house and the guide vanished, reappearing with the most unpleasant looking Boche officer; a large creature, unshaven and the most repulsive face. He talked French, and while talking a Frenchman came out and asked if the German doctor could remain to look after French civilians wounded in the village. I liked the look of the Frenchman as little as the German, and as usual in France a crowd collected, all shrieking at the top of their voices, some were for keeping the doctor but most for removing him. I gave up and said I would return for him tomorrow; the fellow then had the impertinence to ask for two of the prisoners as orderlies. This I refused in no uncertain manner, and I at least got a good Luger automatic from him. I heard that evening that he was roped in by Commandos less tender-hearted.

On the way back I saw an elderly man in a brown uniform striding by the side of the road. As we approached he took off his belt, which he threw over the hedge, and put his hands in the air. He was a gentleman of the Todt organisation and we added him to our groaning vehicle and in addition retrieving a very good pistol. When we got back Alan Pratt set off in high glee with our guests to the P.W. cage.

The usual fusillade of shots started at dusk, and I was woken at 5 a.m. by the Troop Commander of D. Troop, who had found me, with news that our battery was ashore. I went back with him to meet them and found them very tired but in good form, all having had adventures but no casualties. I led them uneventfully back to our area, where they deployed without incident, but coming into action almost at once. The only person now missing was Mike, with my H.Q. staff, and life was very difficult without them, particularly as by now I had lost my voice as a result of fatigue and shouting at people.

I was up all that night working a most successful barrage and on my return, I was delighted to find all my H.Q. staff had safely arrived. I moved my H.Q. to a new location in quite a good orchard with a small farmhouse attached with outbuildings for use as offices, and we all started digging 'liveable-in' holes as hard as we could.