

At 5:00 a.m., the flotilla were up and dressed. Slept in clothing all night. Had breakfast of bacon, beans and potatoes at 5:15 a.m. At 5:45 a.m., landing craft crews of HMCS Prince David stood by their craft. Lowered craft to deck level and troops moved into craft.

...Waiting for the order to move, one could see the bomb and gun flashes on the shores of France 7 ½ miles away. It was daylight and as far as the eye could see, landing craft ships were visible only waiting for the order to move... Overhead the sky was overcast with Allied aircraft on their way in to give the shore a pounding.

At 6:45 a.m., we were given the order to lower away and unhook. The sea was extremely rough and as we started our seven and half mile run in, the soldiers were very sick. All the flotillas of our force were in line ahead and as each mile slipped by, the roar of gunfire from the shore, the bombing from Allied planes, the odd plane being shot down overhead increased. It was a sight never to be forgotten, seeing Allied troops moving closer to the coast of France.

At last the horizon of Bernières-sur-Mer, our objective, loomed in the horizon and all was to be seen were fires and out of the fires, the odd church steeples. About one mile from the beach the signal was given for a deploy and the flotillas moved in abreast. We had been told of the minefields guarding the beaches and as we moved in at half speed ahead, the mines could be seen spread out for a distance of 500 yds. all very close, making it seemingly impossible for an LCA to get through. As I looked over the bow and saw the dead bodies of Marine commandos, floating in the water, I realized what we were facing. The Marines were supposed to have cleared the way for us and their being dead meant that we had to make our own way through those perilous "stakes in the water". We were soon weaving through the minefield and with a strong tide pushing our stern within a matter of inches of each mine, I was ready at any moment to be blown sky high. To make matters worse, mortars were screaming over the craft and the odd Nazi sniper on shore was trying to find a good target.

As we managed to skim through three rows of mines and were ready to sneak through the fourth, the craft on our starboard side could be seen breaking literally in two as she hit a mine. Then as I glanced around me I could see all the craft of our flotilla, only a matter of feet away, being blown in two, holes in their bows, holes in their stern and sinking rapidly but not before the soldiers were on their way ashore in waist-deep water. I couldn't believe that we were still afloat and making our way shoreward still. Another glance around further along the beach, invasion craft could be seen blown to bits and the bodies of the crews being blown in the air. Despite these desperate mishaps, the army were getting ashore. Our craft kept going and when we could go no further, our ramp went down and our troops rushed ashore. We had come safely through the minefield, the only craft in our sector to beach safely.

As we were beached, our stern was still swinging between two mines and knowing that our craft would still have to take the whole flotilla back to the ship, it had to be saved. Therefore, we put a line on the stern and held her from swaying up to our waists in water, while sniper's bullets were still flying about us. At this time, the crews of our flotilla, whose craft had been blown to bits, were making their way ashore and it was with great relief that I noticed everyone of them was safe and sound except one who received a piece of shrapnel in his leg and another who was suffering a slight bullet graze on his ear.

Our flotilla was now stranded on the beach of Bernières-sur-Mer, France. We had landed our troops but had had four of our craft blown up. We had to figure out a way to get back through the minefield and get the crews back to the ship. We would have to do it with our one remaining craft which now had one engine left. As I sat down on the beach, smoking a cigarette and getting a bit of a rest, a glance around showed me a sight witnessed only once in a life-time. The troops we had landed were now digging in getting ready for the drive inland. As far as the eye could see along the beach, great tanks were lined close together ready for the push. LCTs were now coming in unceasingly where we had cleared the mines and hundreds of Bren carriers and tanks were rolling on to the beach.

We knew that we must get off the beach as the drive was about to start, therefore it was decided to take out the whole flotilla on the one remaining craft, with one engine and more mines to face.

Pushing the craft out as far as possible, with water up to our necks, the tide was coming in very quickly and we had quite a time trying to push our way out. The advance of the troops on the beach had now started because the tide was covering the beach rapidly. Amid the ceaseless bullets of the odd sniper who was still entrenched in the church steeple, we crowded into our own and only craft but another obstacle arose as LCTs came roaring in on the beach and we were directly in their path. With more luck than anything, we kept from being run down but as we swung around to starboard and seemed to be headed out of trouble, we ran across a steel spike, a secondary defensive measure of the enemy and a huge hole was ripped in our bottom, and try as we might to stop the flow of water, we had to abandon our craft having time to grab our firearms and a few rations.

Luckily we were alongside an LCT and we managed to get aboard her safely. No sooner were we on board than she hit a mine and slowly but surely began to sink. Once again we were fortunate as we abandoned the sinking LCT and made our way on board another LCT. Safely on board her, looking from the bridge, one could see the sunken craft of our flotilla, holes blown through their sides, sunk down to the gunwale, but Maple Leafs still above the water-line. Another look at the now flooded beach showed that our army was advancing swiftly through the town of Bernières-sur-Mer.

Overhead our aircraft were still continuing their umbrella of support.

Finally the LCT we were on, pulled off the beach. We still had a dangerous area to go through of mines but we got through and for the first time in about five hours we had a chance to relax. Never before had I seen so much strain on men's faces. My best chums were ready to chew anyone's head off who passed any remark. I was in the same state. However, after a cigarette and a shot of rum, our nerves were calmed 100% and we were one more civilized. We had lost our five craft and all our

equipment. Two Lewis guns and a few tins of rations which we managed to grab at the last moment were saved.

We were now on our way back to England, a flotilla whose landing craft had been blown from underneath them but whose job had been accomplished, getting the troops on the beach of France.

As we were still able to sight the shore, I had to look again and record the picture in my mind of the sight five hours after the zero hour of D-Day. On shore the town of Bernières-sur-Mer was aflame and through the town our troops were advancing. On the beach tanks were still rolling in a steady stream. Snipers could be seen, still in the church steeples but one by one they were being rounded up and taken to the beach headquarters. Beyond the town, where stretched hilly green fields, dotted with pillboxes, Naval shells were landing with accuracy. The sea itself was massed with hundreds of Allied ships all firing their salvos and making a deafening noise. Landing craft sneaking in and out in continuous stream. Overhead Allied planes roared but no opposition was there. The destruction of their bombs could be seen on shore.

An hour had passed when we were informed that our ship had not gone back to England but was close-by. This was great news. We were cold, dirty, and miserably tired. I longed for a hammock, a good meal and shower.

At 2 p.m. our ship was sighted and we were taken alongside. The ship's company gave us a great welcome. I had my shower, changed my clothes and had a meal and slept. At 5:30 p.m. I awoke hardly able to realize that I was in one piece. The sight of our boys being blown up and the thousands of other sights I saw wouldn't leave my mind. We were now on our way back to England with many casualties on board who had been taken off the beach. Many were dying. One Marine commando, who this time last night, was telling me of his wife and kid was lying on deck covered with blood soaked blankets.

We reached Southampton about 11 p.m. and took all casualties and dead ashore. At 5:00 a.m., we pulled out and anchored at Cowes Isle of Wight.

*The Invasion Diaries*

*Fred Turnbull*

*Veterans Publications, Kemptville, ON, 2007*