

To Normandy:

Then and now

Dacre Smyth

Background

Arriving in Colombo in January 1944 I found that the modern cruiser I was hoping to join had been torpedoed in the Mediterranean and was laid up for repairs in Malta. Instead I was sent to HMS *Danae*, an old World War I D-class light cruiser armed with 6-inch guns in single mountings.

We spent a few months in the Indian Ocean, including some time in the Persian Gulf, which included a trip up the Shatt-al-Arab past Abadan to Basra (an interesting somewhat tricky passage in a cruiser, guided by a gesticulating local Iraqi pilot). The 'Second Front' in Europe, which eventually occurred on 6 June 1944 with the landings at Normandy, was fast approaching. *Danae* was sent to England through the Mediterranean (where we lingered briefly, with stops at Tobruk and Naples) to work up in the Clyde and in Scapa Flow as part of the bombardment force for the invasion.

In Scapa the King, George VI, came up to review the assembled fleet. As one of the smaller and older ships we didn't rate a personal visit, but I took across a platoon of *Danae* sailors to the heavy cruiser HMS *London* where my captain, Captain Haynes, in due course introduced me to the King as he arrived to review our contingent. 'Lieutenant Smyth, your Majesty. He's an Australian,' said the captain. 'Oh, an'nother c'c'colonial,' comments the King.

'Not a colonial, Sir. You should know that,' say I rather cheekily. The captain quickly moved the King on and later gave me a drubbing down for daring to answer him back.

For the landings at Normandy we were part of the bombardment force for the easternmost landings, at Sword Beach, within gunshot of Le Havre. I was the Gunnery Control Officer. I'd also had my leave stopped in Greenock for the weeks before the landings, for security reasons. I'd been given the job of correcting all the voluminous orders for the operation as the corrections were received. I therefore was well briefed on the plans for it all.

Sixty years after all the ensuing events, I found myself invited to join a small group of Australian D-Day veterans returning to Normandy for the 60th anniversary celebrations. Here's my account of the landings, written at the time and slightly edited for this article, and an account of my return to Normandy this year.

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'We slipped unobtrusively out of the Clyde on Friday 2 June 1944, as we had done several times in the previous fortnight. No doubt the shore-side watchers gained the intended impression that we were off for another exercise.

Rear Admiral Patterson was leading this particular force. From HMS *Mauritius* he controlled us, Force 'D' for Dog, the bombardment force of Force 'S', the naval covering force for the Sword Beach area. His cruiser *Mauritius*, ourselves, *Arethusa* and the Polish *Dragon*, following behind with eleven neat little ships of the 40th Minesweeper Flotilla, were strung out in line out some miles ahead of the two battleships *Warspite* and *Ramillies*, with their screen of four 'S' class destroyers and two frigates, *Rowley* and *Holmes*.

Saturday 3rd June passed quietly enough for us, if one could disregard the inescapable undercurrent of excitement and tension that gripped us all. Since early morning, as we crawled southward down the west coast of Britain, we had been constantly passing or being passed by ships bent on the same enterprise. First we overhauled and passed a convoy of some fifty vessels, every one of them one of the famed Liberty ships produced by the Americans. In the afternoon a force of aged US battleships and French cruisers, escorted by US destroyers, came up astern and in time disappeared ahead.

Devon was in sight ahead as we crossed the Bristol Channel, and soon we would be making the Lizard, with its threat of intensive U-boat concentration, and by the next evening we should be on our way to France. Our immediate objective was to be Ouistreham, at the mouth of the Orne.

Sunday the 4th came and to our dismay there'd been a postponement of 24 hours due to the weather. At 0700, just as we'd passed the Lizard, we turned 180 degrees and began retracing our steps. Close behind us another cruiser squadron was doing the same. Consisting of the US ships *Tuscaloosa* and the new *Quincy*, and the British *Glasgow*, *Enterprise*, *Hawkings*, *Bellona* and *Black Prince*, they had just overhauled and passed us at the Lizard when we got word to turn back. Astern of them were *Texas*, *Arkansas* and *Nevada*, the old US battleships, and ahead of us were *Ramillies* and *Warspite*. The delay was all rather disheartening.

Monday the 5th and we'd retraced our steps back again and were at dusk turning south from the Isle of Wright with Portsmouth astern, once again the day had been one long

continuation of ships as we streamed along the coast from Land's End to the Solent. In the last few hours the landing craft had appeared, and to add to the squadrons and the convoys of the warships and merchant ships already at sea. In flotillas of thirty or forty ships, they were coming out from the pre-invasion ports in literally thousands, and turning south for their goal.

Tuesday the 6th, and we had gone to Action Stations at 2215 the night before, turning shortly afterwards into the specially well-swept channel leading to the assault area. This channel, swept a few hours before by hundreds of mine-sweepers, was divided into twelve narrow lanes, each being for ships or groups of different speeds. Being in the faster category, we were continually passing the others throughout the night, as far as the eye could see, the horizon to starboard was covered by the odd silhouettes of the assorted landing craft, each flotilla separated from the next by a few cables only.

Columns of 5000-ton LSAs (Landing Ships Assault) with their davits packed with LCAs (Landing Craft Assault) were surrounded on every side by the LCT and LCI flotillas (Landing Craft Tank and Infantry). Large unwieldy LSTs (Landing Ships Tank), LCFs (Landing Craft Flak), LCTRs (the rocket firing LCTs) and even LCKs (Landing Craft Kitchen) were all ploughing steadily through the choppy sea. These made up the initial D-Day assault craft for the British landings only, the American ships being farther to the westward, so it was not hard to believe that later official statement that over 4000 ships were taking part, besides thousands of smaller craft.

As the night darkened, the sky on our starboard and port bows was lit by brilliant flashes, and over all was a red glow as the Air Force pounded away at the batteries on the Cherbourg and Le Havre peninsulas. At about 0200 I remembered that now the Airborne Divisions were dropping down, inland from the coast, and shortly afterwards the transporters and gliders of the later waves of paratroopers flew overhead slightly to the east of us.

The task of these men was to infiltrate their way back to the coast, silencing such batteries as were not knocked out by the Air Force or ourselves in the hours before the main touchdown.

At 0400 the sky ahead, over Ouistreham and Caen, was being startled into life by glittering, sparkling, corkscrew tracers, flung at our bombers. There was still, however, no sign of enemy attack from our exposed flank to port and, as darkness turned to grey, we drew ahead of the leading landing craft and stood in towards the Seine Estuary. Splitting apart at the apex of the pear shaped swept channel, our bombardment force crept down to its firing position, the leaders meeting again at the bottom as we took up our stations for the first shoots.

At 0510, with twilight beginning, each ship was in her place, still apparently unseen by the shore batteries, drifting quietly with engines stopped, contacting our spotting Spitfires and preparing for the first salvos. At 0517 the eight ships opened up at the pre-arranged battery targets. A slight hitch for us when we failed to contact our aircraft, but we fired away nonetheless with a calculated range at the unseen targets.

Daylight, and shells from hidden German guns on the Havre and Deauville hills to the port began to fall amongst us, but only in such small numbers as to make it obvious that the RAF had done a good job. The landing craft were coming astern, creeping towards the beaches. But first came the beach-drenching, and the destroyers slid inshore, their guns adding to the increasing crescendo of noise as they blasted away at the shoreline. Next came the daylight precision bombers, who smothered the foreshore with their bombs. The rocket LCTs then closed on the beach and opened up with their hundreds of flaming rockets. In answer to them the flak from the shore intensified and smoke poured forth, not only from the burning buildings ashore but also from several of our craft.

But the Germans still seemed dazed. Their air force had not put in a single appearance, and my impression was that it was all too good to last.

Five minutes before H-hour onwards the landing developed into a series of waves of further soldiery and equipment being put ashore from landing craft, which were all the time coming in from seaward. As the army landed, so it disappeared from our point of view into the rows of house, fast becoming rubble, forming the frontage of Ouistreham. From our position we could not hear the gunfire from the shore above our own salvos, but from the flying incendiaries, the sharp bursts of black-smoked explosions, and the powdery disintegration of one building after another, it was obvious that fierce attempts were being made by the Germans to frustrate our advance.

It was at about this stage that, following an urgent call for fire from a unit onshore, we carried out an impromptu indirect bombardment of a position held by the Germans just inland from Ouistreham. We had just bracketed the target (a stubborn gun position, we heard later) when the Spitfire who was spotting for us suddenly went off the air. It was pretty certain that he'd been shot down (later we heard that he had indeed been, but that the pilot was safe). Anyway, nothing daunted we went ahead, firing for effect with rapid fire, and the army was then able to push on.

All this time the shore batteries, particularly those of Le Havre headland and those above Trouville and Deauville to port who were able to enfilade the beaches, were firing steadily. They appeared to divide their attentions equally between the beaches and our force of bombarding ships, and there were some very close misses in amongst our ships. *Ramillies*, *Warspite*, *Arethusa* and the monitor *Roberts* and we ourselves were replying in kind, and very soon the Germans were all keeping quiet, perhaps knowing that their flashes were drawing our fire.

One of their shells, whining over our heads, landed directly aboard an LCT about half a mile away. A blinding flash, a swirl of water, and then nothing but about an acre of fiercely burning oil and wreckage. A great pall of black smoke drifted downward, adding itself to the smokescreen made by MTBs, destroyers and the smoke-laying aircraft to obscure us and the beaches from the Havre batteries.

At about 0800 a slight diversion was caused by a small group of E-Boats who, rounding Le Havre headland came through the smokescreen intent on mischief. Their reception, consisting of very accurate fire from *Mauritius*

and a concerted charge by a dozen or so MTBs, so affected them to cause a very swift turn and a rapidly retreat whence they came.

As the day wore on there still seemed an almost unbelievable lack of opposition from the enemy. Inland, of course, the army was meeting some fierce fighting, but were still pushing on steadily towards Caen. Our FOB ashore (Forward Observation Bombardment Officer) could apparently find no suitable targets for us inland, so we occupied ourselves by joining in the duel with the Deauville and Trouville batteries, at which direct bombardment was possible. Sharing one battery at Houlgate with *Arethusa* and *Roberts*, we had achieved a near hit when a salvo from *Roberts* finished our shoot in that direction. Falling directly onto the target, it produced a high column of smoke and flame. Shortly before this *Ramillies* had also scored a direct hit on a large-calibre battery further north of the peninsula at Benouville, so it became obvious that very little more trouble would come from those quarters.

In about the middle of the afternoon the enemy mounted their first and only air attack of the day. Flying in low and fast, three Junkers 88s sped along the beaches, dropping their bombs and firing their cannon, and then zooming away into the clouds hotly pursued by over a dozen Spitfires. I believe these three formed part of a squadron of a dozen, the others of whom attacked the landings west of us, four being brought down by our fighters.

At half past five in the evening, just over twelve hours after our first shot, we received orders to withdraw. So we left the offshore area and set course northwards at 23 knots. The return journey, accomplished in half the time taken for the outward trip across the Channel, was uneventful so far as enemy interference was concerned. The Channel was even more packed with ships than during the previous night, as there was now a continuous two-way stream; the original assault craft returning empty for more, and complete new flotillas of craft taking out consolidating troops. We dropped anchor in the Solent at 2230.'

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There ended my contemporary account. Years later I learnt that my brother-in-law, Wing Commander Robert Hardiman, had been at Lee-on-Solent commanding nine squadrons of Spitfires (four RAF, four Fleet Air Arm and one US Army Air Corps) which provided the 180 aircraft providing cover and doing spotting for the fleet off Normandy. He had made sure, knowing that I was the Gunnery Control Officer in *Danae*, that I got a good pilot, one Tiny Deveson of the Fleet Air Arm. He was, however, shot down; not by the Germans, but by one of the RN ships abroad which he's been serving shortly before. They kindly sent a boat to pick him up!

Even more years later I learnt all the LSTs at our Sword Beach were under the command of Commander Dyson Hore-Lacy, who in 1949 married the lady who in 1952, became my mother-in-law!

After our hurried trip back to Portsmouth, described above, we spent that night and the next day unloading all our 6-inch ammunition and filling our magazines with an assortment of stores for our new role of depot ship for the

landing craft, support craft, MTBs and assorted small craft.

Back soon at anchor off the beaches I found that, as the control officer of a main armament, which had no ammunition, I no longer had any action station! So I took my guns' crews, and my Royal Marines (of whom I was temporarily in command, as our Captain of Marines had left the ship suffering from shell shock), ashore and reported to the Beachmaster for assorted duties, such as clearing the storm-strewn beaches of wreckage (and some bodies) and helping the army dig trenches as they consolidated their positions approaching the nearby villages.

My captain asked me, before I first went ashore, to try and get a hold of a Camembert cheese. Hardly knowing what it was, I nonetheless managed to acquire a couple in a nearby village, which was newly liberated but which was still in peril from snipers. Proudly handing them to him on the quarterdeck that evening as I disembarked from a DUKW (amphibious truck), I was surprised to see him call an MTB alongside and toss one of the cheeses down to the captain, who sped off at high speed towards England.

'I owe you an explanation,' he said in his cabin, over a gin, ten minutes later. 'When I called on the King before we sailed on this jolly, a week or two ago, he told me that the one thing he'd been missing for five years was Camembert cheese, and he'd be most grateful if I could get him one. The MTB will be met at Portsmouth by a Buckingham Palace car, and HM will have his cheese for breakfast.' (My captain got a CBE after Normandy. I didn't even get to try the cheese).

Our sister ship *Dragon*, which had been given to the Polish Navy earlier in the war, was blown up by a magnetic or acoustic mine near us one day in the days following the landings. She limped towards the nearby 'Mulberry' (an artificial harbour which had been specially placed, using old ships known as 'corncocks' sunk in rows to act as breakwaters) and herself became an additional 'corncock' as she settled onto the shallow bottom. Some weeks later, in Portsmouth, we decommissioned *Danae* and, as I was the last remaining British officer on board after she paid off, I was the one who handed her over to the Polish Navy as a replacement for the ill-fated *Dragon*.

After the war the Royal Navy allowed me to acquire *Danae's* bell, which still adorns my back porch, and the Poles gave me their Golden Cross of Merit.

This year I returned to Normandy with the small group of Australian D-Day veterans who represented Australia at the 60th anniversary celebrations. The Department of Veteran Affairs had somehow tracked me down, and wondered whether I'd like to go. Of course I said yes, and they then had me medically checked over to see if I was fit enough to go. Apparently, I was, so the process of organising the trip got under way.

At about this stage I heard that the veterans were to be given the Legion of Honour by the French. This later became the media's chief interest, and all the media-hype about it became a bit of an embarrassment to me. Anyway, preparations went on apace, and finally on the 1st June this year we gathered in Canberra, neatly fitted out by Veteran Affairs in new navy blazers and charcoal trouser 'uniforms' and a specially designed tie, for briefing by

retired Admiral Simon Harrington, our leader for the trip.

That evening we visited the Australian War Memorial and were given a farewell dinner at Parliament House by Veteran Affairs Minister Donna Vale. Next morning we went to Government House for a reception by the Governor-General, General Jeffery, where the media were in full cry. Then to Sydney and onto a Qantas flight to London.

Early on the 3rd June we arrived in London, with a day then spent being shown the city's principal sights. Next morning to the new Australian War Memorial at Hyde Park for a wreath-laying ceremony and a tour of Wellington Arch, followed by a lunch hosted by the High Commissioner, Michael Le Strange, at his residence, Stoke Lodge. Onto the Eurostar train that evening, and under the Channel to Paris. We seemed to be going terribly fast through the French countryside after we emerged from the tunnel. I asked an attendant how fast. 'Oh, about 240 kilometres an hour,' he said.

Next morning, Saturday 5th June, we were off fairly early to Les Invalides Museum, where the Legion of Honour was to be presented to the American and Australian veterans who weren't getting it from the French President the next day. The other country's veterans, being nearer at hand, had already received theirs in their own country. Some hundred Americans were duly decorated by French cabinet ministers, as were my colleagues Bill Robertson, Charles Turner and Col Wheatley.

Quite a big ceremony it was too, followed by a lunch at the French-American Association's rooms, where we were again honoured to be allowed to join our American friends. In the afternoon we had a guided tour of Paris.

Next morning, 6th June (the D-Day anniversary) off early to catch a train to Caen, and then by bus to Arranches, where the main remembrance ceremony was to take place. Whilst we ate a boned lunch provided for us by the French authorities (they really did organise things for us all very capably) we watched a display by military bands. Then off to a rallying point prior to our march onto the arena, watched by no less than seventeen heads of state and thousands of others. The other three Australian veterans then left me, alone with thirteen others who, representing their countries, were to receive their medals from the

President. This he did with typical French artistry (I rather surprised him by giving him a couple of lapel pins in return, including a kangaroo). We then joined our colleagues to watch an impressive ceremony.

Australia had rounded up some thirsty Australian servicemen from throughout the United Kingdom, who acquitted themselves very well in the 'march past of nations', despite having only had one practice together.

Then more march-pasts, fly-pasts, and sail-pasts, and a moving theatrical event. This featured some hundred black-clad people who wandered disconsolately onto the arena, representing the sadness of the occupation, leading onto the hopes of imminent freedom from their bondage, and culminating in a joyous celebration of the arrival of the allied forces. At this stage a group of young French girls rushed out of the stands where we were sitting, and one presented me with a posy of flowers and a warm kiss on both cheeks—much more meaningful than the President's earlier air-kiss when he gave me my medal.

Off then by speeding bus to the little village of Noyers-Bocage, arriving just ahead of Prime Minister Howard for the ceremony, wreath-laying and reception at the so-called Typhoon Memorial. This commemorates some Australian pilots who lost their lives flying Typhoon fighter-bombers and are remembered along with many other allied pilots.

Back by bus late at night to Paris. Next day, Monday 7th June, a free morning, and then in the afternoon a visit to Notre Dame Cathedral (a wreath-laying at the Commonwealth plaque there), a visit to the Australian Ambassador at the Embassy, and a complicated evening ceremony at the Arc-de-Triomphe, with more wreath-laying and the 'lighting of the flame' at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Finally, that night, a visit to the 'Moulin Rouge' for dinner and the show, with a visit backstage to meet the fourteen Australian girls amongst the show's dancers. A great group of girls—great ambassadors for our country. Home next day via Singapore, with Qantas welcoming us at every turn. A memorable visit! ♦

Commodore Dacre Smyth, AO, RAN (Retd) served at the D-Day landings as a lieutenant. He retired from the RAN in 1978. As one of four Australian D-Day veterans he represented Australia at the 60th anniversary commemorations of the landing.



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