

SECRET

SEABORNE

SEABORNE

**ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS
GROUP 8**

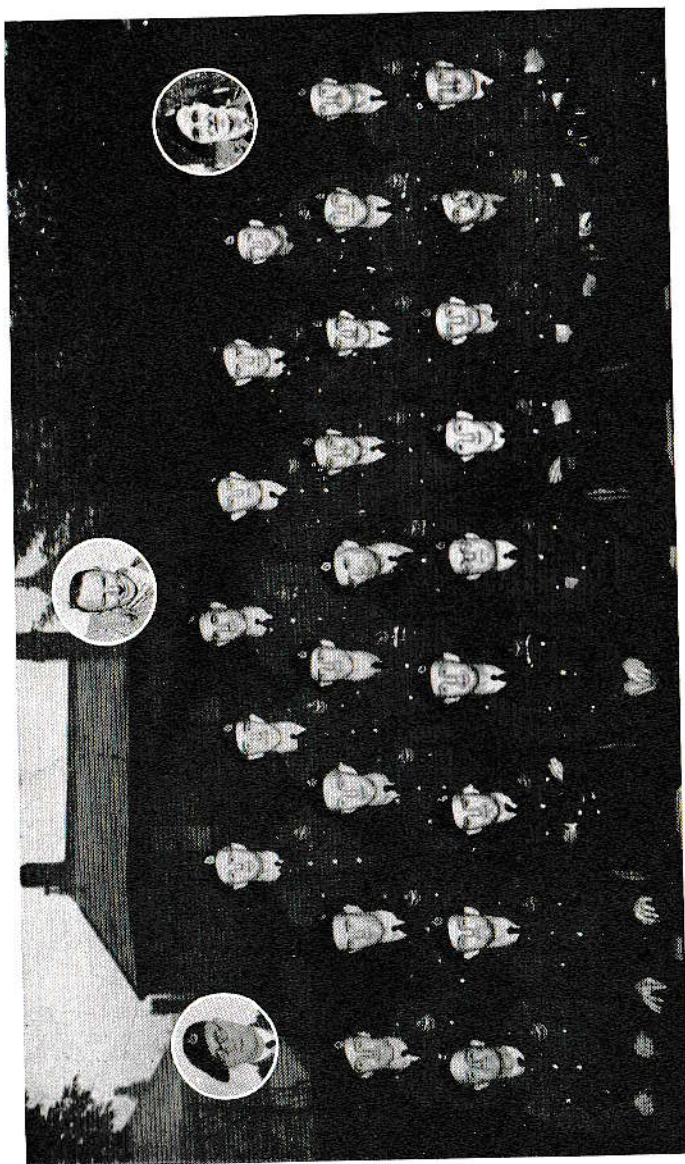
SEABORNE

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Secret Documents.*

Devlin

Winter

Walker



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|------------|------------|---------|---------|----------|---------|
| Reddihough | Turner | Arnold | Pearson | Metcalfe | Gilliat |
| Lister | Mair (H) | Overend | Senior | Frankcom | Morrell |
| | Whitaker | Watkins | Denton | Ward | |
| | Mair (F) | Jones | | | |
| | Scott | Hirst | | | |
| | | Shaw | | | |
| | Scholfield | | | | |
| | Gibbs | | | | |
| | Hitt | | | | |
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SEABORNE

An account of the activities of the volunteers from Group 8 during their period of service with the Royal Navy as Aircraft Identifiers May-July 1944

Edited by Obs./Cdr. H. A. JOWETT M.B.E.
Group Commandant, Group 8

ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS
No. 8 GROUP HEADQUARTERS, LEEDS

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Here is some account of the part taken by the Royal Observer Corps in the invasion of Normandy, and of Group 8's share in it.

The broad outlines of that tremendous and historic operation, its hazards and its success, are known to everyone.

The object of these few pages is to try to present a general picture of Group 8's part in the operation. Perhaps the best way of doing this is to let the story unfold itself from its beginnings, by giving first the appeal for volunteers sent out by the Commandant, Royal Observer Corps, Air Commodore Finlay Crerar, C.B.E., together with other letters subsequently received and sent, and to build up the Group's story from personal letters from our own Seaborne members of Group 8, giving in their own words first-hand stories of their experiences.

The Group 8 Seaborne Observers have very kindly sent me some account of their experiences. I should like to give them all here in full, but as many parts of these letters, particularly in regard to experiences en route, on arrival at Bournemouth, and at the various bases, etc., must of course be very similar, I have tried, by taking extracts from the various reports, to make a composite picture of how the entry into the Royal

Navy was effected, and their subsequent work therein, together with any special individual "high lights" that were experienced during their active Seaborne service.

It will be evident from these personal extracts that every one of Group 8's Seaborne Observers had a remarkable and unforgettable experience, an experience possibly unique in a lifetime. To each Seaborne Observer, looking back on those experiences now that it is all over, it is possibly a pleasurable memory—looking forward to it, with all its unknown hazards and dangers, and making the decision to go, was quite a different thing, and I am sure that every member of Group 8 will wish to join me when I express my tremendous appreciation of the British spirit which prompted those men whose names are recorded overleaf to volunteer for this hazardous and highly important work ; and I am sure also that every one will agree that this appreciation applies equally sincerely to those other men whose names are recorded, who also volunteered for the job but for one reason or another were not able to take an active Seaborne part in it.

May I finish by adding to this an equally sincere appreciation of the spirit of those womenfolk in various homes, to whom the operation was, in its different way, just as hazardous.

H. A. Jowett

Obs./Cdr.

GROUP COMMANDANT

No. 8 Group Headquarters
Leeds

October 1944

SECRET

28th April 1944

A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM THE
COMMANDANT OF THE CORPS TO EVERY MEMBER

CONFIDENTIAL

- 1 I write this message to each of you in every post in the Kingdom and I want you to read it carefully; I want each of you to consider carefully your own position and make up your mind which path yours must be at this most important crossroads. Much depends on your decision.
- 2 Many of you have asked me from time to time whether you could have the chance of taking part in more active operations and I believe many of you who have for so long been on the defensive will welcome the chance to join in the offensive. I can tell you now of what is not only a most important operational requirement but a handsome and well deserved tribute to the skill and value of the Corps to the Fighting Services.
- 3 The Supreme Command has asked me to provide a considerable number of R.O.C. observers to serve on board ship for recognition duties during forthcoming operations. The highest importance is attached to this request, for inefficient and faulty recognition has contributed largely to enemy successes against our shipping and to our losses of aircraft from friendly fire. This request is one which demands the best which the Corps can give; it calls for skill in instant recognition, readiness to share the hardships of the fighting services in amphibious operations and personal sacrifice on the part of those members left behind who must carry on.
- 4 For a long time now the Corps has been confined to a place on the Home Front—an essential and important place, but still a long way from the real offensive. Many of us who know its skill and value to the Air Force have wished that it could go with them overseas but have had to be content at home. The chance has come. It is a great opportunity and I consider it to be one of the most important events in the history of the Corps, a long and honourable history. *We must not let this opportunity pass.* No other organisation possesses our skill and experience in aircraft recognition. Our invasion forces need something which we have got. We cannot fail to give it, and give it *now*.
- 5 Read the special Air Ministry Order which gives all the details of the scheme which has been worked out. You will see that when you volunteer for a month's (or preferably two months') service, you will be entered into the Royal Navy. Every effort will be made to arrange for any two observers so wishing to serve together in the same ship.

6

6 Notice also that you will wear R.O.C. uniform with a Naval armband; and particularly that you will wear a shoulder flash "SEABORNE." I hope and believe that this flash will create history in the R.O.C. and build up for itself and the Corps a prestige in the public eye. Authority will be sought for it to continue to be worn by observers after return to the Corps from special duty. If that is given I am sure it will be a much coveted distinction.

7 I have said that this demand will mean strenuous effort and sacrifice on the part of those left behind. While this scheme is of the highest importance, the primary role of the Corps must not be endangered. The Air Defence of Great Britain will have as great responsibilities as ever. Those who volunteer for Seaborne service will be accepting active service hazards; those who have to remain behind will have to fill their places. I am confident that you will cheerfully play your part whatever it entails and that the reputation of the Royal Observer Corps will shine more brightly than ever.

(Signed) *Finlay Crerar*

Headquarters
Royal Observer Corps

Air Commodore
COMMANDANT
ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

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SECRET

From Headquarters, No. 8 Group, R.O.C.
To Head Observers and all Post Crews
Date 1st May 1944

CONFIDENTIAL

Subject :—

R.O.C. COLLABORATION WITH THE ROYAL NAVY

Here is glorious opportunity :

Since hostile aircraft ceased coming in any numbers to our part of the world, in spite of all the extra work that we now have to do in plotting our own aircraft, we have all felt that the R.O.C. in the north has been deprived of the opportunity of direct contact with the enemy. The action of the Allied High Command in requesting assistance from the R.O.C. is surely the biggest compliment the R.O.C. has ever been paid, and gives a wonderful opportunity to every member of the Corps to volunteer for something that we have all been hoping for, namely, a chance to carry out our specialised Observer Corps work in direct contact with the enemy.

Those who are chosen for this temporary work will have the chance of a lifetime of taking a vital part in the greatest adventure-at-arms that the world has ever known.

It should be a remarkable experience in scores of ways, by its close contact with the masses of materials and ships, etc., of the actual invasion, and also by its personal contacts with the men of the Allied nations who will be responsible for the success of the invasion, with its terrific bearing on ultimate victory.

The main details of the scheme have been put before you, and this Headquarters will put nothing whatever in the way of any man who volunteers. If, for example, both the Head Observer and the Deputy H.O. from any one post volunteer and are accepted, someone will be found to run the post while they are away. Should six or eight men from one post volunteer, and they go, arrangements will be made for the post to be manned somehow.

It is possible that all who volunteer cannot be accepted ; a special Group record will be maintained of all those who volunteer.

I am confident that every member of the Group will make whatever personal sacrifices are necessary to enable the work of his post and

the Corps to go on efficiently whilst these volunteers are away doing this wonderful job, and once the invasion starts, it is reasonable to assume that the ordinary work of the Corps will be of even more vital importance than ever ; to those who cannot go the invasion period may still bring with it many opportunities of doing what, after all, is our primary job, namely, helping to destroy enemy aircraft.

I confidently hope that this Group will be well represented in the distinguished band who volunteer for this special service with the Royal Navy, and I have equal confidence that while our men are away, by extra personal sacrifices from everyone, the normal work of the Group will not suffer in the slightest degree.

H. A. Jowett
Obs. Cdr.
GROUP COMMANDANT

SECRET

25th May 1944

A PERSONAL MESSAGE FROM THE COMMANDANT OF
THE CORPS TO EVERY MEMBER

When I wrote you my personal message on 28th April, I was well aware that large numbers of you would, through one circumstance or another, be prevented from volunteering: and in planning the scheme I was unable to estimate the likely response except largely by guesswork. Largely, but not entirely, for there was one factor on which I knew I could, and did, rely—your enthusiasm and esprit de corps.

Although there is still room for more volunteers I write this time to congratulate you all on the splendid response which you have made—a response which has enhanced the reputation of the Royal Observer Corps, a response which makes me proud to be your Commandant.

My congratulations and praise are not only for those who have already volunteered for seaborne duties, officers and members alike, but equally for those who have shared the unusual administrative burden, for those who have volunteered to take the places of those who have been accepted and to those who have undertaken the strenuous and exacting duties at the Depot and liaison in the Naval Areas.

I have seen many of those who have already been entered into the Royal Navy, proudly wearing the "Seaborne" flash. They have in a short time learned much and they show it in their assurance and bearing. I am satisfied that they will acquit themselves worthily—winning the confidence of those whom they advise and adding still further to the reputation of members of the Corps as experts in recognition.

I think you would wish to join me in repeating to the SEABORNE volunteers the message which has already been sent them by the Air Council "God Speed and Good Luck."

Finlay Crerar

Air Commodore

COMMANDANT

ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

Headquarters
Royal Observer Corps

SECRET

HEADQUARTERS, ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

Organisation Memorandum No. 177

Dated 26th June 1944

Subject :—SEABORNE

Everyone in the Corps will be anxious to have news of the progress of the SEABORNE scheme and of the volunteers who have been taking such an active and responsible part in invasion operations against the Continent. A brief history of the preparations of the scheme and its eventual success will therefore be of interest.

2 When I sent my personal message to you on the 28th April, the time left in which to make the necessary preparations was very short indeed. These arrangements were much more comprehensive than may be imagined, and there was much doubt as to whether the scheme could be implemented fully in time. These doubts, however, rapidly disappeared as a result of the enthusiasm with which the Corps received the scheme and the way in which all the considerable team of Instructors and Assistants threw themselves into the task. Everyone concerned was prepared to, and often did, work day and night continuously in the few weeks left before "D" day, and results justified the great sacrifices which were made.

3 By 7th May volunteers had started to arrive at the Depot at Bournemouth, the Instructors having arrived the night before to find accommodation scattered over different parts of the town, and with the evacuating unit still in main possession. The necessary equipment and stores were still undelivered, but as they arrived Instructors and Observers soon had the lorries unloaded. In one case seven tons were unloaded by ten officers in thirty-five minutes.

4 Very quickly the Depot got into its stride, the training was efficiently organised, the food was good, the quarters were as comfortable as could be, and the atmosphere was characterised by enthusiasm for the job and anxiety to get at the Hun.

Never before had so many Officers and Observers of the Corps got together—slept, worked and eaten as a body, and it was quickly clear that this aspect of the scheme alone was having tremendous value. Men were discussing their common problems, discovering fresh points of view which they had not suspected even existed, and were beginning to realise the extent and importance of their own Service. The people of Bournemouth were quickly aware of the strange uniform, or at least the unusual beret, and it was pleasant to hear local comment on the favourable comparison which the Royal Observer Corps was creating with the many tens of thousands of servicemen who had been temporarily situated there.

5 Much of the initial discussion and legislation for the scheme had to be rushed and, since there were so many interests concerned, Ministries and Service Departments, it was remarkable that agreement was achieved so quickly in the multitude of matters involved. Although at the beginning it was stated that the Naval authorities would be prepared to accept men who had been disabled, this later proved to be incorrect, and unfortunately some gallant Observers who volunteered and got as far as the Depot had to be rejected. In view of their disabilities, their spirit was much admired and it was extremely disappointing to me to fail to secure their acceptance.

6 The Air Staff at the Air Ministry had directed that only the highest standard of skill must be used for this job, and accordingly the Trade Test was a stiff one and a proportion of the volunteers had to be rejected, although if time had permitted they could quickly have been coached to the necessary standards. Many of these men, however, volunteered to man posts where volunteers had been accepted, and they continue to do excellent work in their temporary locations.

7 By 15th May the first SEABORNE observers had been drafted away to their ships, and by "D" day, almost five hundred were on board ship and making history. In the next few days many more followed until by 13th June seven hundred had been absorbed by the Navy. As I write another course of SEABORNE volunteers is going through the Depot to make a grand total of almost eleven hundred to date, including a proportion of the considerable number of officers who volunteered but all of whom could not be spared.

8 Some of these have returned on the expiry of their month's service, but the great majority have remained for two months. Many reports have been received from them on their experiences, and these have been supplemented by reports from Ship's Captains, Naval Authorities and Air Commanders. Although at first Observers were sometimes received on board ship with scepticism, they very quickly proved their worth and generally gun crews and ship's officers were amazed at the skill which they showed. In the course of a day or two days at most their reports on identity were accepted without question and, as a result, very many aircraft and air crews were saved from a barrage of friendly fire and probable destruction such was the low level at which they had to fly.

9 Inevitably there have been some Corps casualties and there may be more, but happily none fatal so far. The success of the Corps in the task given to it is, however, proved beyond question. You will have seen Organisation Memorandum 176 which repeats the message of praise and congratulation from the Air Commander-in-Chief, Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, K.C.B., D.S.O. Similar praise has been loudly repeated by all services who have come into contact with our men . . .

10 Very great interest has been shewn in this scheme generally and the implications which it carried. It may well be that the Corps has made the Armed Services realise that aircraft identification is a skilled art and must in future operations be practised only by specialists.

Many high ranking officers and officials visited the Depot while training was going on. Amongst others were Air Marshal Sir Roderic Hill, K.C.B., M.C., A.F.C., Air Marshal Commanding Air Defence of Great Britain, who represented the Air Commander-in-Chief and carried messages of good wishes from him; the Under Secretary of State for Air, Lord Sherwood, accompanied by his Parliamentary Private Secretary, the Viscount Wimborne; Mr. W. B. Foden who represented the Permanent Under Secretary of State for Air, Sir Arthur Street, K.C.B., K.B.E., C.M.G., C.I.E., M.C., who was prevented at the last moment from visiting the Depot personally; Vice Admiral Sir F. Murray Austin, K.B.E., C.B., Inspector of Merchant Navy Gunnery; Captain D. C. Bayne, R.N., D.T.D., D.E.M.S. Division, and all of these expressed the warmest admiration for the spirit shewn by the volunteers and for the efficient and thorough training given by the Royal Observer Corps and Naval Staff there.

11 It was obvious in this scheme that the limelight would fall on those who volunteered and were chosen to become "Seaborne." It has, however, been quite plain to the Air Marshal Commanding A.D.G.B., and to myself and to Headquarters Staffs, that magnificent efforts have been made, successfully made, to keep the work of the Corps going smoothly and with without interruption or loss of efficiency. That has been possible only by ungrudging sacrifice by very large numbers of Officers and Members and I am fully conscious of what that has meant where the load was already heavy. It has not passed unnoticed but has excited favourable comment on the wonderful team spirit of the Corps.

12 This scheme has proved the versatility of the Corps, it has proved that aircraft identification is a specialist job which cannot be efficiently performed by anyone other than a trained and experienced observer devoting his entire concentration to it; and most important of all, it has made possible the claim that the Corps is sharing in the final assault on Hitler's Europe.

Finlay Crerar

Air Commodore

COMMANDANT

ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

SECRET

Organisation Memorandum No. 176
Dated 21st June 1944

HEADQUARTERS, ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

Subject :—SEABORNE VOLUNTEERS

The following message from the Air Commander-in-Chief, Allied Expeditionary Air Force is circulated for the information of all officers and observers of the Royal Observer Corps :—

20th June, 1944

To :—Air Marshal Commanding, Air Defence of Great Britain
Commandant, Royal Observer Corps

I have read reports from both pilots and naval officers regarding the seaborne volunteers on board merchant ships during the recent operations.

2 All reports agree that the seaborne volunteers have more than fulfilled their duties and have undoubtedly saved many of our aircraft from being engaged by ships' guns.

3 I should be grateful if you would please convey to all ranks of the Royal Observer Corps, and in particular to the seaborne volunteers themselves, how grateful I, and all pilots in the Allied Expeditionary Air Force, are for their assistance, which has contributed in no small measure to the safety of our own aircraft, and also to the efficient protection of the ships at sea.

4 The work of the Royal Observer Corps is often quite unjustly overlooked, and receives little recognition, and I therefore wish that the service they have rendered on this occasion be as widely advertised as possible, and all Units of the Air Defence of Great Britain are therefore to be informed of the success of this latest venture of the Royal Observer Corps.

T. Leigh-Mallory
Air Chief Marshal

AIR COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF
ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY AIR FORCE

The Commandant of the Royal Observer Corps has replied as follows :—

From :—Commandant, Royal Observer Corps

To :— Air Chief-Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, K.C.B.,
D.S.O., Air Commander-in-Chief, Allied Expeditionary
Air Force

Copy to Air Marshal Commanding Air Defence of Great Britain
Date 20th June 1944

I should like to express my very warm thanks for the generous tribute you have paid to seaborne volunteers in particular—and the Royal Observer Corps in general—in your message of 20th June.

Your message will be highly prized by all ranks of the Corps and especially by the seaborne volunteers and will do much to stimulate all of us to even higher efficiency.

Finlay Crerar

Air Commodore

COMMANDANT
ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

SECRET

Organisation Memorandum No. 183
Dated 26th July 1944

HEADQUARTERS, ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

Subject :—CONGRATULATORY MESSAGE

The following message from the Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief, and the reply of the Commandant, Royal Observer Corps is reproduced for the information of all officers and members of the Corps, and in particular to those who participated in the Seaborne scheme.

Date 21st July 1944

To :— Commandant, Royal Observer Corps
From :—Office of Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief

ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS PERSONNEL

Before all the members of the Royal Observer Corps leave the merchant ships in which they have served, I should like to express my admiration of the enthusiastic and zealous way in which they performed their duty. I have received many commendations on their excellent performance which undoubtedly saved a number of ships and the lives of many of our own airmen. In particular, Rear Admiral Alan G. KIRK, U.S.N., who commanded the Western Task Force in the operation has asked that his appreciation may be conveyed to the members of your Corps who served in ships in his area.

2 I should be glad if this could be done and at the same time if every member who embarked could be informed of my appreciation of his valuable service.

With best wishes for the continued success of the Royal Observer Corps.

B. H. Ramsay
Admiral

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25th July 1944

The Commandant of the Royal Observer Corps has replied as follows :—

From :—Commandant, Royal Observer Corps
To :— Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief

ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS PERSONNEL

Your message of 21st July, 1944, will be very warmly welcomed throughout the Royal Observer Corps setting as it does the seal of approval on the SEABORNE scheme.

2 That Members of the Corps have been privileged to serve, even for a month or two, alongside the men under your command was an honour and an opportunity as unexpected as it was welcome. Your message proves that our services have contributed directly to the saving of ships and lives, and thus we are sufficiently rewarded.

3 I am grateful to you and Rear Admiral Alan G. Kirk, United States Navy for your kind and generous tribute and shall promulgate it immediately to all concerned.

Finlay Crerar
Air Commodore
COMMANDANT

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ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS

No. 8 GROUP

Members of No. 8 Group, Royal Observer Corps, who took active part in Seaborne Operations.

			<i>Page</i>
Obs. E. Arnold	Z 1 Post	Barwick-in-Elmet	59
" W. Denton	X 1 "	Darton	76
L/Obs. J. Devlin	T 4 "	Gargrave	43
Obs. G. Frankcom	V 3 "	Guiseley	58
" J. Gibbs	Z 4 "	Bramley	71
" A. R. Gilliat	V 1 "	Harewood	48
C/Obs. E. W. Hirst	Q 1 "	Holmfirth	47
Obs. A. Ll. Hitt	V 3 "	Guiseley	66
" W. A. Jones	W 3 "	Sowerby Bridge	87
" S. Lister	V 1 "	Harewood	85
" F. W. S. Malir	V 3 "	Guiseley	65
L/Obs. H. A. S. Malir	V 3 "	Guiseley	62
Obs. H. E. Metcalfe	Z 3 "	Rothwell	81
" J. Morrell	W 1 "	Thornton	80
L/Obs. J. W. Overend	X 1 "	Darton	74
Obs. G. L. Pearson	Z 1 "	Barwick-in-Elmet	56
" C. S. Reddihough	T 1 "	Beamsley	78
" J. Scholfield	W 2 "	Todmorden	83
" A. Scott	Q 2 "	Heckmondwike	86
" A. Senior	X 1 "	Darton	
C/Obs. A. Shaw	V 3 "	Guiseley	51
Obs. N. E. Turner	Z 4 "	Bramley	86
" J. D. Walker	Q 3 "	Crosland Moor	45
" W. Ward	T 2 "	Keighley	36
" J. W. Watkins	X 2 "	Ecclesfield	70
" H. Whitaker	W 3 "	Sowerby Bridge	40
" A. L. Winter	V 1 "	Harewood	79

The following officers of No. 8 Group carried out liaison duties at the ports of embarkation.

Obs./Lt. A. Quarmby
Obs./Off. J. E. Lumb

The following members of the Group also volunteered for Seaborne Operations, but were not called upon to take part.

L/Obs. R. S. Bailey	Z 4 Post	Bramley
Obs. S. R. Bolton	T 1 "	Beamsley
" A. Cryle	P 1 "	Buckden
" J. W. Davy	T 3 "	Cowling
" E. G. Dennison	T 2 "	Keighley
" A. Douglas	Q 2 "	Heckmondwike
" H. C. Harrison	S 3 "	Darley
" M. Hebden	S 1 "	Sawley
" F. R. Poole	P 1 "	Buckden
" T. L. Price	X 4 "	Wickersly
" P. G. Rawlings-Smith	X 4 "	Wickersly
" H. Reasbeck	R 3 "	Blaxton
" J. E. Slater	P 2 "	Grassington
" E. Sunter	Y 1 "	Knottingley
C/Obs. A. Swales	Q 2 "	Heckmondwike
Obs. W. H. Sykes	Q 1 "	Holmfirth
" S. Thewlis	Z 1 "	Barwick-in-Elmet
C/Obs. A. Thornton	Z 2 "	Barkston Ash
Obs. A. Tilsley	R 3 "	Blaxton

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

On their return from the Seaborne operation, each Observer taking part was asked to send in to Group Headquarters some personal account of the operation, and this they have very kindly done.

Most of these reports contained accounts of the assembly at the base at Bournemouth, the instruction given there, the provision of sea-going equipment, and the details of their entry into the Royal Navy, etc., etc., and most of these could not help but be very similar in detail.

Obs. W. A. Jones of W 3 Post, sent in a very full and comprehensive account of the events leading up to the actual Seaborne operations, and as his account appears to cover very well and very completely the general procedure, this is being given in full, as representing the sort of experiences that each member had. The rest of the matter given will be confined to extracts from the reports which deal with the actual active Seaborne operations.

To have given here the reports in full as sent in by each Observer would obviously have involved the repetition of much similar matter, therefore only what are thought to be the more typical and interesting extracts from each Observer's experience are given here.

PRELIMINARIES

W. A. JONES W3

1 Preliminary

We left Leeds at 10 o'clock on the morning of Sunday, May 7th, and reached Bournemouth about twelve hours later. The reception arrangements were not very satisfactory, as the unit in the billets assigned to us had not yet moved out. However, we got settled in at last, and had our first experience of the extraordinarily good feeding arrangements provided by the R.C.A.F. at the Bowling Green in the shape of a very good meal rather before midnight. We got down to it straight away the next morning, and we thoroughly enjoyed our fortnight's stay at Bournemouth, after we knew that we had passed the really very stiff trade test. This consisted of a cinema film of a type which was quite new to me, and I think to most of us from Group 8. Thirty planes appeared on the screen in succession for varying lengths of time up to about five seconds, in any part of the screen but where you expected them, and in shapes and sizes varying from an Me.109 at 10,000 feet ten miles away, to a pin's head of dirt just disappearing out of the top left-hand corner. The one redeeming feature of the test was that, even if one could not identify the particular aircraft, one did score half marks for stating correctly whether it was friendly or hostile. During the first week at Bournemouth we had aircraft recognition instruction of all possible sorts—films, photographs, silhouettes, the Hunt trainer, moving models, quizzes, etc., followed at the end of the week by a passing-out test of the same type as the initial trade test, which presumably, thanks to the thorough soaking in recognition that we had experienced during the week, seemed very much easier than the trade test, and which, according to the instructors, showed that we had all made definite progress. So far as I am concerned, I felt that I benefited enormously from being in the company of men like Arthur Winter, Jim Morrell, and the Malir Brothers, all of

Jones

whom, and particular Arthur Winter, are to my mind outstandingly good at recognition and very keen on it, and we spent quite a bit of our spare time at the Instruction School putting each other through our paces. Incidentally, I might mention here that we were divided up at Bournemouth into Squadrons of thirty, and careful records were kept of all the marks each Squadron obtained in all the many tests that we took, and our Squadron I believe remained at the head of the list with something in the neighbourhood of 90%, though I cannot give the exact figure.

Apart from Aircraft Recognition, we had the inevitable but very good Security Lectures and Films, some elementary but very sensible First Aid, and a most interesting talk on the rights and duties of Prisoners of War by a Naval Officer, who had escaped from a prison camp. We also spent two days at the Royal Naval School, where a Lieutenant Commander Canner and a number of absolutely first-rate Chief Petty Officers did all they could to give us some idea of what to do, or perhaps more correctly what not to do on board ship. A good deal of what they told us was of no use to us, because it applied more particularly to life in the Royal Navy as opposed to the Merchant Navy, and to long distance trips instead of the short trips on which we were engaged, but this was no fault of theirs, as neither they nor we knew then exactly what we were going to do, or how or where we were going to do it, and there is no doubt at all, from my own subsequent experience, that the absorption of even that small amount of nautical atmosphere did many of us a lot of good, and at least saved us from referring to the bows of the ship as the front end, or the deckhead as the ceiling.

The final and by far the most helpful bit of recognition instruction that we got at Bournemouth was the R.A.F. Circus, which consisted of all the likely British Invasion Planes other than four-engined machines, together with an Me.109F or G, an Fw.190 which was really a delightful little plane, and a Ju.88, which I still think is horribly con-

fusable with some of the Bristol family in certain positions. The pilots gave us a really good look at the planes. They flew very low, in fact too low for the local residents who complained bitterly, and I understand quite ruined the Circus on following occasions—and we got every possible view of each plane. There is no doubt that seeing actual planes is worth all the films, photographs and silhouettes in the world, though I admit that these should come first, but even then I had the uncomfortable feeling that the only way I could be certain of knowing an Me.109 was not a Spitfire when head on at any distance was that it was shooting me up!

Before leaving Bournemouth we were asked to pair off as we should be sent to ships in pairs. As one of the original twelve from Group 8 had dropped out in the Trade Test and the other ten were paired before they left Yorkshire, I had to find another mate in the shape of a lad of 17½ called Ronnie Hayter from a post just outside Grantham. He proved to be a very nice lad who knew his aircraft, and we got along very happily together.

We left Bournemouth on Monday, May 22nd (ten of us in all, the Malir Brothers, Arthur Winter and George Frankcom having been previously posted to Weymouth) for Southampton where we were posted to H.M.S. *Shrapnel*. H.M.S. *Shrapnel* may sound all right, but instead of being, as the name suggests, a gallant man-of-war she, or rather it, turned out to be the old South-Western Railway Hotel right in the heart of Southampton Dock, and a dirtier and more depressing place it would be hard to imagine.

There had been several air raids in the neighbourhood while we were at Bournemouth and at Southampton there were several more, the unpleasant part about them being the filthy black smoke-screen which was put up all round H.M.S. *Shrapnel* whenever the sirens went. The smoke-screen was certainly very efficient in blotting out the landscape, but it was so thick and acrid that it nearly blotted out some of the sailors as well.

We had had more than enough of Southampton by the end of May, and were very pleased to be posted to H.M.S. *Chrysanthemum* on Thursday, June 1st. H.M.S. *Chrysanthemum* is an actual ship, to be exact a Training Ship of the Royal Navy, moored just off the Thames Embankment not far from Westminster. The *Chrysanthemum* was much more our idea of the Navy, as she was clean and well kept, and we were well looked after by a Chief Petty Officer detailed for the job. The only snags were that we were rather badly overcrowded, as there were some ninety Observers there instead of the thirty-five they had expected, and also that although we were granted shore leave, they had rather annoying ideas as to the time at which even such exalted members of the Navy as Petty Officer Aircraft Identifiers should be back on board. While we were attached to the *Chrysanthemum* we had the experience of attending Divisions on the Quarter Deck, and the hoisting of the White Ensign. Apart from this we did very little except again attend some gunnery lectures and test the standard navy life-saving jacket in the local swimming baths. This reminds me that we were issued with really first-rate naval kit at Bournemouth, in addition to a spare R.O.C. uniform, R.A.F. boots, socks, shirt and pullover. The naval kit consisted of a very gaudy but effective blue and orange life jacket, complete with electric lamp and whistle, a duffel coat which is a very thick, rather short fawn coloured coat, felted practically solid to resist wind and weather, and with a big hood that comes right over the head, an enormous oilskin coat and sou'wester hat, and a pair of large heavy sea boots which I never wore. In addition, of course, one had a hammock which consists of a square of very heavy canvas about six feet square, a kapok mattress with a cover, and two enormous and very warm pure white naval blankets, not to mention an alarming collection of rope, all of which we found had peculiar names, such as lashings, clews and nettles, and of course a particular purpose in slinging or stowing the hammock. The objection

to this otherwise excellent equipment was that it was very bulky and the kit bag extremely heavy to cart about.

After three pleasant days on the *Chrysanthemum*, we were posted to Tilbury, and on the afternoon of Sunday, June 4th, we went aboard our ship, which was the s.s. *Fort Slave*, a Canadian built ship completed in 1942.

2 The Ship

Fort Slave is a steam-driven cargo carrying ship, of what is known as 10,000 tons dead weight. This conveys very little to my mind, the more useful guide to her size being the fact that she was some 450 feet long, and about 50 feet wide across the widest part. She had five of the usual cargo carrying holds, with the usual derricks and winches for getting the cargo in and out, and in addition could carry a fair amount of deck cargo.

The Chief Officer (Mr. Hennessey) showed us to our quarters and I must admit that when I first saw them and realised that I had to live there for several weeks, my heart sank with a bump. There was no spare accommodation on the ship, and we lived with the gunners, who are attached to all "Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships," some of them being members of the Maritime Regiment of the Royal Artillery, and some sailors. The accommodation was aft, very near the stern of the ship, and below deck. The stairs down to the cabin (strictly speaking there are no such things as stairs in a ship, they are either companionways, gangways or ladders) were so steep that it was quite impossible to carry a kit bag down them, and one simply had to drop the kit bag and hammock and clamber down as best one could after them. Needless to say, we soon got used to these "stairs," and on certain occasions found ourselves able to get up them and on to the deck surprisingly quickly! The cabin which we were to occupy measured roughly 16 feet by 12 feet and at first glance it seemed to be a very good imitation of the Black Hole of Calcutta. A certain amount of daylight came through

three portholes, and what looked to me like a square hole in the roof, which I afterwards discovered was the emergency escape hatch in case one was trapped down below. But the electric light was on and the cabin seemed to be completely full of what looked like the finest collection of toughs I'd ever seen. It was a hot day, and the deck was made of steel, and as all the occupants of the cabin were, as usual, smoking and had been since rather before they were awake that morning, the atmosphere may be imagined. Round three sides of this cabin were arranged twelve bunks in two tiers, of which all but two were obviously already occupied. I found that I had been allocated the lower bunk of the four that ran across the ship and the one nearer the side of the ship, in fact my feet rested on the degaussing line which ran all round the ship at just about the water line. Although the bunks that ran lengthways had steel spring beds, the four transverse bunks were made of wood extremely solid and unyielding, so it seemed to me! As they had a side piece built on to prevent you rolling out and were about 5 feet 8 inches long by 2 feet wide, the lower bunks were as much like a coffin as could be imagined, the lid being the bottom of the top bunk which was less than 2 feet 6 inches above the lower one. The lengthways bunks on the outside of the ship were bolted to the transverse bunks about half-way down their length so that the opening for getting into my bunk was something rather less than 2 feet 6 inches square. I soon got the knack of getting in and out of it—and more particularly out of it—quickly and without damage, and once in it I slept like a top, thanks to my hammock mattress on top of the mattress provided by the ship, which also provided blankets, a pillow and, much to my surprise, a pair of navy blue sheets. The one drawback to my bunk, which I only got used to with some difficulty, was in the matter of feet! I had to sleep with my head at the open end of my bunk or I should have got no light or air at all, and this meant the feet of the man who slept in the other lower transverse bunk

were only separated from my head by a piece of wood about 6 inches high, and of course any bedclothes, and usually socks, that he had on. I also had the feet of the man of the lower lengthways bunk level roughly with my waist. This last man was quite good at washing his feet, which I think he must have done once a week almost without fail, but the man whose feet nearly touched my head, and who incidentally was one of the best in all other respects, obviously had very little use for water for either internal or external application, and still less use for soap!

We did make mild enquiries as to whether it would be possible for us to be given a little more spacious accommodation. . . . However, it was obvious that unless some of the regular members of the ship's staff who had such cabins were turned out of them, there was nothing to be done, so we said no more about it. After making enquiries, we returned to our quarters again to see what could be done about stowing our gear and getting our bunks ready for the night. As the cabin in addition to the bunks also held a long mess table, with three forms, not to mention a cupboard, in which were kept "dry rations" i.e. half-a-dozen loaves of bread and the week's rations for twelve men of butter, cheese, sugar, tea, cocoa, coffee, jam, marmalade and tinned fruit, plus crockery and cutlery, it was obvious that one could not keep one's kit bag there, and I decided to leave in my kit bag anything I should not be very likely to want, and it was stowed outside the cabin along with about 25 others. The only stowage accommodation for clothing inside the cabin was one's bunk, which in my case was not exactly commodious, and a locker with a removable lid about two feet square underneath one of the lengthways bunks which could be tilted up to enable you to get at it. As my locker was at the opposite end of the cabin from my bunk, and to get to it (or to get out of the cabin) I had to walk along the mess table or one of the forms, and as the locker when I got to it was under another bunk, it was obvious that this again could only be used to hold a

sort of first line reserve of things which I should not want very frequently. Luckily, while at Bournemouth I had had some black American oilcloth bags made for holding various things, and had also bought a large haversack, and I found that these solved the problem very satisfactorily. After a walk round Tilbury Docks, I came back with plenty of nails, and borrowed a hammer to knock some of them into the sides of the bunk near the "lid" and reasonably far from my head. On these I hung my bags containing washing and shaving kit, handkerchiefs, and small changes of clothing, together with a towel, sponge, collar and tie, and I also managed to rig up a large hook made of thick copper wire on which I could hang my uniform on the comparatively rare occasions when one went to bed undressed. We then got our bunks made and, as I have mentioned before, they proved very comfortable indeed.

We found that we were quartered with the soldier gunners, i.e. those who belonged to the Maritime Regiment of the Royal Artillery. There were eight of them, with a sergeant in charge, assisted by a bombardier and a lance bombardier, all three of whom, and outstandingly the sergeant, were first-rate N.C.O's. Actually the sergeant shared a small cabin with the petty officer who was in charge of the sailor gunners, though he messed with us, and the remaining bunks in our cabin were occupied by sailors. When we got to know them, we found that all the gunners were a first-rate lot of men, mostly between twenty and thirty, and I was very sorry indeed when the time came to say good-bye to them. Their language, to begin with, was distinctly startling though somewhat monotonous, as there was so little variety in their choice of adjectives, but one soon realised that it was merely a silly habit and meant nothing at all, and it was extraordinary how well they all got on together in spite of living and having lived for some time in such very cramped quarters, this small cabin being their only place for sleeping, eating and "living." The rest of the gunners

lived in a similar cabin on the other side of the ship. Both soldiers and sailors went out of their way to look after the two of us, and far from resenting our presence as they perhaps might have done, they seemed only too pleased to have us there, and I think I can fairly say that they soon had complete confidence in our knowledge of planes, of which several of them, particularly among the soldiers, had quite a good knowledge.

For the first ten days or so we messed with the soldier gunners, and shared with them the duties of mess orderly, known on board ship as "Peggying." The two "Peggies" for the day were responsible for sweeping out the cabin in the morning, first thing after breakfast (this was a very necessary job, because with the exception of the bombardier and myself all the men smoked cigarettes from rather before they were awake in the morning until rather after they were asleep last thing at night, and also during the night when they came off watch, and 90% of the matches, ash and cigarette ends went on the floor), for fetching dry rations from the steward if they were on duty on Monday when this was done, for fetching the meals from the galley and washing up, and for preparing tea, coffee or cocoa in the middle of the morning and the middle of the afternoon, and usually about 10-30 at night. The Peggies also drew from the Steward the weekly free issue of 100 cigarettes, two boxes of matches, 1 cake of soap (either the toilet variety or what is called Dobey Soap for washing clothes), 6 oz. of boiled sweets and 4 oz. of chocolate, provided for each man by the Ministry of Transport. Washing up was by far the most tricky part of peggying, as it had to be done in about eight inches of warm water at the bottom of a bucket, and if there was a pudding (usually known as "afters") as well as a meat course, and one had to wash up the twelve plates and forks between the courses, it became a little difficult to tell when one washed the twelfth plate for the second time whether one had washed it or not. However, one's appetite soon became so keen

that one took no notice of any evidence of yesterday's breakfast on to-day's dinner plate. On the other hand, I must admit that I drank left-handed most of the time I was on board.

After the first ten days or so, we were invited by the Master of the ship to take our meals in the saloon with the ship's officers, which was a very pleasant change, as meals were very well served, though the food itself was identical with what the gunners and the ship's crew had. There was any amount of it, and after we had got a new First Cook, the cooking was really very good considering the very small space and rather poor cooking facilities available. The First Cook undoubtedly had his good points, but cleanliness was not one of them, and it was truly said that the only time when his hands were clean was after he had made the bread!

From my experience the Merchant Navy are undoubtedly very well fed indeed, with plenty of first-rate food, and I gather that on the whole the standard of cooking is quite reasonable. The new First Cook that we had certainly seemed to me excellent, and except on one occasion, when there was said to be a fifty-mile-an-hour gale in the Channel and when for a few hours my sole interest in food was in the past tense, I enjoyed my meals on board very much.

The ship's officers were a very good lot, and we were fortunate in being in such a very "happy" ship, in which the crew liked and respected the officers. The master was a Captain Storm, and although at 45 he was apparently somewhat young to have been a master for as long as he had been, he obviously knew his job and gave one a very pleasant feeling of confidence. The other officers were all very pleasant and helpful, and particularly the second mate, who was the gunnery officer and, therefore, in charge of the gunners and "Aircraft Identifiers."

Our place of duty was on what is known as the monkey bridge, which is a platform above the wheelhouse, or bridge. The monkey bridge ran the full width of the ship, with a

gun pit at either end of it, and two twin machine guns on a platform just aft of it. In the centre of the monkey bridge was a small "pulpit" about four feet square, and about four feet above the monkey bridge, and we spent most of our lookout time in that as we got a better view from there than anywhere else.

There was a voice pipe from the pulpit down to the wheel-house, and a telephone from there to most of the gun positions, but it was generally understood that if the guns on the monkey bridge opened fire, the other guns followed suit, as they could quickly see from the tracers of the bridge guns where the target was. . . .

. . . I was rather startled at first to find that we were expected to be able to identify a plane almost as soon as it could be seen at all with the naked eye, that is to say, at *fully* five miles distance in many cases, and sometimes more! However, thanks to the splendid binoculars with which we were provided (a brand new pair of 7×50) we were able to give a prompt and positive identification nine times out of ten, and our decision was accepted without question.

We found the special invasion markings a very great nuisance, as it was surprising the extent to which such simple and straightforward marks appeared to alter the shape of a plane at certain angles.

Our hours of duty were from dawn to dusk, whenever we were outside the boom at Southend or the Solent, including any time we spent anchored off the beach head. It was left to us to split the watches as we liked and we usually worked from about 4.30 a.m. to breakfast time at about 8.30, and then changed over until dinner-time about 12.30, and then again till tea at about 5. From 5 till 11.30 we split into two duties of about 3 and 3½ hours each, and the man who was on until 11.30 did not get up for the 4.30 watch the next morning. Whenever we were at "action stations," or whenever there was any expectation of anything special happening, as was often the case at dawn or dusk, we were both on duty together.

We did not come in contact very much with the actual crew of the ship, with the exception of a few of them, who quite often came into our quarters to borrow a book or have a talk, play cards, or have a cup of tea. As they have no uniform and wear the most amazing collection of mixed clothes, and as each man invariably carries a large knife in a leather sheath hung round his waist, they look a *very* tough lot. With very few exceptions, however, the crew of the *Fort Slave* was considered by the officers to be a good one, and the few I got to know at all well proved to be very good sorts and very hard workers. They had considerably better accommodation than the gunners, as they had quite a large mess room up on deck quite separate from their sleeping quarters which were just aft of ours, and several of the senior members of the crew shared two- and four-berth cabins.

I found that one of the biggest difficulties on board was to keep one's self and one's clothes clean. The washing accommodation consisted of a room about seven feet square containing a cold shower and two tin basins with cold water taps. All water had to be pumped up from tanks in the holds into a tank above the wash-house, which was usually empty, particularly on our outward journeys, as the water was used by the troops on board as well as by ourselves. Our small wash-house was used by all twenty-five gunners, and although we took up the wooden floor and scrubbed it thoroughly at the end of each trip, it was almost invariably covered with a thin coating of mud, which was really unavoidable with so many people going in and out all day for a wash, and to have a bath, or in other words a shower, took a very considerable time if one was to avoid stepping with a bare foot on the muddy floor or dropping any of one's clothes on it, and involved a good deal of balancing on the edge of the shower, which was no easy matter in rough weather! Clothes were washed (or dobed) in the same place, and were hung up to dry on all sorts of odd bits of string, hung wherever there was a reasonable draught and where they were not

Jones

likely to get knocked down or touch the walls (or more correctly, bulkheads), which were usually rather grimy. One could occasionally hang one's dobeys on deck, but there was always a risk of them blowing away, or being made dirtier than they were before owing to a change in the wind bringing smuts from the funnel on to them. Altogether, it was no easy matter to keep one's self and one's clothing, particularly towels, decently clean, and I had a good deal of sympathy with those members of the crew who found it more convenient to go apparently unwashed, and certainly unshaved, from leaving dock to getting back again. The gunners on the whole were very good at keeping themselves decent, and apart from themselves and their clothes, we turned our quarters out and scrubbed the floor thoroughly with strong disinfectant after each trip !

I have put in a good deal of detail about our life on board ship, not because I wish in any way to over-emphasize the unpleasant side of it, but simply because it was all so different from one's ordinary existence that I thought it would be of some interest. I should like to make it perfectly clear that once we got used to living in very cramped quarters, and had got ourselves "organized" to deal with the situation, it did not worry us at all. After we had been invited to take our meals in the saloon, we still retained, by very special invitation of the gunners, the complete freedom of their Mess as well as the contents of the ration cupboard ! I was quite astonished at the appetite I developed and I ate positively enormous meals and slept like a top—in spite of the feet ! At the end of the two months I felt—and was told I looked—as if I had had a magnificent holiday.

ACTION STORIES

W. WARD T 2

. . . We were taken aboard the s.s. *Fort St. Croix* by a Marine sergeant and introduced to the second mate who was gunnery officer. We had a good reception and we were taken to the cabin which was to be our abode for the period we had to serve on board.

We found we shared our cabin with a S.A.R.N.V.R. Petty Officer in charge of the gunners and a Sergeant of the Maritime Regiment. We quickly made friends, and all the time we were aboard, our cabin mates helped us in all and every way they possibly could. . . .

. . . The food we had was good and compared to civilian rations terrific.

The master was Danish as were all the officers and practically all the crew. . . .

. . . Our place was to be on the bridge and watch was to be kept from first light to dark, this proved to be from 04.30 to 23.00 on most occasions. Whitaker and I had decided to try two hours on and two hours off, with a four hour watch from 14.00 hours to 18.00 hours to give a change of hours on and off. In practice this proved to work well and we kept this system going on our two trips together.

We were instructed to give our identification of aircraft to the officer on duty, or failing his presence on the bridge in case of hostile attack, sound the alarm bell for gunners to open fire. . .

. . . Passing through the Straits we had three salvos from the Jerry guns across the Channel, the last salvo very close and splinters hit the ship, one piece hitting the wooden dodger on the bridge "monkey island." A quick search was made for a souvenir but without success. . .

. . . We received several warnings from the escort vessels of mines and submarines, etc., but we sailed on without hindrance, friendly aircraft being constantly in sight and I had no difficulty in identifying the various types. Everyone

Ward

took a keen interest in our job and we were asked to settle differences of opinion of the identity of certain aircraft by the gunners. The Captain on seeing a plane approaching at wave-top height, asked for an identification and when I told him it was a Dakota he asked what it was used for, and on being told of the various jobs this plane is used for, he seemed to have an increased respect for our knowledge of aircraft.

Arrived off the beach-head at 08.00 hours, the roadstead appeared to be covered with ships of all shapes and sizes. Fighters patrolled overhead; the beach appeared to be under spasmodic shell fire and our large warships were replying with broadsides.

Small boats were darting here and there, landing craft were busy taking off the ships' cargoes. We finally reached our anchorage about 12.00 hours and L.C.T. came alongside and a start was made on our cargo.

Looking towards the shore a picture was presented which certainly gave me the impression that half the ships in all the world had sailed into the roadstead. The coast of Normandy at this point is a pretty sight, sandy beaches with some small cliffs; the land behind is covered with pretty villages, small woods, well cultivated fields and church spires sticking up in quantity.

On examination through glasses, several of the houses on the beach front appeared to have suffered during the landing. One church spire had a hole right through as if a shell had passed through.

Troops could be seen forming up on the beach and lorries, tanks, etc., were being landed and driven away to the various dispersal points. One type of vehicle which gave no trouble was the "duck" which we just dropped over the side and she steadily wended her way ashore and was driven right on to the sands and away.

Several warnings during the day, but no hostile aircraft appeared near. During the night several alerts; a destroyer attempt to get into the roadstead was beaten off; much firing

Ward

from the warships. We saw two planes come down in flames.

June 9 05.00 hours. A hostile came over through the low rain clouds and dropped a stick of bombs right between two ships one of which was anchored astern of us, no damage being done and only about six rounds could be fired before Jerry was off and away. . .

. . . A lot of activity after dark ; at one period every ship in the bay seemed to be firing at planes overhead, splinters dropping all around ; our gunners fired a great number of rounds, but although four planes were seen to come down in flames it would be difficult for any one ship to claim a kill with certainty. . .

. . . June 14th left for B.H. in convoy ; our ship was commodore ship and we had commodore aboard as well as four naval ratings for signals and wireless duties. Quite a crowd on the bridge now and I wondered if I would be able to get to my usual "shelter" spot if and when trouble started.

June 15th. A quiet trip. Saw my first Sea-Otter this morning, had a joke with the bridge gunners and naval ratings who would insist that it was the old Walrus. Silhouettes eventually convinced them. Arrived B.H. about 20.00 hours and L.C.T. appeared right away. Hopes ran high that we would have a quick turn round, but Jerry came over and stopped night work ; we got more splinters aboard and had very little sleep.

His Majesty arrived here to-day. His ship anchored quite close to our ship and we saw him leave for the beach in a M.L. Jerry over again at night, more firing by warships anchored near us. . .

. . . Saturday night we had a bad night, Jerry over in good time, flares being dropped over the shipping and bombs falling quite close, one stick coming down into the water close enough to let us have several splinters on board. Two planes were seen to come down in flames and several balloons were destroyed.

June 18th left B.H. 09.00 hours in convoy of approximately

Ward

forty vessels, quiet trip until about 10.00 hours when a P. plane was seen coming straight for the convoy, it actually passed right between our two lines of ships. This was the first time we had heard of this weapon and we had quite a discussion as to what it was. Four Spitfires on patrol chased the bomb but we did not see any result. . .

. . . That evening we saw several of these missiles and saw Mosquitos bring two down. Our escort made a signal that ten of the "pharting fannies" had been destroyed during the night. Trust the R.N. to give anything a name. . .

H. WHITAKER W 3

. . . Leave Tilbury and anchor at Southend.

At the Captain's request a Maritime gunnery officer has joined the ship to relieve the second mate. We now come under this officer, who was most interested in us, and seemed amazed that we could tell him what all the many planes passing over were.

All the officers seemed the same about this and we were kept busy identifying for them, and they all said we were going to ease their minds a great deal in the future.

June 6th. "D" Day. Sail at 6.45 a.m. At 11.30 a.m. off Dover the ship was fired at from Calais. The first salvo of six shells were grouped round the ship all within 100 yards. The second salvo were all near misses and much H.E. hit the ship, but there were no casualties. One piece of H.E. smashed into the weather board guarding the helmsman. When told by the second mate how lucky he was that the board had been up, the former said it would have made no difference, as he was flat on the deck. Asked who was steering the ship he said "I don't know, but I was not!" No further incidents on the voyage and all very quiet at the beach head during the day. We were anchored off Coourseuille in the area known as "Juno." During the night there was much firing at enemy aircraft by the merchant ships, but we were never within range.

On the second day an incident occurred which did Ward and myself some good. During an alert four planes came out of the haze overland and flew across the ships. Asked by the gunnery officer to identify them, I did so as friendly fighters. Just then an American L.C.T. opened fire and was quickly followed by other craft, and eventually by a cruiser. Asked by the Captain if I still thought they were friendly aircraft, I replied "Yes," as in the meantime Ward and I had agreed they were Typhoons. Consequently the order to fire was not given, and all the officers were very pleased when a

Whitaker

signal was given from the control ship to cease fire, as these were friendly aircraft.

In the half light at dawn of this day a plane came through the mist and dropped bombs astern. The plane was only visible for a few seconds and was bad to see, but Ward thought it might have been a He.111. There was no time for the guns to fire.

At night there was again much firing at enemy aircraft and this time our ship opened fire with all guns. No results could be observed, as hundreds of ships were firing simultaneously, but four planes were seen to come down in flames at various times. . . .

. . . Our second trip started on June 14th, and on June 16th we had the pleasure of seeing His Majesty the King pass close to our ship in the launch that took him ashore from H.M.S. *Arethusa*, which anchored quite close to us. The next night the ship was dive bombed by a plane that was never visible on account of a smoke screen across the bows. This prevented our gunners from firing. The bombs fell a few yards from our port side, and between us and H.M.S. *Nelson*, for whom they were probably aimed, as the position of the ships had previously been disclosed by flares. . . .

. . . On our third trip I had S. J. Wilkins from Colchester as my mate, as Ward had left at the end of one month's service. Whilst crossing to France a flying bomb glided in over the convoy and came down between our ship and the ship ahead, approximately fifty yards from each. I noted the blast was not as great as from a bomb exploding at the same distance on land.

Whilst at the beach head we saw a Liberty ship sunk by an acoustic mine, which by now were becoming a constant danger.

On our return journey the ship's gunners shot down a flying bomb with Oerlikon fire. It was extremely fine shooting, as the bomb was flying parallel to the ship at very high speed, causing the "aim off" to be very great. Shortly after this

Whitaker

U boats were located close to the convoy, and we saw the attack with depth charges by the escort ships. This attack appeared to be successful. Unfortunately, a ship in the convoy was torpedoed and sunk, and at the same time another hit a mine and also sank. This information was obtained from the Vice-Commodore who was on our ship, otherwise we should have had no idea that anything had happened.

I made two more trips to France, but in neither of them was there any incident of note. The menace of the acoustic mine appeared to be increasing and we also had U boat warnings, and saw many attacks on them by the escort ships.

May I at this point put on record my appreciation of the Danish officers and crew of the *St. Croix*. I have never received greater courtesy in my life as I did from these men. The behaviour of the crew in every way was of the highest order, and we were always treated by them in a most respectful and cheerful manner. From the Captain downwards it would not be possible to find a set of men of any nationality more pleasant to serve under and to work with. . . .

J. DEVLIN T 4

. . . We put to sea on Saturday evening, but to our disappointment we had to anchor all night and the following day. Eventually we started our journey on the Monday, passing Lundy Island late in the evening. Whilst passing Lands End the sea was rather rough. Most of the American soldiers were sea-sick (we were not). Continuing the voyage up the Channel we saw a large vessel overtaking our convoy. The sailors said it was a Battle Wagon, which proved on drawing closer to be H.M.S. *Nelson* on her way to the Normandy beach head. The next item of interest was the Eddystone Lighthouse, which we passed early on Wednesday. The same day an American battleship passed us returning from the beach head. The Americans informed us it was the *North Carolina*.

During the night E Boats tried to attack our convoy, but were driven off by our Naval escort. Thursday morning we reached the Omaha beach. It was a never-to-be-forgotten sight, thousands of ships stretching as far as the horizon, crafts of all shapes and sizes, from battleships to "ducks." The din was terrific, the blast of gunfire from the battleships was deafening and made our small vessel rock. Occasionally the shells from the enemy batteries reached the shore, but they were soon silenced by our Naval gunners.

The crew took off the hatch covers, expecting to unload the cargo immediately, but they were disappointed, as evidently it was not our turn for unloading.

The evening of the same day, the clouds being low and the weather dull, we were suddenly attacked by six Me.109's. They were met by a hail of fire and we had the satisfaction of seeing one burst into flames, which was caused by a hit from one of our guns. (The gunner came from Bradford.) The others turned tail and were quickly out of sight. During the night we were bombed, one fell quite close to the ship and the blast blew me through the cabin door. Just before dawn

Devlin

the following morning we were still being attacked. Our gunners had just been shooting at some enemy planes, when suddenly a couple of Spitfires came on the scene and I recognised them in time to prevent them from being shot down. The next few nights were similar, the enemy attacking us during the hours of darkness, but during the daytime he was conspicuous by his absence, due no doubt to our excellent air cover.

On Sunday evening we were unloaded, and on Monday noon we left the shores of France for home. The return journey was more or less uneventful, except for hearing occasional depth charges. Early one morning there was an attack on another convoy by German bombers but we were not interfered with. . . .

J. D. WALKER Q 3

. . . We sailed from London on a "Fort" ship and were already acquainted with naval language before going on board; we loaded with light and heavy A.A. guns, trucks and jeeps and had a considerable number of troops on board as well, so that we were pretty crowded. Hirst was invited to share the third mate's cabin and sleep on the settee, when sleep was possible, and I did the same in the second mate's cabin.

The trip out was more or less uneventful, we expected attacks in the Straits of Dover, particularly from E boats and long range guns, but we went through in daylight under cover of a smoke screen, the last lap to the beaches was covered at night. We got separated from the rest of the convoy and lost our escort, and I thought our skipper did a fine job to avoid any collisions and mines, etc. It was rather like Piccadilly circus in the rush hour except that it was dark and no lights were showing; there were craft of all descriptions on every side of us.

We arrived off the beaches in the early hours and it was truly an amazing spectacle, masses of ships of all shapes and sizes stretching for miles, and what particularly impressed me then was the peaceful nature of the scene, not a sign of any aircraft or enemy at all and the beaches just at that time looked quite deserted, except for a mass of landing craft which had evidently been shot up or abandoned. . . .

. . . Later that night, about 22.45 hours, we were again at "action stations" and immediately afterwards the order was given to "make smoke," and a few minutes after this planes were heard and all ships, including our own, opened up with all suitable guns. I heard a plane very close and low and suddenly saw a brilliant flash on the port side; I flung myself down, or was blown down, and when I got up saw that we had been hit, there was already a fire aft and several people on the flying bridge were knocked out, one of the gunners

Walker

on the port Oerlikon had the top of his head blown off and a gunner on the starboard Oerlikon was badly wounded in the back, some gunners on the Brownings were also wounded, but Hirst and I were unhurt, a piece of shrapnel just cut Hirst's coat. The fire we saw was the motor-boat and after some time this was thrust overboard, and then a fire was discovered in No. 5 hatch; this was put out pretty quickly, however.

When the firing had died down I went below and found the ship a shambles, the cabin I occupied was filled with wounded, and I found that a piece of shrapnel had come through Hirst's cabin, turned right angles and come through my cabin, turned again and gone through the saloon; we, of course, were on the flying bridge at the time. The casualties were three killed and about thirty wounded.

We got very little sleep that night. At daybreak we were again at "action stations"—no hostile planes came within range of our ship and I could not see the planes that other ships were firing at.

Although we were off the beaches for several more days we saw no enemy planes in daylight, and our own fighter planes seemed to patrol over our lines without any interference from German planes.

We had only one more hectic night while off the beaches and although that lasted all night and into the morning, it was mainly directed against shore installations.

On our way home our convoy was attacked by planes the first night. Our guns went into action and I dimly saw a plane which I took to be a Dornier at about 8,000 feet; no damage was done to our ship nor as far as I know to any other ship in the convoy.

We again came through the Straits of Dover without incident, but coming up the Thames at night we saw our first robot planes and the next morning two came down, one on either side of us about a quarter of a mile away.

We left our ship in dry dock undergoing repairs, as she had been pretty well peppered by shrapnel. . . .

E. W. HIRST Q 1

. . . From the moment we went on board our "Fort" we were made to feel welcome; the officers did what they could to make our trip with them as comfortable as possible. Everyone on board seemed pleased to have us with them, from the "Old Man" down to the D.E.M.S. ratings and the Maritime Royal Artillery Regiment.

The second mate acted as gunnery officer, and considering the amount of armour on board, one would have thought the gunners would have been in charge of a gunnery officer, as the gunners were mostly very "light fingered." . . .

. . . Some of the gunners had quite a good knowledge of recognition, but when lives are at stake, that standard of efficiency was not nearly high enough. My impression of the standard of recognition in the services was never very high, and from what I have seen on this journey to Normandy, I have had no need to alter my views.

Looking back on the occasion of the near miss, which my "oppo" J. D. Walker has gone to some length to explain in detail, I feel that we had a very lucky escape. It would appear that a bomb fell some twenty yards short of the ship on the port beam. We got the full blast, and afterwards I counted well over 100 holes in the hull, most of them the size of the palm of your hand. The funnel had four holes in it, the fore mast was split on the top, and a piece had also made a very clean hole through just above our heads.

Many of the crew had remarkable escapes from injury. The third engineer, who was lying down on his berth, discovered the next day that a piece of splinter had gone through his pillow without touching him.

The next day we witnessed the ceremony of the burial at sea of the dead. A padre on board, who was with the troops, officiated at the service. It was very impressive.

I was wondering if this was a sample of what we could expect each night. . . .

A. R. GILLIAT VI

Taken to s.s. *Robert Lowry*, a Liberty ship of about 8,000 tons, Master Adrian Richardson. Had to wait until midnight to get our bunks fixed. Two clean sheets, pillow case and pillow, bedspread, bath and face towel provided clean once a week. Had excellent supper (5.30) in Officers' Mess (by Sid's arrangement I think). Met Armed Guard officer next day—Lieutenant Dubofsky.

Names of Armed Guard :

Fitzpatrick	McDole	Henry	Morris
Nicklas	Laison	Krupp	Kurash
Sanchez	Czaghowski	Suriano	Muzzio
Carbone	Caron	Dean	Pelander
Castello	Burkhardt	Telesco	Tyas
Hagadon	Stewart	Ferrari	Marciano
Alix	Trautwein		

A nice Anglo-Saxon lot !

NOTICE IN SALOON :

ATTENTION !

To all fellow members of the N.M.U., to non-members and to members of the U.S. Armed Guard. Those who found my two souvenirs rings at the steward's toilet; and is not willing to return them to me, please I beg you kindly to keep them aboard ship during the trip, because these rings have had Histories in my own conception. And if the man is willing, I offer \$25.00 reward for their return, by : confidentially and secretly, without any fuss.

Trustfully yours,

FAUSTUS G. ENGLIC,

Chief Steward.

. . . For about fourteen hours we followed the English coast, then turned more south, and finally arrived off France at 18.30 hours. Here we received a signal, "Delay convoy twenty-three hours." This was on account of the northerly gale which made anchoring unsafe. The following morning we were off England again. We crossed during the day, dropped anchor at 18.00 hours, some 2,000 yards from the beach.

Gilliat

. . . About 6.20 felt sure I could make out coast of France in haze. This confirmed thirty minutes later. We were approaching anchorage. Many ships lying there and very large escort chasing round. Then the greatest disappointment of all to date. Message flashed, "Delay convoy twenty-three hours." Everyone felt like Hell about it. We about turned and sailed back into the teeth of the northerly gale (it was a gale; confirmed by second mate). Took over watch 8 p.m. until 11.15. Howling wind and cold and generally bloody. Nice thought spending the night touring the mine-fields.

. . . Then followed three days of inaction. Our cargo being "general" we couldn't sell it to anyone. The general opinion was that it was destined for Cherbourg and the time-table was late. On the 24th, a start was made at unloading, but this was stopped after forty-eight hours when they had worked down to the bit of whisky we had. (Quite true, that; armed police were brought on board during its removal.)

. . . During supper moved more west and nosed among other Liberties, etc., dropping hook at 6.30 p.m. Heavy swell and half gale. About 6.40 ship hit bottom to everyone's alarm. Not so good in welded hull. We upped anchor and moved farther out. Sun came out for first time. Landscape rather shape and size of Filey Bay. From E. to W. cliffs (about 150-200 feet), dunes, small town or resort (red roofs and two churches), woods, wide beaches, extending about two miles, W. end with several beached landing craft.

. . . Out to seaward many naval craft—cruisers, destroyers, and smaller stuff. Orders are helmets and life-jacket to be worn at all times on deck. Several other discharging points along coast out of our sight. Number of ships most impressive. 9.30 onwards: all hell breaking loose to W. and N.W. Sounded drawing nearer.

. . . Friday, June 23rd: An ensign in charge of a L.C.T. alongside came up to bridge. Very decent educated lad of about twenty-four. His craft was in the show at the beginning. He went in about 3 a.m. being in the 32nd wave. Said craft

Gilliat

were colliding in all directions, and if lighted scene would have "beaten Times Square on Hallow E'en." Said Airborne and Navy did a grand job, assault and barrage. Five Liberties deliberately run aground and bottoms blown out to form breakwater for rough weather. He confirmed that the natives left are mostly pro-Nazi. Several women caught sniping our troops. One such bending to take aim shot in backside. He says four years of Nazi propaganda has had its effect.

. . . Thursday, June 29th : A good breakfast, porridge, bacon and egg, and marmalade. Yesterday evening we moved from— and anchored off—. Rumour that we were to take German p.o.w's back but this later cancelled. We pushed off at 2 p.m. on our own with escort. Doing about sixteen knots. Expect to be off Isle of Wight about 7 p.m. Too late to go ashore and get anything done. After dinner heard two explosions which shook us a little. Was told depth charges. About forty minutes later loud-speakers said three ships recently mined where we were and all advised to wear or carry life-jackets. Got mine and came on deck to see two Liberties, one with stern blown off, and the other settling by stern. Escort ships busy around. Huge traffic in both directions. I think the explosions we heard were the mines. 5.45 p.m. sight Isle of Wight. As we got closer, clouds came down and when W. of island all land obscured. Lovely evening soon after. Grand to see English countryside again after all these years.

. . . Think only one R.O.C. member out of the 800 or so who went is missing, but two R.O.C. who were on one of the ships we saw sinking yesterday lost all their kit which was in the after cabin. Think the ships were towed in. They get five days leave and then join another ship.

A. SHAW V3

. . . Some of the highlights of Bournemouth were a visit by Sir Roderic Hill, Air Commodore Crerar, Lords Wimborne and Sherwood, all of whom said nice things to us about us, and one other bright moment was running into Brian Sellars and having a night out with him. If you know Brian you will know it was a good night out. The one amusing incident which stands out amongst quite a number, was that Leslie Pearson, who became my shipmate and paired up with me all the time, became very navy-minded when we were taught the naval salute, and spent a bit of time seeing how smartly he could salute : he tore off a beauty to a bus conductor (they wear quite a lot of gold braid in Bournemouth). . . .

. . . Then on D day 2, we left for Southampton, and joined our ship the s.s. *H. G. Blasdell*, and sailed on D 3, and arrived at Utah beach head, the American sector, on D 4. In this American ship we lived for practically the next three weeks, and nothing could have been done to make us more content and comfortable than was done by the American officers and men, both Naval and Merchant Marine on that ship.

We fed with the officers, and when I say fed, I mean fed. I do not suppose a description of the food would be of very much interest to you, but I will say the bread was snow white, bacon and eggs meant eggs, and they were only one choice for breakfast ; the other meals were on a similar standard. We roomed, Leslie with the Wireless Operator, and I with the Gunnery Officer. We soon got on very well with all the officers and the men, especially the gunnery ratings. Leslie is particularly good at making friends, and before long we all had christian names amongst each other, or nicknames.

. . . Our first trip across to Utah beach head was uneventful except for the boat running into a buoy which at the time we did not know was a buoy, but it hit the ship darned hard, and might have been a mine : as one of the American gunners said "if it goes clang clang you know it's a dud," and this

clang clanged. When we arrived off the beach next morning there was an enthusiastic Hun gun, or more than one possibly, started to slam shells at us, not us in particular, but about a mass of other boats which were there with us. Some dropped unpleasantly close, and believe me, on the bridge of a ship with a canvas screen round one is not the ideal place to receive enemy shell fire. I was very relieved to see a couple of destroyers go in close to shore and blast away at what I hoped was the guns. He stopped firing and I thought that was the end of him, but he had only stopped temporarily and more shells came over after a time. Then about eighteen Marauders came and bombed a part of the world, and that would appear to have been the part of the world where the gun was because that ended him.

That night I turned in about 11 p.m. Leslie was still on watch, and I heard a little firing, then the 20 mm. gun, which was just above my head on an iron deck, opened up, and believe me, that felt like hell let loose in that cabin just below it. Grabbing tin hat and life jacket I galloped on deck to find out what this was about. I found Leslie who could not imagine what they had fired at except for sounds, shadows he described it, but the whole of the Merchant Fleet was blazing away; Leslie had seen nothing, he had heard a little, but as it was dark he could not identify. Anyway we had managed to shoot off the top of our own wireless mast, and next morning we saw that we had brought down quite a number of balloons amongst us. That showed us what we were there for. These gunners are very quick on the trigger, and I feel certain that the fact that we, and 700 other fellows were on these British and American ships possibly saved a lot of ammunition being used, and possibly a lot of hits being made on friendly aircraft. . . .

. . . Whilst lying off this Utah beach head we had several battleships a mile or two away shelling enemy positions, and one was very glad that they were ours, because they certainly did pack a punch.

The Americans took a part of the beach head opposite where we were lying during that morning, and a few gliders landed on the beach, obviously to help in this operation. By the following day, Sunday, we were told that the whole of the beach had been occupied, which was quite welcome news as we were only about a mile from it. Shells kept dropping on the beach after this, apparently fired by enemy guns inland. . . .

. . . On the way back I listened to the German wireless telling the world what they had done to the convoys off the beach where we had just been. Although of the thousands of tons I heard him claim to have sunk, I saw none sunk, although there were one or two boats lying which had been sunk, possibly on D day or the day after.

Then we arrived in the Solent on Tuesday morning, the 13th. . . .

. . . It was very disappointing to find out here that mail from President 111 had not been forwarded. Being Saturday all the pubs were very full, and we could hardly get a drink, and as we had been dry for over a week, that seemed quite a hardship. We almost immediately started loading, and were to go on all night to push off next morning, but air raid alerts during the night interfered with that, and we did not get away until the afternoon. This time we were carrying a Major-General, and Brigadier-General, and all their staff. . . .

. . . We arrived that time off Omaha beach. The storm was really at it's height; we could not get our Major-General off, and we lay at anchor three days, riding that storm out, and those Liberty boats do perform in a storm. It must have been very boring for those troops, anxious to get ashore, and living on good, but iron, rations. They expected to be aboard only twelve or twenty-four hours. During these three days of gale we saw a large number of ships blown ashore and damaged by other means, some broken in two, landing craft particularly, and when we moved closer to shore eventually to unload, we found there was a terrible amount of

damage had been done to the landing craft and other ships by this gale.

This Lt.-General Macon, commanding the 83rd American Division, was a most matey sort of chap, also all his staff, whom it was a great pleasure to have met.

It was extremely cold during this period, and we were very glad of duffel coats, leather jerkins, and anything else we could gather when we were on watch.

The nights were always active with shell fire, and ack ack fire from the shore. We could never be quite certain whether it was both sides firing at anybody, or Germans firing at ours, or ours firing at the Germans, but there were certainly some very bright firework displays. During the day when the weather cleared the mass of our aircraft which went overhead was really amazing, and made one once more glad to be on our side.

There was a landing strip just opposite to where we were anchored, where the Dakotas arrived, several hundred a day, apparently bringing in supplies, and taking back wounded. Also another strip close to it from which Thunderbolts were operating.

On Saturday the 24th, we were unloading and I managed to sneak on to a landing barge and get ashore, where I stayed an hour or two, and finally came back on a "duck" which was quite an experience. By this time we had got hot bright sunny weather, and life was a good deal more pleasant. This Omaha beach was one where the Americans had had a very bad time; they ran into a Division which was not supposed to be there, it was there doing anti-invasion manoeuvres.

By Sunday the 25th we were finally unloaded and pushed off. Our time had already expired, but we were quite happy to still be with these good-hearted Yanks. We had an uneventful crossing, arriving off Southampton on the 27th, and docked in the morning. As soon as we did so an alert went for the pilotless planes. We thought the all-clear went, and went ashore, but we were told that what we thought was the

all-clear was "danger imminent," and we ought to stand beside a shelter and look out for the doodle-bug. . . .

. . . I would like to add that one of the hardest parts of this trip was parting with those fellows on the *Blasdell*. It is amazing how, in such a short time, we had become part of that ship's company, and felt that they felt we were part of it also.

I would personally like to add how lucky I felt that I had Leslie with me, because, apart from the company of a man on a job of that sort, there is a feeling of terrible responsibility with several hundred men's lives and perhaps a million pounds worth of shipping and equipment which may go by a mistake on your part, or your partner's. You want to know you have the right sort with you. . . .

P.S.—There is one incident which I have overlooked, and which may amuse. Owing to the influence exerted by Leslie Pearson and Jim Overend I was made a Flight-Leader. When we had finished our training course at Bournemouth we were given certain fatigues. On the morning we got this fatigue, duties were detailed of cleaning up, etc., and being Flight-Leader, I picked the nasty one, cleaning the lavatories, and there were a lot of them. Leslie and Jim spent the rest of that day, at every opportunity, singing some song about "Dan, Dan, Dan, the sanitary man" whenever I appeared. The following day by some mistake, or the grace of God, my Flight was detailed for duty again; when we mustered, firmly pushing the Adjutant on one side, I took charge of the parade, and detailed the people for the various jobs. We heard no more of "Dan" after that! . . .

G. L. PEARSON Z 1

. . . Again I was lucky to find a good Samaritan to sew on my seaborne flashes and after to be posted to the American ship the *H. G. Blasdell* where I had a pleasant surprise to find the Americans a fine set of fellows, who just cannot do enough to help you and make a person feel at home.

I might mention the game of Ace'y, Duce'y which we were taught by our American friends; it is a good game and I would be very pleased to teach anyone this game, also the swear words which seem necessary to play it properly, free of charge.

My first sight of the French coast was an amazing one as I never realised what it took to make an invasion, and one felt proud to be British, also fortunate to be taking part in such a gigantic operation.

The first time our guns opened up was after darkness had fallen on the first day when anchored about a quarter of a mile from the shore, and from my experience I say that our own heavies were going in and the enemy guns opened up on them. Well, this certainly was a pretty sight as shells were bursting over our heads and tracers were cutting across the sky in all directions, our own gunners all keyed up waiting and wanting to pull the trigger when the guns on the next ship to ours let go; after that all hell was let loose, but apart from our radio mast and a few balloons, no further damage was done and the planes passed over us going in a southerly direction.

The Navy was there also in strength, half a mile away were the battleships *Rodney*, *Warspite*, and another of the same class; in between all the ships we had cruisers and destroyers in dozens, and they kept firing into the shore all day.

While unloading on the first day a German shore battery opened up and had he not been quickly dealt with we might not have been here to tell the tale as every shell was getting closer, however, after about a dozen rounds had been thrown

Pearson

at us, two of our destroyers headed close in shore and soon everything went according to plan.

I think the worse job is that of the infantry, as they are under shell fire the whole of the time and had it not been for the tremendous cover provided I shudder to think what the casualty returns would have been, the terrific weight both sea and air was such that nothing on earth could withstand it, and apart from a few shells here and there we were safer on board than people in the south of England, and I should have to use a lot of imagination to make me change my mind.

A quick survey of the whole operation. First and foremost I had no idea what to invade meant, the colossal arrangements that had to be made were beyond my imagination; I was proud to be British and thankful I was not German; lastly the most difficult job as far as I am concerned has been doing this letter as it is my first go with a typewriter. . . .

G. FRANKCOM V3

My colleague (L/O H. Malir) and myself joined our ship in Portland harbour, and after some time had elapsed American Rangers came aboard and we learned that our part in the scheme was to take them across to be landed for their special objective.

Days and days passed by and we began to think the job was never coming off, and we were considerably cheered when we were inoculated and noticed that a Naval Surgeon took up quarters aboard.

Eventually we left Weymouth at 17.30 hours on the evening before D-day, and as we approached the Normandy coast could see our Air Force were very busy, and knew that whatever might be coming our way later the Boche was getting the father and mother of a good hiding.

Our troops were duly landed and we stayed through the day watching the various phases of the operations, including our powerful Fleet sending loads of sleeping draughts at the Hun batteries and defences.

We left the scene at 17.30 hours and my impressions were that mastery of the air and sea had made the landing a success.

I am grateful to all who assisted in giving me the chance to go.

E. ARNOLD Z 1

... Soon after breakfast we were informed that we should be transferred from the *John S. Sweet* to another boat sailing earlier as the supply of R.O.C. was not enough to meet the immediate requirements. This proved to be the *Cameronia*, a 16,000 ton Anchor Line trooper. This filled up with troops and we were off down the river to Southend almost immediately. We received a very encouraging welcome from the Gunnery Officer First Lt. R.N. who had about fifty gunners altogether. The armour consisted of a 6-inch gun on the stern, two 12 pounders, two Bofors, eight Oerlikons, two Hotchkiss. In spite of the hurry, we were only wanted to proceed to Southend where we anchored just inside the boom, amongst a very great array of shipping of all types. Our action station was to be on the signal bridge which is above the bridge, and had no protection of any sort against hostile attack, the bridge being well covered with plastic concrete.

Monday, June 5th—At Southend.

Tuesday, June 6th—D-day. Sailed for Portsmouth at 10 a.m.

We were in a convoy with other large ships with all suitable naval escort and one or two flights of four Spitfires. The journey involved going round the Straits of Dover. Just before reaching there we were able to see a ship ahead of us in another convoy had been hit and one was on fire. This was the ship which has been mentioned in the press on which one of the R.O.C. was wounded. Just as we were approaching Dover the instruction came to reverse direction and the whole convoy started to go back again. This proved only to be a large circle, and we were soon off on our original course. As soon as we approached the narrows the destroyers and other craft had come out and started laying a smoke screen which seemed very effective indeed, although the upper parts of the ships must have been visible from the other side. Spotting for aircraft with the visibility only 200 yards was rather

Arnold

anxious, but as a number of friendly craft could be seen from time to time at the far side of the screen, they would presumably see any hostile planes first. It was generally expected that there would be some shelling, but for some reason this did not happen at all and we were able to sail on without interference. We formed the opinion that Marauders, which we had seen going out low just as we were going past Dover, had probably been on a mission to occupy the attention of the guns. Nevertheless, the sounding of the air raid sirens at Dover as we went by did not add to our comfort. The speed was only about ten knots, and it certainly seemed to take a very long time to get past the narrows. Both of us were on the bridge, and this is a practice we adopted when there was any likelihood of anything happening. The rest of the voyage to Portsmouth was uneventful.

Tuesday midnight we sailed for Normandy; arrived offshore at dawn to find everything quiet, a comforting amount of naval escort but not more than one or two flights of four Spitfires or Lightnings. Probably there was a great deal more we could not see. The day dawned misty; eventually this cleared and we could see the coast and the vast amount of shipping that was there with us. After a little time we moved in to take a position in the bay, probably about two miles from the coast at the head of the bay and rather less at the side. We stayed all day waiting for landing craft to take off the troops which was eventually completed about 9.30, after which we received instructions to spend the night where we were. The other ships in the convoy had managed to get off home.

During the day there was plenty to watch although there were no signs of the enemy; no planes were sighted; there was no gunfire directed at any of the ships or immediate parts of the land which we could see. We were able to watch the big ships bombarding the coast continuously, and this in itself was a great sight. From what we could see the shore was strewn with beached craft of all types, but the unloading

Arnold

of ships seemed to be progressing quietly although I felt sorry for many of the smaller craft as the sea was quite choppy and many soldiers had difficulty in getting on to their small boats with full equipment on.

The night was not too quiet, but on reflection probably it was a great deal better than we might have expected, or, indeed, than the night before. Soon after dusk the ships started firing at planes, with a very fine show of tracer going up from the great array of warships which were in the outer part of the bay. Our ship did a bit of firing although it was rather against instructions as we were not supposed to fire unless the plane could be seen. One or two balloons were shot down very spectacularly, but apart from three runs over during which time I do not think the planes were intending to attack us, the activity ceased about 2 a.m. In the meantime we had been instructed to make smoke which had the effect of concealing everybody in the bay except ourselves who were on the outside with a brisk on-shore wind. There were a few E boat warnings, but we were able to get to bed. The smoke-making apparatus results in our own ship being filled with it, and as it is heavier than air, the lower deck cabins are quite uninhabitable. In fact, to get to our cabin we had to use our gas masks which proved very effective. . . .

H. A. S. MALIR V 3

. . . During our stay in Weymouth we were visited by H.M. the King, accompanied by Admirals King and Stark of the U.S. Navy.

. . . At last our Rangers came aboard, and the flotilla crews were briefed. The ship was sealed, and all shore leave was cancelled, except for absolutely necessary stores. We learned from the flotilla crews what was to be our objective—a six-inch gun battery on top of a hundred-foot cliff commanding the beaches almost on the extreme west of the operation. The Rangers and the flotilla crews were instructed that the objective must be taken, irrespective of loss of men or ships, as, until these guns were silenced, no landing could take place on that particular sector.

In order to storm the cliff, the Rangers were trying out a special device never previously employed. It consisted of a 300 foot length of scaling ladder attached to a grappling iron, which was to be fired over the cliff by means of a rocket mounted on the landing craft. The moment the grappling iron became fast, the Rangers climbed the ladder and guaranteed to have sixty men on top of the cliff in four minutes. This was no mean feat, as each man was burdened with 60/70 lbs. of kit. Six of these rockets were fixed to two of our assault craft, and six more to two craft from our sister ship, the *Amsterdam* (Observers Winter and F. Malir).

On Friday, June 2nd, we knew operations were to commence on Sunday night, and messages were read over the loud-speaker from the commander of "J" force (the force with which we were operating), from General Eisenhower and Admiral Ramsay. On Saturday the weather deteriorated, and on Sunday morning, with very low cloud and a fairly high sea running, it was evident that a postponement was inevitable. The prospect was now rather grim, as it was impossible for us to leave the ship, and the same tidal conditions may not recur for nearly a month, so it was with great

Malir

anxiety that we scanned the weather on Monday. Greatly to our relief, we found conditions a little improved, and although the seas had not moderated much, the cloud conditions were much improved. Towards mid-day the landing craft, L.C.T.'s, L.C.I.'s and small craft of all descriptions, moved slowly out of the bay, shepherded by their escorts of destroyers, corvettes, sloops, etc., and at 17.30 hours came our turn. Our flotilla of six ships, all with their complement of troops, swung into line ahead, and steamed out of the bay eastward towards the Isle of Wight. After about two hours steaming, we passed the landing craft which had preceded us, and we saw converging upon us from north and south other convoys and their escorts, the whole protected by a battle squadron consisting of four battleships, four heavy cruisers with their screen of destroyers—presenting a magnificent spectacle of sea-power.

We dropped anchor at our rendezvous for about an hour, and then proceeded at 11 knots to our anchorage off the Normandy coast. This we reached at 03.35 hours. As we approached the coast we had an excellent view of the bombardment by the R.A.F. This appeared to be on a tremendous scale, and of great accuracy. As the dawn broke, we were able to pick out and identify a few Halifaxes making their bombing runs, and also a few Dakotas returning after dropping their paratroops.

We dropped our landing craft at 04.25, and were able to watch them proceed towards the shore for quite a distance, bobbing on the waves as they followed the launch which was to lead them to their appointed beach.

As daylight broke, the aerial bombardment ceased, and was taken up by the battleships and cruisers, who gradually annihilated all the shore batteries and closed nearer and nearer inshore. At 11.00 hours our landing craft returned, having accomplished their mission successfully. The crews reported that so successful had been the aerial bombardment that the six-inch guns had not fired a shot, and that in addition

Malir

to the guns being silenced, a great part of the cliff had been brought down, so simplifying the task of the Rangers, who had to face only fire from machine-guns.

After picking up our landing craft, a lull came over the proceedings. There was the spectacle of hundreds and hundreds of craft of all descriptions lying within a few miles of the enemy shore, and, except for a few sporadic bursts of gun-fire, nobody seemed to be doing anything about them. Our own ships kept up the bombardment the whole day, and never for a moment were we free from our escorting Lightnings and Spitfires, and all day long the rocket-firing Typhoons and bomb-carrying Thunderbolts were roaring in to attack the beaches. The mate of our ship grew so bored with the proceedings that he unrolled a fishing line and commenced fishing from the ship's side. As our L.C.A.'s were not required for another mission, we hoisted anchor at 17.30 hours and sailed for home.

On our homeward journey we again encountered masses of ships, both outward and homeward bound, and were very impressed by the thoroughness of the organisation, for, all the way across the Channel were little groups of craft, each moored to a tug, consisting of a petrol boat, and oil boat, a water boat and a repair boat, for all the world like filling stations, which, as well as providing petrol, used to provide tea and ginger beer on the busy motoring roads in pre-war days.

Our journey homeward proved quite as uneventful as our outbound trip, and we dropped anchor in Cowes Roads at nearly midnight, having been on watch continuously for twenty-nine hours.

F. W. S. MALIR V 3

... As Herbert, George and I were all on the same operation, I am going to leave the operational part to Herbert, as we all saw very much the same thing. We had one or two experiences that differed and I will tell you these.

Firstly we had a raid on Weymouth Bay while we were anchored there. During the raid a mine was dropped between our ship and a Yankee destroyer, which set our ship rocking. The following morning five mines went off in Portland harbour without damaging a ship; we also on the same night identified in searchlights a Me. 410, and a little later a Mosquito, this identification caused the gunnery officer and the rest of the gunners to take a little more interest in us than they had done up to that time.

During the time we were crossing the Channel we were unfortunate enough to see a Lancaster shot down by our own escort (a Yankee destroyer I think); we had identified him as a Lancaster as he passed over our ship.

These little instances show how vital we were for this job, as we found out the average gunner was extremely poor at recognition, and although we saw no hostile aircraft on D-day, I shudder to think how many of our planes would have been shot at had we not been aboard.

This letter sounds as though I am trying to convey to you how good we were, please do not think that, I am only trying to impress upon you how necessary the R.O.C. were on this particular job.

As to our ship, everybody was very good to us after the first few days, we naturally had a little ice to break, especially with the sergeant in our mess. I could sympathize with him, as he was turned out of his cabin for us; he also had to hand over his field-glasses to me, naturally he thought we were rather shoving in.

Our gunnery officer was very good to us, and also told us when we were leaving what a good job of work we had done. . . .

A. LI. HITT V 3

. . . We were driven to the docks by tender and dumped our kit, went on board and asked for the officer in charge of the armed guard, which is a point of distinction as compared with asking for the captain of a British merchant ship. This had been fully explained to us at the Naval School at Bournemouth. We were made very welcome, and being very near supper time, had our meal first before being shown our quarters, etc. Jim and I shared a berth with two others, one a steward, the other an English sergeant acting as quartermaster sergeant for any troops the ship might carry, incidentally it was interesting to learn he had spent nine months at Ilkley in connection with the O.C.T.U. there.

The next twenty-four hours was spent in loading up and the taking on board of some 350 troops. Sleep proved just about impossible that night owing to the continual clanging of winches and the gaiety of the American sailors who had been on liberty and who seemed to keep up a party all night, and it was unfortunate that the mess was next door to our cabin. . . .

. . . On Monday the 12th, steaming westward for the south coast we soon began to see quantities of aircraft, and were constantly having our attention drawn to these by the various look-outs in the gun turrets, though all proved to be friendly, in fact, we did not see a single hostile aircraft the whole trip in actual daylight. As time went on I believe the look-outs gained some confidence in both our identification and ability to spot the various aircraft that were flying near us and largely ceased to call our attention to them. It perhaps made our job a little harder, but was I think a compliment to the watch we were keeping.

The Liberty ship is rather differently constructed from the normal freighter. All the raised superstructure containing cabins, bridge, etc., being in one piece in the centre of the ship, with the funnel topping the lot, and it was on the very

Hitt

top of this, above the actual bridge, that we had our position. It gave us a grand view all round with the exception of the funnel, but it was easy to pass from one side to the other either aft or forward. Incidentally, at each corner of this superstructure was mounted a 20 mm. Oerlikon gun.

As we approached the Straits of Dover we appeared to have a constant patrol overhead of two fighters, which would fly for the English coast when their patrols ended and be replaced by two others flying out to meet them. Through the Straits themselves we passed under a thick smoke screen. There was no actual shelling from either side as our vessel went through, but it did appear that some was taking place just before we reached the Straits. Continuing in a westerly course until the Isle of Wight we turned almost due south.

The night of the 12th/13th passed quietly and we dropped anchor off the beach head about 06.30 hours on the 13th. The sight to be seen there is one which I shall never forget, and is quite beyond my power to describe it, but it seemed as if most of the ships of the world were within one's vision, made up of battleships and other smaller warships, freight vessels, down to the landing craft and smallest motor-boats, etc. It was an amazing proof of our naval and air superiority that we lay there all day at anchor entirely unmolested. From our first anchorage we quickly moved to one rather nearer the shore, probably about a mile and a half away, and in the afternoon began the task of unloading the vessel, which was done by using the ship's own cranes and winches, and unloading into flat-bottomed L.C.T.'s of which we usually had three or four alongside. It was very interesting to watch this being done, as the sea was sufficiently choppy to make these L.C.T.'s rise and fall some three or four feet. The work was carried out by R.E.'s who came aboard specially for the purpose. . . .

. . . On Wednesday the unloading continued. We again had another alert, but as before no hostile aircraft appeared. About 20 hours we weighed anchor and steamed north,

joining other ships to form a convoy. Just before 23 hours when the light was failing and the alert was still in progress, we spotted a Me.110 almost directly overhead at 10/12,000 feet and wondered what he was up to. We had not to wait long as the next thing we heard was the scream of a bomb coming down which narrowly missed an L.T.C. vessel just off our starboard bow. We subsequently learnt that this ship suffered casualties but was able to proceed. Another bomb was dropped further astern but also resulted in a miss. Some Spitfires then appeared, and though considerably below the Me.110 it turned off south and was soon lost to sight. About one hour later when it was quite dark, aircraft were again heard overhead and soon flares were dropped, at first considerably astern and to our west, but it was not long before they succeeded in finding the convoy, and we seemed to be lit up almost as if it was daylight, a not very pleasant experience, as we did not know what was in store for us, i.e. whether an attack from the air or from service craft or possibly both—it turned out to be an air attack only, and I do not think more than five or six bombs were dropped in all, and again no vessel seemed to be hit. We were dive bombed at the same time and nearly all the ships in the convoy went into action. Our own vessel fired some 500 rounds of 20 mm. ammunition and a few rounds from the three-inch guns fore and aft. Unfortunately no enemy aircraft was seen to plunge into the sea, so I do not know whether any of them were hit. . . .

. . . This time it was dark for the passage through the Straits of Dover, but just before we got there, we had the unique experience of seeing several of the new flying bombs crossing the Channel, one in fact came very close indeed to our own ship, and from this one should estimate its height from about 800 feet and its speed not more than 200 miles an hour. The ships had instructions not to fire at them, but the coast batteries opened up in great style and gave us a fine firework display. Two of the bombs were hit in the air and

exploded. It was interesting to note that they could be clearly seen at every angle as they approached and went away from one. They also made a most distinctive noise, more resembling the noise made by certain landing craft or tractors rather than an aircraft engine, at any rate, once heard one would never mistake it. . . .

. . . The only thing I have not mentioned is to do with our comfort and messing, and perhaps I should just say a word about it. The bunks were very comfortable and we were provided immediately with clean sheets, etc., about half-a-dozen towels, three bars of soap and three boxes of matches—the sheets we understood could be changed twice a week, clean ones provided. We messed with the crew, but the food was exactly the same as served in the officers' mess, and I cannot write too highly of the standard of this, both in the quantity provided, its quality and the cooking. It was a wonderful treat to be able to consume large quantities of grapefruit juice, tomato juice, etc., and to actually be given oranges, apples and grapefruits. It was also a novelty to meet white bread again, but this is a side with which you are probably not so interested. It was quite easy to keep clean, as there was an excellent hot-water supply and plenty of showers. . . .

J. W. WATKINS X 2

... In the first place I must give the instructors at Bournemouth a pat on the back for the time, hard work, and encouragement they gave us, and to these men I say, "Thank you and good luck."

I served my period on an American Liberty Boat and I am pleased to say we soon gained the confidence of the officers and crew. I think throughout the whole eight trips we made across we gave complete satisfaction both as aircraft identifiers and teaching the few gunners who were interested in the job.

Well, sir, as regards "Personal Extracts" from Seabornes I have only one thing to mention, and that is, I always seemed to be on the next boat to the one that got mined. Our worst experience was four mined in one run across. Perhaps you have heard of the Observer who had to be awakened from his bunk after his boat had her stern blown off with a mine, well, it is quite true!

J. GIBBS Z 4

... On the third day, Saturday, June 3rd, five Liberty ships, British and American, docked, and we were assigned in pairs to these ships, Arnold and I joining the American s.s. *John S. Sweet*.

Aboard this ship we really began to eat! We were quite overcome by having *two* eggs and large masses of fried ham for breakfast on Sunday morning.

This ship was carrying, besides a mass of equipment below and on deck, about 500 British troops who, poor devils, were feeding on iron rations, while the American crew, including ourselves, were eating like gourmands.

The gunnery officer of this ship, Lieutenant Bowers, an American, was a very nice chap and appeared to be pleased to have us with him, and I think we would have been quite comfortable and probably have seen more action, as these cargo ships remained longer "over there," had we remained aboard her. We certainly would have come home very discontented with our home rations.

However, at 11.00 hours on Sunday morning a sergeant of marines came aboard and told us to "lash up and stow," as we were wanted for another ship that was sailing immediately. Our biggest regret was that he had not left us aboard another two hours as we missed what promised to be a marvellous lunch of fried chicken à la Maryland.

We were taken immediately, however, to Tilbury landing-stage and joined a much bigger ship British this time, the Anchor liner T.S.S. *Cameronia*, which was already loading some 2,500 troops. She was carrying troops only, no cargo, and by 14.00 we were proceeding down river to anchor off Southend.

Accommodation and messing aboard this ship were all that could be desired, although, of course, we had no opportunity to "gorge" ourselves as we should most certainly have done aboard the "Yank."

The gunnery officer here, an R.N.V.R. Lieutenant Morris, was also very helpful and pleasant and glad to have us with him. Incidentally, he was a very good "Identifier" himself.

We lay off Southend all day Monday, June 5th, and heaved anchor at 11.00 on D-day, and in company with four other big troop ships and two or three smaller ships proceeded down Channel. Turning the corner off Dover, our escort laid a smoke screen between us and the French coast, and I think everyone on board was waiting for the first Jerry shell to come over. We even heard the sirens sounding the alert on shore. But not a shot was fired, and we proceeded without incident to anchor in Portsmouth Roads.

We did, however, see a Liberty boat on fire farther out in the Channel off Dover, and I believe this was the ship on which the first R.O.C. casualty occurred. She had been hit some time before we arrived off Dover.

We lay in Portsmouth Roads until 23.00 on D-day plus one, and then proceeded south towards Normandy, arriving off the beaches at dawn on D-day plus two, Thursday, June 8th, and anchored about two miles off shore amidst a mass of ships of all sizes, from small landing craft to H.M.S. Rodney, which was shelling targets inland continuously.

Occasionally a Jerry shell would land on the beaches but none fell among the ships as far as we saw. Throughout the trip up till after dark on this day (D-day plus two) we did not see a hostile plane, only masses of Forts, Marauders, Thunderbolts, Typhoons, Lightnings, Liberators, Mustangs and, of course, Spits.

Disembarkation of troops was completed by about 21.00 but we received orders to remain at anchor until morning. After dark, around 23.30, "action stations" was sounded and several hostile planes flew low along the beaches. Every one of the hundreds of ships opened up with tracer and we saw one plane caught in searchlights (I believe a Ju.88) and shot down. Another came down in flames to our west over against the Cherbourg Peninsula, and the ship ahead of us shot down

its own kite balloon! Every ship was also ordered to "make smoke" and here I would say that this was the first time I have found a use for my respirator! It was certainly necessary. "Action stations" was sounded two or three times during the night, and ships opened up at other planes, one of which appeared to fly right over us, but we saw no more shot down or any bombs dropped.

J. W. OVEREND X 1

Left Southampton at 20.30 hours, June 7th, sailed across Channel all night. One exciting incident, an attempted attack by E-boats from Cherbourg. We could plainly see the battle between destroyers and E-boats. Eventually they were driven back to base.

Arrived in daylight at Omaha beach head. There seems to be about 2,000 ships down the coastline. We anchor near the American battleships Texas and Arkansas, with Nevada a little farther away. They are bombarding positions all day. What a noise!

Night of June 8th/9th, enemy aircraft came over, flares dropped, then bombs to starboard and port bows, missed us but damaged one ship on starboard side of us. What a sight! cannot describe it, every gun on every ship, big and little, open fire. Half-a-dozen gala nights would be nothing to the tracers and A.A. One hour's lull then they came again, saw them clearly. Fw.190's coming straight up the beach head, intense A.A. fire kept them at about 12,000 feet; passed overhead and dropped nothing on our beach head. Naval lieutenant says we are lucky having no casualties, shrapnel all over the decks and bridge, one large piece went through No. 4 lifeboat.

An amusing incident during this excitement was contributed by the nineteen years old cadet. The alarm had sounded to stand by the lifeboats, and the cadet thought it was abandon ship. We all laughed when he ran on to the boat deck in his birthday suit and his Mae West, he looked so funny.

The first night was over at 04.40 when the first Spitfires arrived and we then had some sleep.

The same happened nearly every night while we were here. Left the beach head Tuesday 13th, arrived in West Solent 23.00 hours, and got a shock at 24.00 when another ship rammed us, causing some damage.

Left Southampton on second trip Saturday 17th at 07.00

Overend

hours. Rather exciting watching escorts dealing with submarines. Arrived 22.00 hours just in time for another firework display. Saw what we took to be the first flying bomb from the direction of Cherbourg. It passed over us and went inland at the eastern end of the beach head. A bit quieter at nights now. Left 13.00 hours Monday 19th.

Thursday, 22nd June, left Southampton for Belfast, our ship is commodore of convoy. The only excitement, when our escort contacts submarines immediately after giving us message while steaming towards Lands End that there were more U-boats here than any other place. The escorts circled then let go the depth charges. They shook our ship from stem to stern.

Left Belfast July 6th, saw Wellington successfully bomb surfaced U-boat in the dawn of July 9th. Arrived at Utah beach head 23.00 hours. July 9th very quiet all night. Left 12th and anchored in Southampton Water. Up all night watching flying bombs. Left Southampton on last trip 15th July and it was just like a pleasure cruise. Returned and docked on 20th July, then home.

W. DENTON X 1

. . . I was drafted from Bournemouth to a good ship s.s. *Samos* in the Port of London. My fellow A.I. and myself were made very comfortable and soon made friends with the crew and gunners. Neither the gunners or ships officers had any idea about the identity of aircraft and soon came to rely on us entirely. Any reports on aircraft were accepted without question. We were in control of the gun-pits from the telephone control point on the bridge. I tried once or twice to get the gunners interested in aircraft with a pack of silhouette cards, but they were more interested in the packs containing fifty-two with which "nap" and "brag" were played.

Anyhow they were content to relax and leave identification to us. My adventures started soon after we left Southend on D-day and arrived in the Straits of Dover. The ship on our port beam was struck and set on fire by a shell. Shrapnel from the salvo tore a few holes in our plates and small pieces whizzed about the bridge. However, we were fortunate not to have any casualties. . . .

. . . The first night we were at the beach head we had seven casualties on the ship from A.A. shrapnel falling on the decks like hail. It was like a firework display with the sky filled with tracer. We were pleased to see one or two Jerries crash in flames.

A number of Forts were passing overhead at a good height when we were outward bound on one occasion. The O.C. troops was on the bridge at the time but could not see for the sun. He asked what they were and when I told him he said "You must have eyes like a hawk, I can't see a b— thing and anyone who says they can say what they are, are b— liars." He should have been at the R.O.C. refresher course.

Another incident I shall always remember was seeing a big merchant ship break her back after striking a mine. The few hostile aircraft we saw in daylight soon disappeared in the clouds when chased by Spitfires. I think I can safely say

Denton

that a low-flying Mitchell and several others would have been fired upon if we had not been there. We made five trips to the beach heads altogether, and apart from dodging flying bombs in London when on shore leave, and being shelled in the Straits on several occasions, I quite enjoyed my experiences and learned something fresh every day. It was a thrill to watch the Spitfires shooting the flying bombs down over the Channel. . . .

C. S. REDDIHOUGH T 1

For the Seaborne portion of our service our home was a comparatively small Norwegian vessel. Our quarters were cramped and were, moreover, suspended over the boilers, an arrangement no doubt admirable in arctic waters, but not ideal for June in the Channel. We judged ourselves more than compensated, however, for any lack of the luxuries enjoyed by our colleagues on Liberty ships by the consideration, thoughtfulness and kindness which are apt to flourish in a community so confined that everyone is bumping into everyone else several times a day, and these virtues we certainly found well-developed in everyone on board the *Lysland*.

From the first we were thankfully accepted by the gunners, who were delighted to be relieved of that portion of their responsibilities for which they were, and knew that they were, ill-equipped. Of aircraft identification they had been taught little and they were both eager and quick to learn whatever we could tell them. Gunners and identifiers together only numbered eight, and consequently we speedily came to know each other intimately and our arrangements as to watches and communications were both elastic and smooth in operation.

Naval life proved a welcome relief from the cares and monotony of civilian routine, and on the positive side provided new and stimulating experiences as regards environment, companions, duties and bodily sustenance, the latter being on a scale fantastic to one hardened by civil life and which only a sea-sharpened appetite could face.

In many other respects our good fortune held. As we sailed from a South Wales port we had several days at sea and, our ship being vice-commodore and carrying a naval signaller, we acquired much interesting knowledge of the organisation and handling of convoys. We were anchored for a few days at various points near the American beach for which our cargo of American vehicles and troops was

Reddihough

Winter

bound, and at one time or another were in the vicinity of all the British and American battleships and the French cruisers whose broadsides daily paled the sunlight with their orange flames. Again, thanks to the hawklike eye and steady nerves of one of our gunners (Bradford boy) our ship was credited with the destruction of an Me.109, an adequate return for the one or two near misses we suffered during our nightly exchange of discourtesies with the German fighter bombers.

For my own part I have never lived through a more satisfying month nor parted from comrades with deeper regret.

A. L. WINTER V 1

. . . Served with Frank Malir on s.s. *Amsterdam* and to this I can only add that a week ago I heard from the gunnery lieutenant that the ship is now at the bottom of the sea.

After leaving the *Amsterdam* at the end of a month's service I signed on for a further month and was transferred to the *Fort Dearborne* and thereafter sailed from Tilbury. . . .

J. MORRELL W 1

. . . We embarked at East India Dock, Tilbury, on June 9th, on board a U.S. Liberty ship, s.s. *Sam Houston* carrying a cargo of war material in the form of heavy ack ack guns, radiolocation equipment, jeeps, motor lorries, motor cycles, petrol, ammunition and 400 troops, and not until we approached the Normandy beach head on the night of June 12th did we encounter any hostile action. This was surface attack on the convoy from E-boats, but was adequately dealt with by our naval escort by dropping depth charges which fairly shook our ship and really reminded us that we were at sea.

We lay off the beach head unloading our cargo almost three days, and during this time we were quite near two light cruisers which were intermittently shelling shore batteries the whole time, this was augmented at night time by continuous hostile air activity which was met with naval guns and batteries of artillery which had been already established ashore.

Returning from the beach after five hours steaming, we were attacked at dusk (23.00 hours) by a lone Me.110 flying at 9,000 feet in 8/10ths cloud, and although he dropped a stick of light bombs the convoy escaped with a few near misses. The attack was again renewed at 24.00 hours and lasted until 01.45 the following morning, this time by about three aircraft which first of all dropped strings of brilliant flares which lit up the whole convoy, then they proceeded to dive bomb, and every ship opened fire with all they had, a really exciting two hours, this time however we did not escape without casualties.

Our duties were two hour watches on the bridge from dawn till dusk (04.00 to 23.00 hours).

H. E. METCALFE Z 3

. . . The ship which my pal and I were allotted to was called s.s. *Fort Assiniboine*. We first met the first mate who told us the Maritime gunner would attend to us. He turned out to be a good chap, and we were given quarters with him and a petty officer, and we were soon at home with them. . . .

. . . Monday opened out with a beautiful morning. Many of our fighters were flying about at various heights which made one dizzy watching them and making sure what they were. All went well until 14.50 hours, the engineers were busy unloading the ship into the landing craft; I was stood on the port side of the bridge, when suddenly above the noise of the winches there came the sound of aircraft diving. There would be about 7/10ths of cloud with a base of 5,000 feet at the time; I looked up the starboard quarter right into the sun, and was only just in time to see three Fw.190's with two Spitfires on their tails. Before I had time to give the warning the Spitfires opened fire; the enemy dropped their bombs, and turned, flew right across midships. I thought as I saw the bombs coming down that we would be hit, but as luck had it two bombs dropped about twenty yards on the starboard side, and six dropped fifteen yards or so on the port beam. I didn't see what became of the enemy, I was too interested in watching where the bombs were coming.

Later in the afternoon I saw a Fw.190 brought down into the sea in flames. . . .

. . . On our homeward journey (it was Wednesday June 14th), everything was all right until 22.55 hours. I was just ready to go off duty thinking it was too dark to see anything, when the sound of aircraft was heard overhead. I got the glasses on to them, and yelled out "Junkers 88's overhead." The gunners opened fire, being the first ship to do so. They dropped their stuff, and again we were lucky, the bombs, I don't know how many, dropped on our starboard beam about twenty yards away. Well, all the ships opened up, it

Metcalfe

was a grand barrage whilst it lasted, but the aircraft were quite safe as I estimated them at 10,000 feet. By the way, there were two of them, and I was pleased to have it confirmed by other observers.

No sooner had the firing died down, when it was opened up again; the sound of aircraft was heard coming on our port quarter. One of our Oerlikons on the boat deck had a go, and then on the port side about midships I saw and identified immediately four Spitfires. I yelled out "cease fire, friendly aircraft" and our gunners kept off them. . . .

. . . I might add I saw plenty of these fly-bombs crossing the Channel, and was interested in the speed of the Tempest and the Spitfire 14 chasing them and shooting them down. We had not to take any action when we saw the fly-bombs, the gunners had not to fire at them. . . .

. . . In conclusion I would like to say that we saved many of our aircraft from being shot down, as the gunner's fingers simply itched on their triggers to have a go, whether it be friendly or hostile, and I think that they were sorry that we were leaving them. . . .

J. SCHOLFIELD W 2

. . . I was eventually posted to Southampton, where I arrived on the 28th June. I reported to D.E.M.S. and was there introduced to my partner, Mr. Rogers of Dorchester, who had already had several weeks service. He then took me to our ship, s.s. *Joseph Pulitzer*, a Liberty ship, with an American crew, of which he gave me a very good report, and which I am now able to heartily agree with. The officers and crew gave me every consideration and kindness, and I was never made to feel an outsider.

We sailed the following morning in a convoy of about forty ships, escorted by destroyers and corvettes. We dropped anchor off the Omaha beach the same evening after an uneventful passage. The next day we discharged our cargo—guns, lorries and the troops in charge of them. After we had discharged we watched a troopship come in and discharge, turn and go away, and whilst threading her way through the shipping off the beach, she struck a mine and in about half-an-hour had completely disappeared with a loss of more than thirty lives. This was something of a shock to me, as I had assumed that once having dropped anchor we should be more or less immune from mines and that our trouble would be from the air. . . .

. . . Whilst at anchorage awaiting next morning's convoy to Southampton, the shock of the sinking was somewhat dispelled by the sight of about 250 Lancasters going over in the direction of Caen; we watched them and saw a terrific cloud of dust and smoke rising. . . .

. . . The following morning we sailed back to Southampton without further incident. Here I lost my partner, but was introduced to Mr. Thompson, a Scotchman from near Prestwick, who was now to be my future partner. He had already had a few weeks service, so was quite at home immediately.

Our next trip was to Utah, the other American beach. We

Scholfield

sailed as before, in the Omaha convoy, leaving it when quite close to the Normandy coast. The passage from Omaha to Utah—only five or six miles—was evidently very dangerous, as the Skipper brought all his crew and troops from the stern to midships. This short distance took us almost two hours to sail, and gave one a most uncanny feeling; one felt that everything must be done without sound, and even the ship appeared to be trying to move along without, as if afraid to let a mine know we were about. However, we at last reached Utah, discharged our cargo, which was as before, and returned to Omaha to await the convoy back to Southampton. Shortly after leaving Omaha a sudden storm arose and almost at the same time our steering failed to answer; this did not appear to cause any concern to the crew, but to me, well, I must confess that I was somewhat scared. On this return we saw a raid going out; we watched Lancasters and Halifaxes going over for almost two hours. Again the crew showed great excitement, and at no time during my service did I see so many of the crew on deck at the same time, and one, perhaps a little unconsciously, took a little pride in the spectacle, possibly because of being on an all American ship. . .

. . . During the night we had a visit from Jerry and one or two bombs were dropped but no damage was done. He was soon driven away by the ack ack which was terrific, our decks catching some of it, but fortunately no one was hit. We discharged our cargo next day and returned to Southampton during the night. On this passage we saw the exhaust flame of a few P-planes and saw two of them shot down into the sea.

Whilst going from our anchorage in Southampton Water to dock, and whilst we were having lunch, another ship collided with us; there was a terrific bump, and all at lunch made a frantic dive for life jackets, however, these were not required as no damage had been caused to our ship and we proceeded to dock. The other ship had her lifeboat crushed and had a large bulge in her side. . . .

S. LISTER V 1

. . . June 5th Went aboard Liberty ship *Robert Lowry* 15.30, and was received and made very comfortable with good bed and food.

June 5th to June 14th Mixed cargo was being loaded, and we gave classes in Identification to gunners in the morning and went ashore in the afternoon in our turns, as half the crew were allowed ashore at once. The *Robert Lowry* was a ship of 10,000 tons, 141 feet long and 51 feet wide, crew 47, gunners 27, and eight 20 mm. guns, one 5.38 gun and one 3-inch gun, so we were well-armed. The gunners looked after their guns well.

June 16th Loaded and left Swansea 02.00 for Falmouth, Anchored in Falmouth Bay 16.30, after good trip and fine weather, no one allowed ashore, we were waiting for another convoy to join us.

June 19th Left Falmouth with seven ships in convoy for France. Sea very rough, all on board slept in clothing.

June 20th In sight of France, 23 hours delay.

June 21st Back in sight of England 07.15, and back to France 17.30; rough sea.

From 21st to 28th June Laying off France with only one-third of cargo unloaded. Nothing much happened. One night raid and plenty of fires and mines going up on shore. We were anchored near one ship which had been sunk by a mine.

June 28th Left *Robert Lowry* for *Empire Rapier*, another Liberty ship manned by British crew.

June 29th Left France 13.50 for Cowes, Isle of Wight. Anchored Cowes 21.45; good crossing, saw three Liberty ships sinking; struck by mines. . . .

A. SCOTT Q 2

N. E. TURNER Z 4

. . . D-day plus three saw us comfortably installed aboard the s.s. *Samyork*, an American built Liberty ship of some 8,000 tons. The crew and gunners were British and by the diligent use of our recently acquired naval vocabulary we soon settled in and found our companions a friendly crowd.

During the ensuing month we made three trips from the London docks to the Beaches and suffered no casualties or damage whatsoever. Alternate four hour watches on the bridge kept us fully occupied, and after the first few planes had flown about our ship and we had correctly identified them to the gunnery officer we were accepted as part of the necessary defence personnel of our ship; thereafter every plane, bird or speck on the horizon was referred to us over the inter-com. for identification.

To see the invasion in full swing was an awe inspiring sight, and the success of the operations was a true reward for the careful and detailed planning. The enemy, despite his submarines and E-boat attacks, his coastal shelling, night bombing and sea mining, was unable to halt the steady flow of liberating forces.

It was an honour to be accepted into the Royal Navy for so short a time, and we are proud to have been associated with the fighting men on such a momentous expedition.

W. A. JONES W 3

. . . A cruiser lying quite near us was apparently dive bombed unsuccessfully at dawn next morning, though I did not see this as I was not on the early watch. As things were getting rather too hot, most of the merchant ships in the anchorage received orders on the Friday night to move out and return to the original beach first thing on the Saturday morning. About 7 o'clock on the Saturday morning, a destroyer anchored about a mile away from us started to move, but as soon as she did so she blew up and sank, and I am afraid very few of her crew were saved, as she broke in half and went down very suddenly. Twenty minutes later a cargo ship similar to ours, and belonging to the same Company, but motor not steam-driven, started to move, and she too blew up immediately. She was lying next to us, as close as one ship could be to another without colliding, and the explosion was so loud that we thought we had been hit. The explosion blew the ship's stern off, and it settled back into the sea, while the bow end (about two-thirds of her total length) remained afloat. Landing craft of all sorts and in considerable numbers were alongside her very quickly, and anyone who was not knocked out by the explosion got safely away, in spite of the fact that a fire broke out in one of the lorries on deck, and there was soon a big blaze and a tremendous lot of noise as the flames reached the shells with which the lorries were loaded, and also the ship's own anti-aircraft ammunition in the gun-pits.

We heard later that some 130 soldiers were lost, together with nine of the crew and fifteen gunners. There were two observers on board, as I had seen and waved to them the evening before when she anchored, but presumably both were on deck on duty, or they may have had accommodation amidships, i.e. up on deck, as so far as I know there have been no fatal casualties among Seaborne R.O.C. personnel. .

. . . Our ship had been just about to move when this ship

Jones

blew up, but we stopped immediately to see if there was anything that we could do. As it was soon clear that we could not help in any way, as there were more than enough landing craft to take off survivors and plenty of fire ships arrived to deal with the fire, we re-started at about half-past eight. As it seemed obvious that the destroyer and this merchant ship had been mined by acoustic mines, because they had both blown up as soon as they started to move, i.e. as soon as vibration from their propellers set off the mines, our captain gave orders for everyone who was not actually on duty below deck to be on deck and wearing his life jacket when the ship started, and we started off more slowly and gently than one would have thought possible. As we steamed back to the other beach, minesweepers were still very busy sweeping the Channel, and one of them after exploding two mines herself blew up on a third just astern of us. When we got near the other beach, we saw another ship of the same type as ours with her back broken by a mine, with her bows and stern still above water, though the stern sank very shortly afterwards. Apparently, there were only a few fatal casualties in this ship. . . .

“ Let's drink to the spirit of gallantry and courage that made a strange Heaven out of unbelievable Hell, and let's drink to the hope that one day this country of ours, which we love so much, will find dignity and greatness and peace again.”

Noel Coward

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