

CHAPTER XVII UNDERLING IN 'OVERLORD'

Tom Hussey walked into my office one day and said:-

"21st Army want a naval liaison officer for pontoon causeways, will you take it on?"

I knew something about pontoon causeways, which the Americans had produced as a means of bridging the water gap, but at that time I do not believe I had ever seen one. The expert on our side was Lieutenant-Commander Mulock at Appledore and he had been carrying out trials or experiments with this equipment for some time. However, it was made clear that he was not available for some reason or other so it had been decided that I must take on this last minute assignment and try and ensure that it worked. It was March, 1944, and I attended a few meetings at Norfolk House on the subject and others concerned with the paraphernalia of invasion, ably conducted and lucidly explained by Admiral Creasy. I then journeyed to Southampton, where I met Lieutenant-Colonel L.R.E. "David" Fayle, C.R.E. of the Fifteen (Kent) G.H.Q Troops Engineers. He was in charge of the construction and subsequently the operation of the pontoons. He was an extremely able, likeable man and we were soon on excellent terms. I decided that I was going to enjoy the job in spite of the fact that I felt I had been pitchforked into it at the last minute with no experience of the subject to help me along. Under David Fayle's careful tuition I soon learned enough to be able to realise the problems we were going to have to solve.

There was also the intriguing possibility that the causeway might prove of vital importance in the follow-up stages of the invasion for landing vehicles in quantity. The "water-gap" was one of the major problems of the invasion. All the beaches concerned were relatively flat, which meant that landing craft grounded some distance from the water's edge, according to their draft. The big L.S.T's (Landing Ship Tank) drew about nine feet aft and even when trimmed to conform with the beach slope, were liable to end up with the end of their ramp in four feet of water. This posed a considerable wading problem which, in the event, was only overcome by allowing them to dry out in the follow up stages. The same problem occurred with the smaller L.C.T's (Landing Craft Tank), although they would normally end up with not more than two or three feet at the ramp. Even so, vehicles had to be specially waterproofed to be able to wade in such depths and this was a colossal job with the number of vehicles involved.

The Americans, having studied the problem, evolved and produced the Naval Lighterage Pontoons (N.L pontoons for short) and it was this equipment which David Fayle and his skilled crew were going to fit together on the beach at Netley, near Southampton. It was a job of some magnitude, for which the ten weeks or so available seemed much too short.

Briefly the causeways were made up of steel tanks 5 feet long by 7 feet wide and 5 feet deep. These tanks were connected together by

steel angles into sections 30 tanks long by 2 tanks wide. That is, they were something over 170 feet long by 14 feet wide. In addition there were wider, short sections, 4 tanks across and 10 in length, which were used as projections from the side of the causeway proper, on which the landing craft lowered their ramps. A full causeway might be nearly a thousand yards in length. Tugs were also constructed, 3 tanks wide and 7 tanks long and powered by two gigantic 'outboard' motors, each of 120 horsepower. In all eighty-one causeway lengths (2 tanks x 30 tanks), forty-eight landing platforms (4 tanks x 10 tanks) and twenty-two tugs were constructed and towed to Osborne Bay in the Isle of Wight, where they were moored.

Life was very hectic. There was a mass of nautical detail to be arranged and in order to cope with this I established an office in the Sea Transport building, near the docks, and got myself an assistant, one Lieutenant Law, R.N.R. who had spent most of the war up to that time in Iceland so it was a nice change for him. At least for the time being.

A great deal of our time was spent in trying to foresee what gear we were going to need and then trying to get it, for the invasion date was obviously so close at hand that there was little of anything left on the shelves. But the Admiral Superintendent of Portsmouth Dockyard proved a real friend in need and conjured up priceless equipment from heaven knows where. I was officially

under the direct orders of Admiral Creasy, who told me it was too late to give me any official standing so I would just have to use his name. As he said this he gave me a searching glance which indicated clearly just what would happen if I took it in vain. From then on I made signals as from Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force and as I was never called to account for anything I said, I assume they were all approved. In fact, I saw little of Admiral Creasy after my first interview but a good deal of Admiral Mansergh, his deputy. I had tremendous admiration for both these officers and not only enjoyed working for them but appreciated their confidence in me more than I can say.

I had asked Combined Operations H.Q. if they could spare me a secretary and by return of post I got a most excellent Leading Wren, Constance Harrington. She was quite one of the most efficient, charming, determined and generally capable secretaries it is possible to imagine. Knowing nothing whatever about pontoon causeway or what we were supposed to be doing, within 48 hours I realised I could leave her to run the office and deal with all enquiries single-handed while Law and I went out to badger, cajole or persuade people to let us have something we, or more probably David Fayle, needed.

I remember one day we needed a tug, or tugs, for some job our own 'biscuit box' variety could not tackle and after trying every

possible source in and around Southampton without success, someone suggested the Americans. "They've got masses of tugs" I was told. "Lots of little ones just arrived called TIDs" I eventually ran down the officer concerned with Tids and found him in a large office somewhere in Southampton docks with a long queue of suppliants waiting for audience. As I approached his desk I heard him say to each person ahead of me in a deep southern drawl, "Be mighty quick, now. I wanna go fishing". I knew the River Test offered some of the best fishing in the country but thought it rather an odd time to be so preoccupied with the sport. Nevertheless, when it came to my turn he used the same formula so I asked him where he was going to fish. "Back home in Alabama, when we've finished this darn war", he replied. "Now what's your problem?" I explained briefly and left the room within five minutes, having been given the loan of two Tids for the necessary period. I wished more people were in a hurry to go fishing!

The actual working of landing craft on the causeways was the subject of much discussion and trial but David Fayle, although a very experienced yachtsman and a fine seaman, too, deferred usually to my suggestions and I think our arrangements were sound. They were not entirely approved on the beaches after the invasion, however, and I think this proved to be a mistake. Had the original system been persevered with, I believe the causeways could have handled a lot more traffic.

It was decided that pilots would be needed to bring the L.C.T'S in to the causeways as in fact they were practically invisible at the seaward end and it was thought that the L.C.T captains might well be dubious about putting their ramps down in what appeared to be five feet of water. I discussed the problem with my contact on the staff of A.N.E.X.F. a Lieutenant-Commander Juniper, who very promptly arranged for twelve Skipper Lieutenants R.N.R. to be posted to me from the Patrol Service pool at Lowestoft. In due course they arrived and proved to be a pretty hard-bitten collection of trawler skippers led by one, Bill Donovan, a giant of a man who proved a tower of strength throughout. But more of these sea-dogs later.

During this time I managed a couple of brief visits to my home in Ruislip, in conjunction with some business at Combined Operations H.Q. but in general 24 hours a day were not enough for the work in hand.

Eventually all construction was coming to an end and we arranged to stage a trial in Osborne bay for the delectation of various high-ups, naval and military, including the Engineer in Chief, 21st Army Group, General Ismay. David Fayle asked me to make arrangements for sea transport from Southampton for the Army big-wigs and I suggested that the most practical solution was to take them in one of the L.C.T's which were going to land vehicles. We had only put down a very short causeway so the trial had to be done at the exact

period of tide, allowing us about an hour to unload the vehicles and embark them again.

"At least", I said "If the L.C.T's are there to do the demonstration the General will see it. If we lay on a high speed launch it may break down or go to the wrong place, or something, and all our efforts will be wasted".

David was a bit dubious and it was rather as if I had suggested providing a horse and cart as transport but he eventually agreed. When the General and the other observers arrived it was clear they were by no means flattered at the provision made for them. On the bridge of the L.C.T the General said so in plain terms and was not a bit mollified by my explanation.

"I should have thought we could have come down an hour later and made the trip in a high-speed launch" he said rather huffily. I said I had little faith in high-speed launches and did want him to see the demonstration. Well, he did see it and it went off quite smoothly but none of the other observers from Portsmouth, including the whole naval contingent from A.N.C.X.F arrived until after the demonstration when the tide had fallen too far for a second showing. Their high-speed launch had broken down! I think the General would have liked to say "Take that silly grin off your face!" but he did not.

Soon after the arrival of the twelve Skipper Lieutenants, I called a meeting and gave them a short lecture on pontoon causeways, or N-L pontoons, as we usually referred to them, and explained how they were going to be used. I also told them what their duties would be and that in due course we would have some practice runs with LCT's, in which they would act as pilots. Although somewhat non-committal, as trawler skippers tend to be, I got the idea that they rather fancied the idea of being pilots for landings on enemy held beaches.

I told them that until I sent word to say they were required they were free to do what they liked but that when I wanted them they must appear at the precise time stated as I had no intention of sending out search parties.

About a week later we were ready to start operations and I had managed to get a couple of L.C.T's with which to practice. I sent word to Donovan to have his band of braves on the beach, ready to start work, at eight o'clock next morning. I think one enthusiast turned up on time, the rest dribbling in between nine and ten. When they were all there I reminded them of my instructions and said:-

"You are no use to me. Go and pack your kit and I will have warrants made out for your return to Lowestoft".

They departed, muttering rather unpleasant things, mostly about me and my high-handed ways. Round about mid-day Donovan and one or two of the others sought audience with me and said they were sorry but as they had been kicking their heels for over a week they could not see what the hurry was. I quickly pointed out that I could have paraded them every day and given them some real time-wasting to occupy them until I was ready to start training but decided that would waste my time as well as theirs and I was very busy. Now I had the craft for them to handle it was essential to make the most of them but I had no intention of wasting more of my time on men who could not obey orders. They saw the point and said they could not go back to Lowestoft without being the laughing stock of the place and please could they stay? Of course I said 'Yes' and from then on all my orders were obeyed with considerable promptness, if not always with acclamation. I am afraid that many people found trawler skippers difficult to handle but like most independent people they liked to feel certain that the person giving the order knew what he was talking about and that the order was really necessary. Later on, in Normandy, there were some interesting clashes of opinion on these subjects and I regret to say my sturdy skippers came off worst. It was a great pity as they were first class seamen and very likeable chaps.

One day, soon after we had all transferred to the Isle of Wight and were quite comfortably housed in a holiday camp in Wootton creek, Donovan told me that there was beer at the Prince Albert, the pub opposite the entrance to Osborne House - would I care to join the skippers in a pint or two? I agreed with pleasure and right on the dot of opening time we poured into the bar. There was hardly room for anyone else, as the majority of the skippers were something like 50 inches in girth. I suppose one could put it down to a fish diet!

None of us had had any beer for some time and the rounds came up with some speed. It was an education to see those sturdy chaps sink a pint as if it were a thimble-full. I do not believe I could possibly have kept pace but I know it eventually arrived at my turn to say 'Thirteen pints'. At this stage the landlord proceeded to put a dish cloth over the pumps, the traditional sign that service had finished.

"What's all this?" said the skippers, "We can't have drunk a barrel of beer yet!"

The landlord agreed but said he must save some for his other customers who also knew he had had a delivery.

"Well, if there's no more beer we must have some entertainment," said Donovan, "So just send your missus along and we'll make do with her".

The landlord hardly hesitated before snatching the cloth off the pumps again, after one look at his customers, who seemed highly in favour of the idea. Beer or landlady, I had had my quota and said goodnight to my troops and made my way back to camp.

The actual move to the island took place in one of the gales which led up to the postponement of the landing. I had an L.C.P(L) (Landing Craft Personnel, Large) with a crew of three young marines, as my personal craft and with Leading Wren Harrington and Lieutt. Law

proceeded across to Cowes. It was a very bumpy ride and it occurred to me that invading in similar weather would be anything but a picnic.

I established myself in the naval H.Q. in Cowes, Osborne Court and commuted between this office and Osborne bay where all our pontoons had been assembled. They stretched for miles and needed constant attention as there were some leaks and other minor faults to attend to. Our first job was to provide the towing gear and on the beach my skippers proceeded to cut up and splice coil after coil of wire to make towing bridles. A number of bridles were also produced in the dockyard and gradually each pontoon was fitted for towing.

The actual towing operation was very complex as all sorts of craft were allocated pontoons and working out a schedule was a job for a computer, which of course was not available then. I made several trips to Fort Southwick to consult the Staff Officer Operations and Juniper but in general the day to day arrangements were left to me. The first series were towed by smoke-making trawlers and boom-working vessels and quite a number of our carefully constructed pontoons did not reach the other side. Later on, L.S.T'S, both British and American, took tows but there was a decided tendency to look on them as an incubus and a burst of speed would shake them off. At one time there were a dozen or more adrift in the channel.

Not long before 'D-day' I gave a lecture to most of the L.C.T captains in a shed in Southampton docks and I hope I was able to convince them that the pontoons would not be difficult to work and that they would avoid the necessity for the landing craft drying out on the beach, where they would be a sitting target for evening attack. This last was, of course, my trump card.

A very charming Third Officer Wren friend of mine came down from C.O.H.Q with some urgent papers for me and asked if she could have a trip in one of the L.C.T's we were using for practice runs. It was a lovely sunny day and the L.C.T. boys were delighted to have female company and the day went off very well. Coming back, we were steaming quietly up Southampton water and Joan, the Wren, was standing on the compass platform in the usual place of the officer of the watch. The coxswain, who had done the job dozens of times, was taking the ship into harbour and the L.C.T captain was sitting in the sun talking to me.

Suddenly Joan said,

"There's a boat with an awful lot of gold lace in it coming along and it looks as if it is flying a Royal Standard".

We shot to our feet and peered over the dodger.

"Good heavens, its the King" I gasped, "Turn right and salute, Joan".

The royal barge passed down our starboard side a bare cable away, her distinguished passengers obviously viewing our dapper Wren commanding officer with some surprise - and, no doubt, appreciation.

As I expected, I subsequently received a signal requesting the name of the officer of the watch of L.C.T - but my close and unspecified connection with Admiral Creasy allowed me to talk my way out of the situation.

To get from Osborne bay or the camp at Wootton creek to my office in Cowes I could either go by sea in my L.C.P(L) or use what transport the Royal Engineers had available. On one occasion they took me in a reconnaissance car which had a turret on top like a miniature tank. On our return I suggested a drink at the Duke of York so we parked our aggressive looking vehicle outside a shop on the other corner of the road leading down to the ferry. We had just been served when Uffa Fox and Chris Ratsey came in. After wishing us

'Good morning' Uffa enquired if it was our tank parked outside his shop window spoiling the effect of his careful window-dressing. I apologised and accepted a drink from Uffa and when we got back to our vehicle found the 'window-dressing' consisted of two fly-blown showcards and three or four uninteresting items of boat equipment lying untidily on the floor. Since that occasion I have met Uffa many times but have never reminded him of the incident, which was typical of his somewhat impish sense of humour. This, I fancy, was not always to the liking of some of the people with whom his work and play brought him in contact but he ^{was} ~~is~~ a remarkable man and he has undoubtedly made an immense contribution to the sport of sailing.

There was, of course, a great veil of secrecy over the actual date of the invasion, although the gigantic build up of men and material all along the south coast, and particularly in Hampshire, gave some indications that the time was rapidly approaching. The Solent was full of ships and the absence of any real air activity on the part of the enemy was astonishing. One day I was returning to our camp from Cowes when all the anti aircraft guns in the island opened up and for some time we awaited the arrival of the enemy planes. We saw nothing but heard an oddly rough engine noise followed by a loud explosion. It was my first experience of a buzz-bomb. We had a number more in the island and in the Solent but I did not hear of any major damage.

Orders for moving the pontoons arrived and David Fayley consulted me on a major difficulty. The orders called for certain movements to take place on D - 1 and so on, but neither of us knew when D day was, which made things a bit difficult.

I went over to Fort Southwick and asked Juniper but he replied that he was not allowed to tell me and referred the matter to Admiral Mansergh or Admiral Creasy. I cannot remember which. Whichever it was, he sent for me and explained that I could not be told as I had not been 'Bigoted', which was the term used to denote those people allowed to know the date and time of D day, and other extremely secret matters. I explained our difficulty and said we had a lot of very awkward bits of equipment to move from Osborne bay to Bembridge, ready for towing to France and we were bound to be a day late unless we knew when to do it. The Admiral thought for a moment and then said:-

"I must take advice on this; meanwhile there is an interesting paper on my desk which may give you some useful information connected with your work. You must not disclose anything you learn here, except to Colonel Fayle, of course".

He then left the room and lying on his desk was a sheet of operation orders for the groups which included the pontoon causeways, together with the date of D-day! Almost at once the Admiral returned and said no more about the matter, except to wish me good-day and good-luck. Nelson's blind eye again!

Oddly enough, David Fayle had been 'bigoted' so why his people had not told him when D-day was to be, I cannot imagine.

I spent an interesting hour in the bowels of the earth under Fort Southwick looking at the chart of the channel with the Staff Officer Operations. All the courses of the various groups were shown with a rather large black area where lots of the lines crossed. I said it looked like a somewhat congested position but was assured that it was unlikely that everyone would be there at the same time. Just as I left Southwick House after a final talk with Juniper, all the key figures of the invasion

came out of a room, having just discussed weather prospects with the meteorological experts. Someone, I think it was Admiral Ramsey, said:-

"Well, the witch doctors have cast their bones and we can now only rely on their interpretation of the omens!"

In fact, the invasion was put back one day on account of the weather and there is little doubt that in more ways than one the Lord was on our side.

It was perhaps fortunate for me that I had plenty to occupy my mind for my wife was due to produce our third child at any minute. After my trip to Southwick I got back to my office at Cowes late in the evening to find a message asking me to ring my wife's doctor at Ruislip. I did so and Dr. MacDougall told me that a daughter had been still-born but my wife was well. Connie Harrington was a tower of strength and did all she could to make sure I was kept informed but we were moving down to Bembridge and I had no idea when I would be in a position to ask for leave.

Having got our first group to Bembridge the postponement meant that the troops were kicking their heels for a day and some of them managed to get very drunk. I spent the night rounding up strays and going from one pontoon tug to another in my L.C.P(L) but anchored for a few hours sleep about 3.0 a.m. At four I was awake to find we had drifted about a mile and it then transpired that one of our marines had omitted to stock the anchor! We got under way again and spent the rest of the morning ferrying men to the ships they were crossing the channel in and generally shepherding the flock. I wished David Fayle luck and promised to get the remainder of our pontoons away as soon as possible and join him to assist in working them on the beaches.

I wanted to cross with Fayle and the first wave; not from any desire to get into the fighting and be heroic, but because we had worked together to make the operation a success and I felt that my real job would be to superintend the use of the causeways by the L.C.Ts. I was sure that if we could get off to a good start and make sure that craft used the causeways in the manner we had devised, all would go well, but once it became a free for all we would find they lost favour. I believe this is exactly what happened as there was no one on the naval side to put the causeway case to the authorities off shore. At the same time there is no doubt that Fayle and his men worked wonders and in spite of all difficulties the causeways proved their worth.

My attempts to join Fayle leaving Law to arrange the remaining tows, which consisted of over a hundred units, was firmly vetoed by Admiral Mausergh. He insisted that the major problem was to get the remaining units towed to France as quickly as possible and that this was a job which would require a lot of very earnest persuasion. "It will tax all your resources, Middleton", he said "And you will need Law to help you".

How right he was! Nobody wanted our unwieldy tows and a large number of vessels instructed to call off Osborne bay to receive one conveniently forgot or developed some defect which prevented it. On one occasion Donovan was trying to

persuade the 1st Lieutenant of an American L.S.T. to lower the wire of their big anchor used for kedging off the beach, so that he could shackle it on to the pontoon causeway's bridle. The American said "You'll never handle that wire on your own, I'll send a couple of men down".

Donovan, who had the big steel wire in his hand by now, said,

"If you do, I'll put a running bowline in this and send them back in it!"

He looked quite capable of doing it.

An American officer in a landing craft called in to Osborne bay and made fast to a pontoon saying,

"You guys got any use for this craft?"

We said it might come in useful but why did he wish to get rid of it.

"Guess I've got one too many", he replied laconically as another craft came up to take him off. He ^Left without further ceremony. As time went on we collected a mass of discarded equipment and put up a sign:-

'Middleton and Law - Dealers in secondhand invasion equipment'.

I was rather perturbed at the lack of news from the other side and decided that I ought to go over and discuss matters with David Fayle. Admiral Mausergh agreed so I thumbed a lift/^{in an LST} and on our arrival off the beaches was quite astonished at what I saw. There were vessels of all sorts in all directions with the ~~Hunt~~ class destroyer Waveney controlling the traffic and a Trinity House light vessel with J U N O on her sides indicating the name of the beach area, The L S T I was travelling in ran ashore and lowered her ramp to discharge her load of vehicles and men and I made my way across the beach to find David Fayle and the causeway party. The activity on shore in all directions was tremendous and it was hard to believe the enemy was only a few miles away and why there was a complete absence of air activity. I soon found David Fayle and he quickly gave me details of the situation, including a depressing list of missing equipment. He then told me what he needed most urgently and we arranged a schedule of deliveries. I promised to impress on ships' captains the need to hand over tows to Fayle's parties and not just cast them adrift off the beaches, as many had been doing. I then had a quick look at the work in progress and we fixed on a day for the skippers to come over and start working as pilots. When I was sure I had a clear picture of how things stood and what was required I sought out an L.S.T on the beach and begged a passage

back to the Solent. Eventually we disposed of our large fleet of floating boxes and I made arrangements to take passage in an American Landing Ship Dock with our remaining craft which consisted of a couple of tugs, my L C P(L) and one or two minor items. The L S D flooded down and we all steamed into her capacious womb. The after doors were then closed and the dock pumped out for the passage across the channel. My skippers were somewhat taken aback to find the ship was dry! *hugot-wise, that is.*

On the way across the ships young surgeon-lieutenant asked me if I could arrange a conducted tour of the battlefields as he simply could not return to America and confess he had never seen the enemy. I said I would see what I could do, provided he did not expect me to come too and when we reached the beaches I asked David Fayle if he could oblige. He said 'yes' with some enthusiasm and before I could disassociate myself from the idea we were all off in a jeep heading for some unspecified point where a view of the enemy was considered a possibility. This was down to the eastward, somewhere in the *CAEN* ~~Caen~~ direction I fancy and we were proceeding along a quiet lane through a clump of trees when our driver suddenly swerved off the road. David looked at him questioningly and he said very quietly:

"Enemy tank", and pointed down the road. Sure enough,

less than two hundred yards away with a nasty looking droopy gun pointing vaguely in our direction was a tank which even I could see was not one of ours. The young American doc was delighted and, I think, wanted to go into the attack, but it was clear we were outgunned and outnumbered. Fortunately, the enemy either had not seen or heard us or was brewing up, if Germans did that sort of thing and we quietly made our retreat, informing the first unit we came across of what we had seen. In some surprise they said they knew and we had somewhat rashly moved into an area which was still being ~~dispatched~~ *disputed*.

After a look round some of the other interesting places, we returned to one of the causeways and I took our American friend back to his ship. Unfortunately, he was so eager to relate his experiences that he made a bad jump for the accommodation ladder and slipped with his leg between it and the boat. There was a nasty crack and he said apologetically, "I'm afraid I have broken my leg".

On board he was helped off to his surgery where, with the help of his surgeons mate, he set his own leg and returned to the wardroom with it in plaster. I felt very bad about the whole affair as I had him in my charge. He heaped coals of fire on my head by producing a bottle of Bourbon whisky from his medical comforts, which he insisted I should accept for my kindness!

Once on shore, I was soon immersed in helping to keep a good flow of traffic over the causeways and this really amounted to public relations work or touting for business. I had a certain amount of difficulty with my skippers who all decided to live off the land and were, therefore, somewhat difficult to find off duty. The more orthodox army and navy officers thought they were much too casual and what the skippers thought they were inclined to say bluntly. They all got themselves army issues of battledress and denims and eventually evolved highly individualistic uniforms of their own. This was by no means confined to them for the Naval Officer in Charge of one area, a Royal Navy Captain, usually wore rugger shorts and stockings with a blue battledress and beret with a naval badge sewn on at a rakish angle. He strode about with a large Alsatian dog at his heels, slapping his leg with a riding crop. On one occasion he complained to one of the skippers that he was very slow in getting an L C T on to the causeway and the skipper replied politely,

"Well, if you were a seaman you would realise the difficulty I was having".

When the explosion had ceased to reverberate the skipper said plaintively,

"I thought he must be a cavalry colonel in that rig".

Another time the same officer was chiding two skippers for being 'out of the rig of the day' when one replied dourly,

"If thee was properly dressed we'd know whether thee was entitled to say we's not properly dressed".

I had tea and strawberries with this unorthodox N.O one day when he had the unpleasant task of informing a Polish captain that his ship, one of our 'C' class cruisers, was going to be sunk as an addition to the 'Gooseberry' breakwater. She had been mined and it was decided that she was not worth repairing. The Pole was heartbroken and his pleading for his ship, which was clearly his pride and joy, was pitiful to hear. Not even the strawberries could ease the situation.

To begin with I lived with the Royal Engineers in a house not far from one of the beaches but everyone slept in fox-holes in the ground. As far as I could see the army considered it infra dig to live in any sort of comfort and nobody made any attempt to improve the amenities. To make matters worse, at meal times one or other of the younger officers would arrive with some new type of mine they had found and discuss means of de-fusing it. I found this bad for my appetite as I always expected one to go off sooner or later and after a day or two I decided to move to the naval camp not far away. Here we still slept in fox-holes with a tent over the top, which was not quite in accordance with naval ideas of civilised living. Our ward room was a large marquee where white coated stewards served the

meals with normal ceremony. Most nights there were sporadic air attacks, which were only dangerous because of the trigger-happy troops who fired all sorts of weapons in all directions, except the one likely to be most effective. Law and I regaled ourselves on the Bourbon whisky for a night or two and it certainly helped to keep our spirits up. Then Law got a recurrence of his ulcer trouble and was taken off to hospital in some pain. A day later I got a frantic message from him saying I must get him out of hospital so I went along to see what was the matter. I soon found out. He was in a casualty clearing hospital and surrounded by badly wounded men, most of them unconscious or just coming round after major surgery. It did not do my stomach any good so I could guess the effect on his. I said I would see the doctor in charge and see if he would agree to Law being sent back to England as he was unlikely to make much of a recovery here and on field rations. While I was waiting to see the doctor a surgeon came out of the operating theatre close by to get a breath of fresh air. His big rubber apron was running with blood and his face was tired and haggard. He told me he had been operating for twelve hours a day for several days and that they were very short of competent staff.

The reason was, I believe, that they were having to deal with cases which would normally have been treated either before reaching that hospital or on return to England. It certainly brought home to me the fact that a lot of people were having a much grimmer war than I was and I was only thankful for my preservation so far. Anyway, when I saw the medico he promptly agreed that Law should go home at once and as any question of a replacement for him would have caused a lot of bother, I decided to carry on on my own. In any case, things were settling down to a reasonable routine and except for trying to convince various groups that our causeways were the best (the only ones, in fact, but a better alternative than beaching and possibly drying out), I had no major problems at that time.

I made one trip back to Osborne bay in the early stages, probably before we had completed delivery of all the equipment, and having been some days in my clothes I looked around for a bath. One of the army officers I met told me that it was possible to get a bath at Osborne House, which had been cleared of patients to receive casualties from France but had so far not had any. Incidentally, this was probably one reason why the hospital Law was in was so busy! However, I made my way to Osborne House and was met by a very pleasant Sister, who heard my request and said we must go and ask Matron. We went down a long corridor with

plants and statuary to a room at the end, which I daresay was once Queen Victoria's study. Sister knocked on the door and we were bidden to enter. Sitting at a desk was a thin faced forbidding figure, who might have been carefully carved out of stone. I remember wondering where was the compassion of a life-time of nursing the sick? Sister explained that I had returned from France and would much appreciate the opportunity to have a bath. The antiseptic figure behind the desk hardly moved a muscle,

"He looks as if he needs one", she said, and then gave instructions as to which bathroom I was to use and dismissed us with a regal gesture. As we reached the door the cool, precise voice spoke again,

"You will see he has sufficient soap and towels, Sister".

"Yes, Matron", answered Sister as I opened the door and we passed through.

"And a nurse to scrub his back, if he needs one", went on the same unemotional tones as the door closed behind us. Who would have believed it? I grinned and looked at Sister, who would have done the job very nicely, I am sure.

"You won't you know!" she said briskly.

My suggestion that Matrons were there to be obeyed carried no weight at all.

The bathroom was a museum piece with a bath which looked as if it had been hacked out of a solid piece of marble, mounted on

a dais approached by two steps. On the wall was a notice saying it was no use trying to get more than the regulation war-time five inches of water in the bath as the plumbing had been so arranged that this was impossible. The notice was signed by Surgeon-Rear Admiral Pickering-Pick. I enjoyed my bath and afterwards was invited to tea in a very comfortable sitting room with the only two ex-patients remaining. It was a pleasant interlude. Osborne House was, and still is, a convalescent home for service and civil service patients.

To return to Normandy though, in August 1944 it was clear that my period of usefulness there was coming to an end. Not long before I left I remember watching an air attack on Caen by some hundreds of our aircraft at about seven o'clock in the evening. The flak appeared to me to be impenetrable but the planes flew on steadily, dropped their bombs and turned out to sea again. I believe two were shot down but the crew of one was saved just off the beaches.

I made a trip to the American sector for some reason or other and was entertained by a major in an engineer unit who had been cutting up one of our 'bombardons'. This was a large floating metal structure designed as a breakwater to protect the Mulberry harbour but it came adrift in a gale and ended up on Utah beach.

My American friend said how thoughtful it was of us to provide such a handy source of supply of sheet metal as he was using it to make bullet and splinter proof shelters. I remember he showed his appreciation by giving me two cartons of Chesterfield cigarettes and a big box of Polo mints. Discussing the landings, I realised that the American forces had had a pretty rough time on their beaches, which had sizeable cliffs inshore and from which German fire pinned them down for some time. The other feature which impressed me was the fact that the gigantic bombing raids immediately before the landing had done little to impair the efficiency of the defence installations.

Looking back on those days I still remember my strong feeling that our hold on the invasion territory in those early days was a very precarious one. The supply lines over the beaches were closely controlled by the weather and the gale of the 20th to the 23rd June gave some indication of the problem. Indeed, without the ability of the L S T's to beach, dry out over low water and retract on the following flood, supplies would probably have got dangerously low. As it was, a dried out L S T was a sitting target had there been any real air aggression.

The streams of vehicles moving inland were all controlled by military policemen, who stood imperturbably at the cross roads, smothered in dust, keeping the traffic moving, even under fire.

One day I saw a long column of prisoners in German uniform marching stolidly along a dusty road and noted with some surprise that they all appeared to be Chinese. A military policeman on duty told me that in fact they were Mongolians who had been captured while fighting on the Russian front and offered a transfer to the opposing team, no doubt in exchange for some basic essential. Later on, in Russia, I was to learn what happened to such unfortunates on their release.

My skippers all seemed reasonably happy but were still far from discipline-minded. One day two of them asked me if I would care for some new potatoes and when I asked how they had acquired them, showed me a field clearly marked as mined.

"You must be mad" I said "You'll get blown to pieces".

"Oh, no" was the reply, "Major Barton showed us how to deal with mines", and they proceeded to demonstrate, crawling along the rows digging carefully with their fingers and putting the mines gently on one side. It made me shudder and has rather affected my taste for new potatoes since.

All the proposed causeway sites were working quite well and when they were eventually handed over to an Inland Water Transport group they had handled 1,606 major landing craft, 13,947 vehicles and 115,000 troops so they may be said to have justified their existence. One causeway, however, was never put into action, this was on Roger beach which was under spasmodic fire as long as I was in Normandy. In fact, David Fayle and I paid a couple of visits to inspect the beach, which I found somewhat un-nerving, although he seemed to rather like it. I suppose you do get used to being shot at but I found I tended to get more nervous, rather than less, as time went on.

About this time I received an invitation to act as usher at the wedding of Admiral Mansergh's daughter - and my friend Dick Fairbairn, a soldier who was also on the staff of the Chief of Combined operations. David Fayle agreed that as he was moving on - eventually to take part in the Rhine crossings and win a D.S.O - I could now consider my term of duty as Naval Liaison Officer, Pontoon Causeways, at an end so I obtained permission to return to England.

I joined an L S T whose commanding officer very kindly gave me his cabin for the passage and I slept on board the night before our departure. The L S T was dried out on the beach. During the night there was an air attack made by pick-a-back planes, so they said, the parent plane guiding a smaller plane full of explosives down on to the target. I heard the bang but otherwise slept well.

On our way across channel we ~~in turn~~ received instructions to proceed to Tilbury, which was a bit of a bore for me as my gear was in the Isle-of-Wight but I had no doubt that Leading Wren Harrington would do more than cope.

Coming up through the straits of Dover that night the buzz bombs were in full flight and it was awe-inspiring to see their fiery tails with aircraft chasing them and shooting them down. Over the land the anti-aircraft batteries took over from the aircraft and there were many indications of their good shooting. We got the occasional buzz-bomb in Normandy but I believe they were 'rogues' and not intended to be there at all.

Next morning we docked in the familiar surroundings of Tilbury and I made my way home to Ruislip, having reported my return to Tom Hussey on the way. I also got my instructions for the wedding next day. This took place at St. Pauls, Knightsbridge and was chiefly remarkable for the fact that buzz-bombs were coming over throughout the ceremony.

Guests arriving flattened themselves in the porch as one 'cut-out' near at hand and to cap matters another 'cut-out' just as the parson was saying "Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder". The guest next to me in the pew whispered, "What an ill-timed remark" but the parson went on steadily and after a tentative bob in the direction of the safety of the floor the congregation stood firm. I do not believe Dick and his charming wife even realised what had happened. The explosion, when it came, was obviously at a comfortable distance away. Personally, I thought Normandy was safer!