

47 ROYAL MARINE COMMANDO ASSOCIATION

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Normandy Despatch No.9 July 2004.

Editors Comments:

First may I welcome you to this our ninth Despatch and one that is dedicated to record the Association's visit to Normandy between the 5th and 9th June 2004. A total of 23 Veterans mustered in what was a most memorable visit. A further thirty associates were on hand to offer support and assistance that was, thankfully, not overly needed. Of the Veterans four must stand out for special praise in attending as their health was not good. These are Peter Winter, Mickey O'Brien, Frank Making and Arthur Delap. Others who were deemed too frail to attend were sorely missed and our thoughts were with them, as they were with all Veterans, during the stay.

For myself, the son of a Royal Naval Commando occasionally attached to 47 Royal Marine Commando, the events were a humbling and emotional experience. The reception given to the group by the populations of Port-en-Bessin Huppain, Sallenelles and elsewhere was tremendous and, at times, overwhelming. To all the people who supported us in France 'merci beaucoup'.

Before going further I must place on record my personal regret at having caused some Veterans offence. My link to 47 is tenuous and some have felt intrusive. I am sorry if I have offended anyone. You, the Veterans are my first and only concern in my dealings with and towards 47. I have tried to ensure everyone who was entitled to receive the 'Despatch' did so. If I missed you then I am sorry. Lack of space has meant some editing that I take full responsibility for. Again if this offended it was not meant to.

JM

The sixtieth anniversary and commemoration of the D-Day Landings received a great deal of space in the media. Many people I've spoken to, most of them with no connection with the event, said they watched at least some of the coverage on 6th June and found it both moving and uplifting. The same goes for those who managed to get there, only more so. Trying to recount the day to day events of our trip made it more and more obvious how much had to fall by the wayside to keep within a reasonable length.

We've always wanted the Despatch to be for everybody and welcome any contribution from members. If you have a particular (repeatable!) memory of the trip perhaps you'd like to send it in for the next issue and share it with all of us. Or if you weren't on the trip, some other aspect which struck you during the commemorations.

Meanwhile, time is short so you need to get your bookings in straight away for the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Walcheren. Judging by previous visits to Holland, it will be brilliant. Try and make it if you can.

LB

60th Anniversary of D-Day: 47 RM Commando Association in Normandy

A slightly shortened version of this account will appear in the next issue of The Globe & Laurel accompanied by a couple of photos taken during the unveiling of the new memorial at the Western Feature

THEY'RE STILL STANDING

Our trip to Normandy for the 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings began very auspiciously. The ferry left Portsmouth on 5th June with an escort of four warships, the RN destroyer HMS Gloucester in the lead with a French ship to stern and US and Canadian warships to port and starboard. To our amazement, crowds of people lined the shore waving and cheering, bringing quite a lump to the throat. On arrival at Ouistreham, a band struck up and the veterans walked the length of a guard of honour which included some very smart Royal Marines. At our destination, Port en Bessin-Huppain, there was just time to settle in before gathering at a reception at the Cultural Centre where an exhibition about the Commando's route behind enemy lines to take the port from the rear on the morning of 7th June 1944 was on show. It also offered a welcome chance to meet up with old comrades who were travelling independently, many with their families. By the time the French flag had been hoisted to the top of the church belfry to cheers and applause, our time was running short again.

Back at the quayside, a ceremony at 47's memorial beneath the Vauban Tower took place. Local schoolchildren laid a wreath, then came the town's wreath laid jointly by the Mayor of Port en Bessin, M Sachet, and Professor John Forfar. Our own wreath was laid by Gordon "Tim" Tye and our standard dipped in unison with those of the French veterans, Les Anciens Combattants et Prisonniers de Guerre. Matthew Abbott, our excellent RM Bugler, sounded the Last Post and Chuck Harris spoke Laurence Binyon's moving words: "They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old..." A good crowd had gathered both at ground level and on the cliff walk above and the ceremony ended to loud applause. There followed a buffet in the civic hall, not the sort where you stand balancing a glass of something and a twiglet but a seated meal of several courses and plenty of wine and other beverages available.

Our long but very enjoyable day was not yet over. Ushered to seats on the quay, we had an ideal view of a spectacular firework display. Beginning at 11.15, the fireworks went off in unison along the length of the landing beaches.

Before heading for Bayeux Cemetery on 6th June, we had an appointment at Commes, just inland from the port. On a crossroads close to 'Hill 72' where the Commando spent the night of 6th June 1944 now stands a 'totem' erected last year as part of a tourist trail recording the unit's exploits. After a brief but telling ceremony the mayor, M de Gouville, presented each veteran with a framed photo of the monument.

This detour meant we were running late for the main event at Bayeux and though we had the necessary papers, we had breached security by not arriving within the given time limit, the prelude to an exciting time. Gendarmes and armed military directed us around and around the ring road so that the splendid view of Bayeux Cathedral was first to the left, then to the right, straight ahead, back to the left. Nobody would let us through. We arrived at a garage (closed for the occasion) where half our number were directed onto a shuttle bus. The rest of us waited for the next shuttle before being directed back to our coach together with other 'strays' who were in the same predicament. The process began again, cathedral to the left, cathedral to the right. However, we now had a very friendly and efficient REME sergeant, part of the Royal Logistics Regiment, aboard plus a senior French plain-clothes policeman and one of our 'strays' was a diplomat from the British Embassy and this ultimately gave us enough clout to break through the cordon.

A great air of anticipation permeated the British War Cemetery before the arrival of HM the Queen, M Chirac and the other dignitaries. The weather was extremely hot and people no longer young were having to stay on their feet for longer than they'd like but the Royal Logistics Regt kept handing out plentiful supplies of bottled water and a cheerful atmosphere prevailed among those standing shoulder to shoulder in the heat. The service itself was very moving but afterwards people smiled happily as the Queen, Prince Philip and President Chirac moved around talking to veterans, some of our number within hand-shaking distance of them.



The Wreath is laid on Capt. Cousins grave.

Back on our coach with almost the full complement, we still had the REME Sergeant looking after us and our diplomat also returned saying it was more fun travelling with 47 than in a limousine! Aubrey James and his charming wife managed to make it to Arrromanche – Commando imitative!?

Later that afternoon, in Port en Bessin, we attended an excellent concert by the Ceremonial Band of Blue Valley North High School, Kansas, in fact, a very accomplished and entertaining orchestra who played both popular and traditional music of the US, France and Britain, including a superb excerpt from Vaughan Williams' Nursery Suite. Other events were laid on for the veterans including a concert in the church and around the town there was a general sense of happy well-being.

Port en Bessin's big day is the 7th, the date of the town's liberation. We were honoured to be joined by Brigadier G S Robison, representing Major General Dutton, Commandant General Royal Marines.

The strong links with the town extend also to the school and our first engagement, a reception at College Hemingway, gave students and veterans who had been corresponding a chance to meet in person. The headmaster welcomed us and Brigadier Robison replied wholeheartedly on behalf of the Association and the Marine corps in general. Following that, everyone mingled and chatted happily while enjoying the refreshments provided.

Next on our schedule was the renaming of a roundabout in honour of Captain Terence Cousins. The veterans and the crowd gathered and the sound of the Band of the Royal Marines became audible and gradually louder as it marched, right on cue, to the roundabout. John Forfar, the Commando's historian as well as former MO, described how Captain Cousins had saved the day by leading a group up the Eastern Feature overlooking the port which had till then proved unassailable. As a result this impregnable fortress fell but in the process Captain Cousins lost his life. In his speech the Mayor said that though their pronunciation of the new name of the roundabout might be a little different, their gratitude was nevertheless profound. He and Brigadier Robinson unveiled the plaque and Fred Wildman laid a wreath on behalf of 47.

A further ceremony took place at the memorial at Huppain in fierce heat, where E Gurnos Jones laid the wreath on behalf of 47 Cdo. A "Highland" band from the Netherlands in attendance must have been aware of 47's later history for they presented each veteran with a commemorative sample of sand from the beaches of Walcheren.

The next destination for everyone, including the RM Band, was the Western Feature, held by the Germans in 1944 and just as formidable as its Eastern counterpart. Here a new memorial has been built naming the fallen of both the landing at Asnelles and the taking of the port. During the ceremony the names of all 46 men were read out. Four RM buglers sounded the Last Post and the memorial, draped in a large Union flag, was unveiled by Brig Robison and the Mayor. In his address, Brigadier Robison thanked the Mayor, Council and

inhabitants for the generous hospitality to 47 RM Cdo since 1944 and for the memorials they had established. He also mentioned the great contribution made by the unit's generous benefactor Malcolm Ross who, happily, was able to be with us. As well as the historical significance and the feat of arms by 47, Brig Robison also gave thought to those remaining members of the unit unable to travel on this occasion.



Brig. Robison lays the Wreath at the Western Memorial

After the ceremony, many took the opportunity to climb down into the recently cleaned up German bunker. No pill-box this but a massive structure built into the hillside with many rooms. After the summer heat outside it felt refreshingly cool but the commanding view over the harbour from the gunslits brought home the awesome task which 47 Commando had undertaken.

In the afternoon, after a service in the Church of St Andre, wreaths were laid at the memorial to the civilian war dead of the town. The RM Band arrived once more and marched with our veterans down to the harbour to much applause. There the flame of liberty was lit and a bas-relief of the oil-harbour of Port en Bessin unveiled followed by the reading of poems by the children on liberty. The Royal Marines Band Beat the Retreat, including many popular tunes from World War 2 and gave a magnificent marching display. All too soon it was time for "A Life on the Ocean Wave" and farewell to this unique branch of the service who had turned a very special day into something even more spectacular.

The veterans were then presented with their medals and later the 7th June was completed with a wonderful dinner. The wine flowed freely and with the singing of songs from the forties in both languages at the end of the evening, both French and British proved to be in good voice.

On the 8th, our last full day in France, we took a longer trip, crossing Pegasus Bridge to reach Sallenelles where M de Chevigny, the Mayor and other local dignitaries were there to greet us. Another moving ceremony took place at the monument to the fallen of 41, 46 and 47 Commando with a guard of honour from the French 18th Signals Regiment. Maison Chevigny, close by, is where "Doc" Forfar had his field hospital in the basement while a seeming war of attrition between German and British night patrols went on in the surrounding countryside. After the ceremony, there was time for an aperitif and chat before the fine meal laid on for us. As well as plenty of wine there was also the famous local *cidre* available for those with a strong enough head.

Our faithful RM Bugler, Matt Abbott, played his final Last Post of the trip at nearby Sannerville. After the wreath laying ceremony, Fred Wildman told us of the Frenchwoman living nearby in 1944 who wore black and said she always would until the occupiers had been driven from their land. On his return long after the war, she came to her door smiling broadly and wearing a bright floral dress.

Over the course of a few days, we received the most incredible warmth and hospitality. All the same, this was

quite a gruelling schedule for men now mostly over eighty, not to mention the rest of us. However, as in former days, the men of 47 withstood the rigours and came out smiling. They're still standing. And it would appear that everybody enjoyed the trip, for plans are well in hand for the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Walcheren. Time to brush up our Dutch.

LB

Veterans Badge

Veterans of 47 on the trip to Normandy were given some of the first Veterans' Badges. This is a lapel badge of a pleasing design intended to indicate former service personnel when in civilian dress. The first was presented to the former Secretary of State for Defence, Lord Healey who saw distinguished service as a Beach Master during the Anzio landings in Italy in 1944. The first issue of badges are being distributed to veterans attending 60th anniversary events right through to the commemoration of the end of World War II in 2005. Those not attending events can apply giving their service number and (where applicable) their Heroes Return reference number to Terry Marsh, Ministry of Defence, Ground Floor, St George's Court, 2-12 Bloomsbury Way, London WC1A 2SH. Further general information is obtainable through the Veteran Agency's helpline: 0800 169 2277

LB

* In the Press

Journalist, James Delingpole who travelled with us to Normandy had his article about the trip, headed "Brooding 'bout my generation", in *The Spectator* of 12th June. Obviously quite a personal account, it ponders how his generation might have coped in similar circumstances but also includes a great deal of background regarding 47's activities in Normandy. It captures quite succinctly the mood and spirit of our stay in France and includes "quotes" from George Amos, John Forfar and Chuck Harris.

George Amos was also quoted in a more general D-Day article produced by a group of other journalists in *The Mail on Sunday*. Apparently, the quotes weren't that accurate, being put in a manner which didn't reflect his character at all. That's the problem with becoming a celebrity, you get misquoted and misrepresented in the national press!

George also appeared in a photo in a Southampton newspaper being kissed by two of the girl musicians of the Kansas school orchestra. Ah well, perhaps celebrity isn't so bad after all.

LB

One of those military jokes:

When a Very Important and Senior Officer was due to visit a naval base, all the usual rather excessive spit and polish went on in advance.

On arrival, he inspected the men who were drawn up in line and standing stiffly to attention. Well aware of the amount of work and preparation which would have gone on, he stopped in front of one young serviceman and asked, "And what time did you have to get up this morning?"

"Five o'clock, sir," was the reply.

"Five o'clock? That doesn't sound quite right to me. Would you like to rephrase that in nautical terms?"

The young man looked rather perplexed then after a brief pause for thought said, "Five o'clock, me hearty!"

A Reflection-

This was my first visit to Port-en-Bessin with the Veterans, my first taste of the hospitality of the local Norman and I was humbled. Here I was, a foreigner in a foreign land being feted as a king, and why? Because 60 years ago my Father was part of that massive force that started to liberate Europe from the Nazi grasp.

By far the majority of French I met had no memory of those dark days of 1940-44. They were too young. But their gratitude was immense. They had no first hand experience but they had a history, a history taught without embellishment or slant. Their pride in the Veterans and their Families was genuine. Their gratitude, at times,

overwhelming. The smallest French village would turn out to say 'merci'. Their memorials are well kept and revered. Solitary war graves are tended and the massive cemeteries to all the dead, Allied and Axis, are beautiful.

I saw two elderly Germans standing on the Western Feature on June 5th, quietly chatting to themselves, pointing things out and taking themselves back sixty years. I wanted to approach them and speak to them but something held me back, I know not why. Perhaps I didn't want to interfere with their memories of those days so long ago? I wish I had spoken to them as though I looked for them later I didn't see them again.

I took my jeep over to transport as and when. I know quite a few of you enjoyed the lifts I gave. But I was one of thousands from all over Europe who brought their veteran vehicles to Normandy. Not to show off but to pay respect to you. From Denmark to Italy, Portugal to Latvia, vehicles came - youngsters came. They all came to say 'thank you'.

In Europe, in France, in Normandy, the memory of June 6th 1944 and the war years will live on. The sacrifices made will not be forgotten. The gratitude to your generation will never die. That makes me humble in a country where it all seems so long ago..... JM

Finally Betty **MUST** have the names of all those wanting to go to Walcheran this November. Contact her direct on 01329 314890. Those who have already expressed an interest need not reapply. A £25 non-refundable deposit is required. Please note the dates are ^{5¹⁵}2nd October to 6th November, not 5th November as previously discussed. This is at the request of our Dutch Hosts.