

## 47 ROYAL MARINE COMMANDO ASSOCIATION

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### DESPATCH 22 July 2010

#### COMMENT

Please note my new email address. Good communications are always important but especially so for an Association like ours. Members are far-flung and the majority not often able to meet and see each other and in some cases unable to travel at all. I hope *Despatch* helps to keep you in touch and informed.

I should add that, whether it's by email, phone or letter, I'm always interested in hearing your comments and always looking out for items to include, in particular memories of veterans which could be of interest to all our readers, not to mention posterity.

So... please keep communicating.

Lannah

#### CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

On the whole, it has been a good 2010 so far.

The trip to Port en Bessin was a great success and will, no doubt, be fully reported by our Editor.

Sadly, we have lost two stalwart veterans this year, being 'Mint' Burkinshaw and Tom MacAndrew.

We next travel to Walcheren later this month for the opening of the Royal Marines Memorial Bridge in Westkapelle. A donation of £1000 has been made from 47 RM Commando Association funds and many members have donated as individuals which will probably total around the same amount, though this is only surmise on my part.

Unfortunately, our dear Secretary, Betty Field is giving up the post this year but we hope we will continue to have the pleasure of her company.

Bless you. Keep well.

Sincerely,

Chuck( C J Harris)

#### Normandy 2010

*This report with the photo should appear in the July/August, 2010 issue of The Globe and Laurel.*

#### 47 RM Commando Association in Normandy, June 2010

After last year's 65th anniversary of D-Day one might be forgiven for believing that the 66th might be a bit of a let-down but, as ever with 47 Commando, the trip was as busy, fascinating and enjoyable as ever.

The group, including about a dozen veterans, though not all ex-47, were met on arrival in Port en Bessin by our wonderful Support Party, being Major Bob Perry; Major Mark Bentinck(Retd), the RM Corps Historian; Rev David Devenney RN (Retd), our Chaplain, and Geof Haywood, Chairman of RMA Poole and just about the most talented Gofer in the world. On the anniversary of D-Day, 6th June, we attended a Service of Remembrance at Bayeux

Cathedral where His Excellency Sir Peter Westmacott, HM Ambassador to France read the lesson and also laid the wreath. This was followed by *vin d'honneur* at the Hotel de Ville. After lunch we made our way to the British Cemetery at Bayeux. With a French military ceremony about to take place, we were still able to hold our own brief wreath-laying in memory of those who lie there including the many men from 47 Commando. Late afternoon at Port en Bessin we gathered by the quay to greet and applaud members of the local community who had walked the route (as near as possible) taken by 47 Commando on the 6/7th June 1944 to capture the port from the rear. They, with our intrepid Support Group, had set out at 8.30 and along the way Mark Bentinck expounded on some of the historical background. A wreath was laid at the trail marker on the harbourside. Before dispersing, Bob Perry told the gathering that veterans present, who had originally made the journey under rather more difficult circumstances, were right opposite their favourite bar which served all their preferred beverages.



*Veterans and Majors Bentinck & Perry on the quay*

Later, we visited Chateau Tracy where the de Bourgoing family were as warm and welcoming as ever with Lady Cathise de Bourgoing and her son Francois, his wife and children all present. A plentiful supply of nibbles and drinks were dispensed including, naturally, some excellent Calvados.

On 7th June, the anniversary of the port's liberation, we went first to the Eastern headland where the monument to Captain Terence Cousins, funded by our benefactor, Malcolm Ross, was inaugurated last year. In its way, this proved as big an occasion. For several years a relative of Captain Cousins had been sought. At last there had been success. Essie Cousins, the niece of Terence Cousins, was able to join us and laid a wreath, as did M Pierre-Albert Cavey, the Mayor of Port en Bessin, Christine Hagan, veteran's wife, on behalf of 47 Commando and Captain Phil Stonor RN, Deputy Defence Attaché at the British Embassy in Paris. Rev Devenney led the remembrance service and Bugler Alaine Shakespeare sounded the Last Post. Jeeps, lovingly maintained by French enthusiasts, ferried people to the summit and back, quite an exciting ride with the gradient and twists and turns of the track.

Our company then made the transfer to the monument and memorial garden on the Western headland. There, a similar remembrance took place with, as previously, the standard of 47 Cdo alongside those of Les Anciens Combattants et Prisonniers de Guerre. Chuck Harris, our Chairman, read out the Roll of Honour.

A further brief ceremony took place at the plaque beside the harbour before everyone repaired to the nearby Salle des Fêtes where we were welcomed by the Mayor who spoke of



the continuing link between 47 Commando and the town. These have become especially strong since Major Bob Perry and his henchmen involved serving Commandos and those in training in a reenactment of the landings. For all the work and liaising which Bob has undertaken since then, the Mayor awarded him Port en Bessin's Bronze Medal. Afterwards, the veterans met students who were classmates of Alice de Bourgoing in Paris. They were able to utilise their English and learn a great deal about the veterans'

experiences. Many long and deep discussions went on amid a good deal of laughter.

At the Bar de la Marée that evening, our hard working Secretary, Betty Field, provided wine for the tables and as well as quite a few toasts being drunk, several presentations were made (mainly alcoholic) to members of the Support Group and to Marc de Bolster who not only runs our website but acts as "official photographer" on these occasions.

On our final evening, Nathalie and Stephane, the proprietors of La Marée, presented every veteran with a bottle of wine. A fitting end to another successful excursion to Normandy. LB

#### **Normandy extras:**

CAPTAIN PHIL STONOR RN, who has been so supportive of our activities in France, is to retire this year from the Royal Navy and his post at the British Embassy in Paris. I think he is as sad about his leaving as we are. Phil assures us that he will encourage his successor at the Embassy to treat us with equal kindness. We wish him well for the future and hope that he will stay in touch with 47 RM Cdo Association.

FRED TUCK, who served with B Troop, travelled independently to France with his wife and daughter and was able to join us at the Plaque Memorial by the harbour and laid a wreath. It was the first time he had met up with 47 veterans for 17 years. It was a great surprise and pleasure to meet again after so long and we hope that he will become a member and be able to travel with us on future trips.

JEEPS Two Belgian couples in Port en Bessin who had brought jeeps to Normandy offered their services and helped to ferry people up and down the Eastern Feature along with the French enthusiasts. One couple, Roger Vermeylen and Tina Jonkers, will be bringing their jeep to Walcheren during the Liberty Bridge opening. The jeep will be available to transport veterans if needed.

#### **THE ROYAL MARINES LIBERTY BRIDGE**

The official opening of the bridge linking the Tank Monument at Westkapelle with the Polderhuis Museum will be on Friday, 23rd July 2010. Members of 47 and 48 Cdo will be travelling to Holland by minibus on the 22nd and returning on the 24th. There will be a full report, of course, in the next issue.

Leen van der Merbel sent me a piece from a newspaper with a picture of work in progress being undertaken by local volunteers. It's excellent to know that the Royals still get this sort of support and that the whole thing has become something of a community project. LB

#### **KAPELSCHÉ VEER**

On January 30, 2010, 20 Dutch Commando veterans were present at the annual commemoration at Kapelsche Veer to honour the comrades of 47 Royal Marine Commando who lost their lives during the battle for this bridgehead on the River Maas. Kapelsche Veer has finally been added to the list of annual commemorations for which the Dutch 'Korps



Commandotroepen' takes responsibility.

Another positive sign this year was the participation by the civilian population of neighbouring towns and villages. At least 100 civilians took part in the ceremonies. Wreaths were also laid at the grave of Lt Adam at Sprang Kapelle. Ed Thoden van Velzen



*At Lt Adam's grave, Sprang Kapelle*

Eddy also reported via email that the only original veteran from the various units which attempted to take this objective was a former Polish soldier who is now married to a Dutchwoman and, as ever on this occasion, there was snow on the ground and it was bitterly cold.

#### IN MEMORIAM

*We have learned of the death of the following veterans and offer sincere condolences to family and friends:*

**Ronald "Mint" Burkinshaw** near Rotherham, 20th March 2010, aged 88 years. Mint served in Y Troop, landing in Normandy on D-Day and also at Walcheren. He regularly holidayed in Normandy in early June with his wife, Margaret, and other members of his large family and joined us for the D-Day commemorations. Everyone called him Mint including Margaret and the grandchildren. We shall miss him.

**T C A (Tom) MacAndrew** Tonbridge, Kent, 9th April 2010, aged 84 years. Tom served in Q Troop. Until recently he regularly went to Fort William for the Remembrance Day ceremonies in the town and at the Commando Monument at Spean Bridge. He and his wife attended many reunions over the years, Tom proudly wearing the kilt for official ceremonies.

#### WESTKAPELLE BATTLEFIELD TOUR

Fred Wildman, representing 47 Cdo, took part in a Battlefield Tour run by Lt Col George Gelder (retd) who is a member of the RM Historical Society and runs occasional Tours for a government agency.

[Fred's account:](#)

The trip went well. I was picked up by a hired car from my home and driven to London City Airport where I had a nice breakfast before take off. The plane landed at Rotterdam Airport in exactly one hour, where I got a taxi to the train station. I reached Flushing Station in just under two hours and then got a cab to the hotel. Everything was prepaid and I was sent euros for taxi fares by George.

I met up with the main party in the evening as they returned from one of the battle sites. Over dinner it became clear that they were not students, as I thought, but mostly scientists

engaged in naval and military departments responsible for design and everything to do with national defence. There was a good mix of male and female, mostly in their late twenties or early thirties, I judged. There was even a couple with a young baby who went everywhere with them on their backs. There were about forty people plus a coach driver who was quite capable of getting them into seemingly impossible places. As for myself and a veteran from naval craft, we went everywhere by car.

On the following day, the one that us two vets were to be involved in, we set off for Westkapelle where the gap had been blown open all those years ago for us to land. After a number of talks from various people on the statistics of the operation, I was able to tell them what it was like at the sharp end on the day. Things like launching amphibious vehicles from a ship that had been set on fire and landing in a gap with a six-knot current running. As the tour proceeded along the dunes following the route that we had to take to subdue the gun batteries, it became quite bizarre. Standing in a forest of tall trees I had to explain that at the time it was all sand dunes, mud and water but I hope I was able to describe the scene as it was then.

The day was long and tiring but very interesting and revived many things that I had forgotten. After a long discussion at the hotel and a late dinner, I was ready for a good night's sleep before setting out on the reverse journey home. FGW

Lt Col Gelder emailed to say thank you for being put in touch with Fred. He continued, "... his involvement was extremely worthwhile and he was a great hit with the tour party. I think he enjoyed himself a lot and we enjoyed hosting him."

It should be added that Fred and his wife, Rose, who many will remember, play bowls and are keen ballroom dancers. For Rose's 90th birthday, just recently, the family took them to a Dinner Dance at the Ritz and they danced all night. - These youngsters.

### IN THE PRESS

**Times Literary Supplement** 29th January 2010 There was an excellent review of John Forfar's "From Gold to Omaha" by Duncan Campbell Smith in the TLS and further great publicity for 47 RM Commando. To get such a good review is fine, to get one in such a prestigious publication is brilliant. Congratulations to both John and Alexander Wilson, the Gens du Phare publisher and everyone else involved. The review is reproduced on the final page of this issue with kind permission of both the TLS and the reviewer.

**The Globe and Laurel** Jan/Feb 2010 As well as our report on Walcheren and reports from 48 and 41 Commando, a well-illustrated article also appeared by Captain Ed Hands who was assisting Lt Col Bob MacDonald and, in the course of his duties, provided help and information for everybody involved.

**Dispatches** The Commando Veterans Association newsletter in its most recent edition included a very truncated version of my review of *From Gold to Omaha*. Although very brief it provided a little bit more publicity to a group that might well include people interested in buying.

**Duncan Campbell-Smith** who wrote the TLS review of *From Gold to Omaha* is a full-time author who works on commission. At present he's engaged on an authorised history of the Royal Mail which he is due to complete by the end of the year. Duncan is just beginning to think about his next assignment and thought it would be worth mentioning this in *Despatch*. If anyone should hear of someone looking for an author for an institutional or personal biography he would be grateful if they could bear his name in mind. The opportunity to write about a military topic would certainly appeal to him.

You can find out more about Duncan and his work on his website:

[www.duncancampbellsmith.com](http://www.duncancampbellsmith.com)

### TRACING THE PAST

**Frank Blackburn** (PO/X105362)

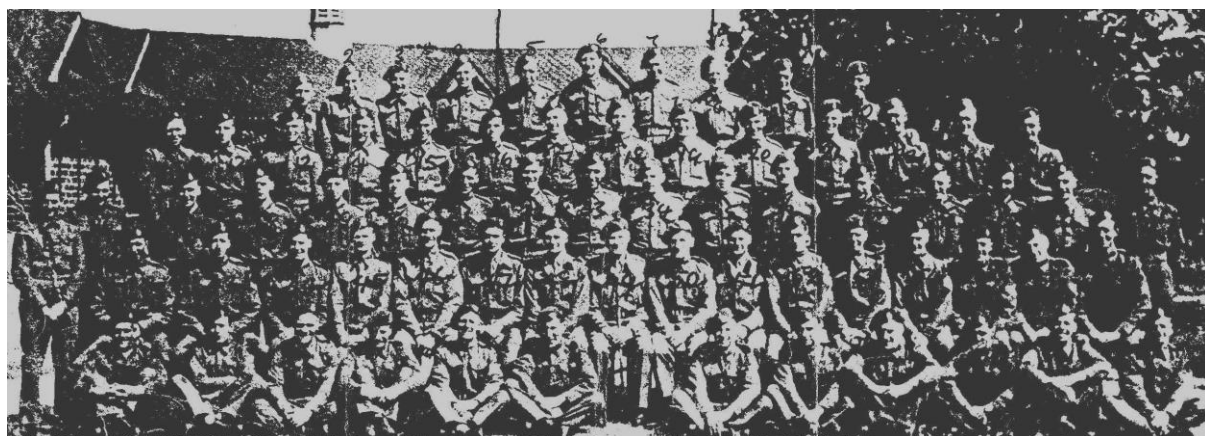
The daughter of the late Frank Blackburn, Brenda Cogswell, is trying to find out more about his service. He came from Eccles, Manchester and was probably known as Blackie. He took

part in the Normandy landings. The friend he went ashore with (name unknown) was killed. Frank was caught up in the explosion. Brenda thinks he may have seen action in the Pacific with the Americans. He brought home a grass skirt and a Japanese sword and his medals include the Pacific Star. This could mean that he was in the Far East, eg Burma with RM Commandos in which case he wouldn't have come to 47 via 10th Battalion RM but probably joined them just a few months before D-Day. Frank died in 1968 aged 45 years.

If you remember Frank or can add to this, please email [brenda.cogswell@hotmail.com](mailto:brenda.cogswell@hotmail.com) or make contact via *Despatch*.

### **Ted Battley**

Ted has no photos taken during his wartime service because everything went astray after he was wounded for the second time at Walcheren. In the course of eighteen months in various hospitals, most of his belongings went AWOL. However, he does have this poor quality photocopy of a photocopy of B Troop taken at Herne Bay in March(?) 1944. He and the late Ray Gasson tried to mark up the names but that was some forty years on. Anyway, here it is with known or probable names and others may be able to add some more. Has anyone got a print of this or any photo with Ted (then known as "Ben")? It would be nice to have something better to pass on to his daughter and grandson.



Known or probable names (X=unknown):

Back row: X King XX Beck XX Roy Emsley, Marrow? X

Next row: "Sick Bay Tiffy", Cpl Toms XX Tash Colwill, 'Ben' Battley XX Bryan Harper XXXXX

Standing: Les Barker X McKenna, Jack Duff, Pat Plumb? X George Burt XX Charlie Hughes, John Adey, Jimmy Johnson X Ginger Liggins, Cpl Butch Noon, Cpl Albert Rutherford, Barret

Seated: X Sgt Roy Mansfield, Sgt Cumner, Sgt McFadyen, Sgt Lofty Gardner, Lt Roger Lloyd X Capt Isherwood XX Sgt Harry Horsfield X Sgt Rackham, Cpl Fred Kent, Cpl Wherlock X

Front Row: Bradford, Robinson XXX G V Johns X Fred Lanyon X Eddie Cousins, Bullock X

### **47 PLAQUES**

Geof Haywood reports that the plaques which he had for sale on behalf of the Association, went like hot cakes. It will be possible to order another batch when there is a demand for a reasonable number so it's worth letting him or the Secretary know if you are hoping to buy one at some future date.

### **COMMUNICATIONS**

**Roger Lloyd** The Association heard from Nicola Lloyd, daughter of Captain Roger Lloyd. She had been trying to find out more about her father's war service and after a lot of delay managed to buy a copy of John Forfar's *From Gold to Omaha*. Roger never spoke about his



war service so it proved to be most enlightening.

He served in B Troop and was one of those who helped Ted Battley to get ashore after he and his landing craft were hit at Westkapelle.

After the war Roger qualified as a Chartered Accountant and moved to the then Rhodesia in the late 50s where he married in 1961. The family lived in Harare and Roger died in 1990. Nicola now lives in a village just outside Cape Town but her older sister still lives in Harare. Since getting in touch, Nicola has become a member and sent a number of photos and cuttings from her father's album to Marc for the website.

Marc also heard from David Billingham who is an avid WW2 amateur historian and knows 47 RM Commando's story very well, not least because he and his wife Lynda have a property in Port en Bessin which they rent out. Their luxury second home is on a new development at Golf Omaha on the cliffs at Port en Bessin, a short drive from the D-Day beaches and easy walking distance to all the key locations for the 47 assault on the port. Their accommodation has the advantage of three swimming pools, sauna, kids' play area and sits on one of the world's best golf courses. You can see excellent photos plus tariff etc at

[www.normandyluxury.com](http://www.normandyluxury.com)

David writes that they would be glad to give a discount on the published price to members and would make a donation to the Association should they get any bookings. He also says that if any members would value them visiting a grave or taking a photo of a particular spot then to let them know. They are in Normandy several times a year.

During the recent visit to Port en Bessin we met Peter Smith who was conducting a battle tour outside his normal stamping ground. He and his wife are based in the Somme and normally do First World War tours in that area plus B&B, cycle hire as well as buying and selling WWI memorabilia. He tells us that veterans and families are always welcome and special rates would apply if they wanted to visit that area. For further details:

Peter & Hilary Smith, Otago View, 48 Rue Principale, 80360 Flers, Somme, France

Email: [hilary.smith@wanadoo.fr](mailto:hilary.smith@wanadoo.fr) Web: [www.fieldsoffrance.com](http://www.fieldsoffrance.com)

### **AGM**

The Annual General Meeting was held on Saturday, 27th March 2010 at The Royal Maritime Club in Portsmouth.

Present: Chuck Harris, Chairman; Peter Spear, Vice Chairman; Betty Field, Secretary; Sandra Tebbutt, Ken Parker, Geof Haywood, Marc de Bolster, Mariel van Mierlo and Norman Rose.

Among other matters, it was agreed that Marc de Bolster should be co-opted onto the Committee as our Netherlands representative and because of his involvement with the Association's affairs through running the 47 Commando website.

Afterwards some of us visited the Royal Marines Museum and the D-Day Museum.

Unfortunately Ted and Lannah Battley were unable to attend following Ted's accident. I understand that his cracked ribs are a lot better now.

CJH

### **A BRIDGE TOO FAR?**

Back in April, a small forward party of 47 RMCA headed to the Hague. We were six in total, Arthur, Chuck, Ernie, John, Geof and Patrick. There we were prompt at the Dover dockside, ready to board, when the French ferry workers went on strike. It looked as if the group was going to stay in the UK. Ahead lay a few days of social plans and visits to historic sites, but for now, we were stuck beneath the white cliffs.

Out came the hip flasks, and thanks to some very quick thinking by Geof, who drove the minibus sharpish back to the terminal building, Patrick was able to buy one of the last available spaces on a P and O boat. Huge queues were building up behind us, and we

really were very lucky to get to Calais.

We were met at a small and friendly hotel by Marc and Mariel, who'd booked dinner nearby followed by drinks in their local pub. The veterans were treated as returning heroes, with drinks being bought in all directions, and Marc presented the group with a small engraved glass each, to help with drinking.

During the following day we met Col Sergeant Kenny Everett, a UK Royal Marine serving in the Netherlands, and drove to the coast to see an ancient Dutch fort, where the Royal Family grouped before escaping to wartime refuge in the UK. We visited Marc's collection of uniforms and memorabilia at he and Mariel's home, and again had a full and sociable dinner.

A highlight for many of us was a visit to Arnhem and to the military cemetery. Chuck called the group to order, and a wreath was laid on behalf of the Association. When we visited the nearby museum it became clear that this was a most brutal defeat which the top brass worked hard to turn into an example of the bravery of British fighting men but the exhibits left it plain that there had been plenty of warning for the wartime planners.

A photo was taken of all the Veterans at the bridge, and it will perhaps sum up the moment very well. All agreed that it was important to have seen more of the history of the campaign to liberate the Netherlands, and to join some of the dots of history. All we Brits hoped that Marc and Mariel would also see it as a small token of the appreciation we all feel for what they do that we managed to pull off a social visit to them in their own home.

Well done Ernie for the initial idea, and to Chuck for giving the green light, Arthur for kicking Patrick into action to book hotels and minibus, and to John for staying calm and charming the locals at all times. A great vote of thanks must go to Geof who did all the driving. The whole trip really did seem a bridge too far, as the striking French workers left us with little hope. Once we were on our way, the joke was to say that the whole operation had been run like a Swiss Clock.

Patrick O'Connell



*At Arnhem*

### **Proposed visit to War Cabinet Rooms**

Patrick hopes to be able to arrange a group visit to the War Cabinet Rooms in London, which are not open to the general public, for 47 veterans and members. It would probably



mean staying overnight in London for most people and he believes that reasonably priced accommodation could be arranged. In the first instance, it would be best to know how many people would be interested and to take it from there. If you'd like to go please let Ingrid, our new Secretary (details below), know as soon as possible and she will pass on the information.

### **ROYAL MARINES MUSEUM**

The RM Museum has a very good Online Exhibition on the Liberation of Walcheren 1944, produced in conjunction with the Polderhuis Museum, Westkapelle. See it at [www.royalmarinesmuseum.co.uk](http://www.royalmarinesmuseum.co.uk)

### **MONEY MATTERS**

The annual subscription of £10 per head runs from January to December. Our Treasurer, Gemma Davison, will be very pleased to receive your subs for this year if you haven't yet got round to it. Cheques should be made payable to "47 RM Commando Association" and sent to:

Mrs G Davison  
91 Catherine Street  
Rochester  
Kent ME1 2HL

### **OUR SECRETARY**

Sadly, our Secretary, Betty Field, is giving up the post after our July trip to Walcheren. She has done what is often a very demanding and thankless task most patiently and successfully over many years. We really can't thank her enough. We just hope that she will still wish to share our company on future reunions without the hassle of organising them herself.

We're very lucky to have a new Secretary. Ingrid Fearne will be taking over. Many people will already know her from our trips to France and Holland. Her address is:

138 Beauchamp Road  
Upper Norwood

London SE19 3DB

Telephone: 0208 2390145

email: [ingrid.fearne@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:ingrid.fearne@blueyonder.co.uk)

It is possible that after the visit to Walcheren this month, not too many people will wish to travel there for the October/November commemorations of the landing and liberation.

However, Ingrid says that if there are enough people to justify a trip then she will be happy to organise it. So please let her know just as soon as possible if you would like to go.

### **47 RM CDO WEBSITE**

**Thank you** Many thanks to several veterans and families, for sending me lots of documents, maps and great quality wartime photos. These not only help me to complete my records, but also to put more useful information on the 47 Commando website.

But we are far from really completing the records. Of the seven Troops that were in 47 Commando (A, B, Q, X, Y, HW and HQ), I still only have good quality Troop photos of A- and X-Troops, and a poor quality Xerox copy of the B-Troop photo.

Also, out of 883 names I have that served in or were attached to 47 Commando, I only have about 25 portrait photos of men in their uniforms.

Some may not realize how important it is to step forward with such items, or do not understand why it is so important. With the number of veterans depleting, it is getting harder to make a full document on this important part of history. With every commemoration we all say "we will remember them!", but can we keep that promise if we don't help each other to create a permanent historic archive of those involved? Even

veterans love to see photos, which many of them have never seen before. So please come forward if you have anything that might help. Even stuff that does not look important, might prove to be very valuable. In these modern times of digital communication, many have the possibility to scan photos and send them through the email. Others may not have such means, but could get professional copies made in a shop. Any help would be much appreciated. Send items to:

Marc de Bolster  
Elzendreef 29  
2272 CG Voorburg  
Netherlands

Email: [m.de.bolster@xs4all.nl](mailto:m.de.bolster@xs4all.nl) or [webmaster@47commando.org.uk](mailto:webmaster@47commando.org.uk)

Of course anything else related to 47 RM Commando is also very welcome!

Thanks in advance for your cooperation.

Marc

[www.47commando.org.uk](http://www.47commando.org.uk)



***Next issue - Despatch 23: January 2011***



On a wall of the Anglo-American Supply Headquarters in London in 1944 was hung a cautionary copy of the six-line verse, "For Want of a Nail". In the logistics for D-Day, there must have been a long list of items as tiny as they were potentially crucial. The provision of petrol for the Allied armies after the landings was never in much danger of being overlooked. With about 6,000 vehicles set to disembark over the first twenty-four hours, attaching a cross-Channel pipeline to the French shore was obviously going to be vital to the success of the invasion.

But securing the pipeline's landing point was a task delegated to a relatively tiny force of Royal Marine commandos. Their mission ran into serious trouble and seemed likely at one point to end in disaster. It was rescued by an act of great courage by one officer and a handful of men. For want of their bravery, the aftermath of the landings might arguably have been a different story.

John Forfar's *From Gold to Omaha* is a slip of a book – lavishly illustrated, but scarcely longer than the potted guide one might buy at the entrance to any of the Second World War museums that dot the Normandy region. But it provides a valuable and moving first-hand account of an episode that has received little or no attention in the blockbuster histories of Operation Overlord published over the years. In 1944, Forfar, at the age of twenty-eight, was the medical officer with 47 Royal Marine Commando.

**TLS**

TLS JANUARY 29 2010

## Between beaches

DUNCAN CAMPBELL-SMITH

John Forfar

FROM GOLD TO OMAHA

The Battle for Port-en-Bessin, 6–8 June 1944  
95pp. Les Gens du Phare. £15.  
978 2 911924 44 6

This unit, against heavy odds, captured the small harbour town of Port-en-Bessin in the eleven-mile stretch of cliffs that separated the British and American beach fronts.

As the first Allied trucks and tanks were rolling onto the beaches, a pipe-laying vessel was already making its way from the Isle of Wight to Port-en-Bessin, designated by Project PLUTO (Pipe-Line Under The Ocean) as the initial petrol port of the campaign. But the town had heavily entrenched German defences. Lessons having been learnt from the disastrous Dieppe Raid of 1942, a frontal assault on the harbour from the sea was ruled out. Instead, 47 RM Commando went ashore early on June 6 with the first of the main British forces. It then struck inland immediately, marched twelve miles to the west and attacked Port-en-Bessin from the south on June 7.

By the time the assault was launched, the unit had already lost three of its four wireless sets, much of its ammunition and almost a quarter of the 420 men who had left England. Unknown to its officers, the supposedly empty harbour was occupied by two well-armed German flak ships. Overlooking the town were headlands to either side, both topped with defensive bunkers and guns trained on the port. An attack up the steep western headland by sixty men drew fire from the flak ships and left half the men dead or seriously wounded. Other setbacks fol-

lowed. By the evening, and now at the end of their third day with virtually no sleep, those still fighting knew the Germans had regained control of the exit road and cut off the town. The men at the first aid set up by the commando outside the town were busy destroying all their maps and papers in anticipation of being taken prisoner. As Forfar remarks with typical understatement, the tide "was running seriously against the commando".

What turned it was an assault on the other headland. In the dying light of the late evening, one of the commando's officers, Captain Terence Cousins, led a party of twenty-five men up a zig-zag cliff path towards the German position at the top. Taking just four of them with him, he launched a charge at the bunker. Cousins himself was killed, and the others were badly injured. But this desperate act of courage seems to have so impressed the occupants of the bunker that when the rest of the assault party ran forward and shouted for their surrender, a white flag appeared. As darkness fell, other pockets of German defenders along the cliff-top followed suit. Though outnumbered four to one, the commando fighters cleared the entire headland. This prompted a general collapse in the morale of the port's defenders. The two flak ships were abandoned – and by dawn on June 8, Port-en-Bessin had been taken. Montgomery turned up there the next day to congratulate its captors.

Forfar, who later became a distinguished professor of medicine in Edinburgh, tells his story in the third person, with a modesty that has fallen out of fashion. He must have spent time talking to the French inhabitants of the town after the war, and describes events from their perspective in almost as much detail as the experiences of the fighting men. In both

cases, it is the detail that counts. The book has been produced – by a small publisher in Port-en-Bessin itself – towards the end of its author's long life, but is far from being an old man's hazy recollection. Forfar evidently noted down everything he saw at the time. This account is able to trace the action almost hour by hour, giving the reader a sense of what happened with an immediacy that only a direct participant could have captured.

The horrors of serious injury and the difficulties of tending the wounded are given meticulous attention. The strangeness of being in action behind the front line is also well caught. As they make their way to Port-en-Bessin, the commandos pass a French farmer "unconcernedly ploughing a field with two horses and apparently paying little attention to the historic events unfolding around him". Further on they encounter a fat German sergeant, cycling to a village brothel to say his farewells. A striking feature of the account is the tenderness with which it describes the dying moments of other Germans taken by surprise and shot on that extraordinary June morning. One senses their deaths have stayed with the author just as vividly as the sufferings of his own comrades in arms.

As for the commandos themselves, they were mostly volunteers in their early twenties. They had been highly trained, but had never been tested in battle. Their self-belief had to overcome the physical advantages enjoyed by German defenders from the same 352 Infantry Division that fought back hard against the Americans at Omaha Beach. That so many of these were induced to surrender at the port was remarkable. No doubt the different circumstances gave smaller groups of men more time to weigh their options. But the collapse of the port's defences must also be a tribute to the determination of its attackers, celebrated now as part of an active campaign within the town to ensure that those who liberated it in 1944 are not forgotten.