



## INTRODUCTION

As the years roll by first hand memories of battles fought more than three score years ago begin to fade and the cold analysis of the professional military historians begins to dominate the field.

The nation, however, recognises its responsibility to individual soldiers, sailors and airmen to record and remember in a permanent way on headstones in British military cemeteries throughout the world the names of those who made the supreme sacrifice; final testimonies and tributes to those who gave all for their country. What manner of men were such in 47 Royal Marine Commando?

Of the initial complement of 420 who landed on Normandy on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944 most were in their early twenties, few had been in action before, all had undergone extremely rigorous training and readily accepted the risks which that training and its purpose implied. They were motivated by a sense of duty to their country, allied often to an inherent spirit of adventure. On the battlefield their primary loyalty would be to their 'mates', a brotherhood in arms transcending risk, fear and rank.

Prior to D-Day on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944 the commando was untried in battle but had been chosen to undertake, virtually on its own, the formidable task of ensuring that the British and Canadian armies of over 75,000 men had the supplies of petrol without which they could not operate. The commando would have to capture Port-en-Bessin, a small Normandy fishing port which would be the vital petrol supply point and terminal of PLUTO (Pipe Line Under the Ocean) running from the Isle of Wight. The commando suffered heavy losses at the landing, had to undertake a ten mile march through enemy held territory and then attack the formidable concrete bunkers, pill boxes and barbed wire protected trenches and defences of the Port sited high on two 200 feet headlands commanding the harbour. In spite of heavy losses and a number of serious setbacks the 3-day battle was crowned with success meriting the words of General Dempsey, the British Army Commander, *'When all did so well.....the two outstanding examples of initiative and the value of tough individual training were on my right and left flanks, carried out by 47 Royal Marine Commando and the Sixth Airborne Division respectively'*, and of General Sir Brian Horrocks, *'it is doubtful whether in their long distinguished history the Marines have ever achieved anything finer'*.

The pattern of 47 Royal Marine Commando's battle actions had been set. Crossing the Orne it was sent to assist the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division. It then fought

its way northward for 200 miles in a series of battles in pursuit of a determined enemy, crossing the Seine, capturing Fécamp and investing Dunkirk.

The battle for Walcheren followed. Arnhem had failed, the Allies were running out of supplies and the port of Antwerp, already in Allied hands, would have to be brought into use: but the guns of Walcheren at the mouth of the Scheldt were denying access of Allied shipping to it. A costly opposed landing at Westkapelle, against formidable coastal batteries, was followed by fighting along sand dunes mounting heavy guns in bunkers surrounded by machine gun positions. Three Royal Marine Commandos, 41, 47 and 48 and 'little ships' of the Royal Navy were involved. In three days of heavy fighting 47 Royal Marine Commando captured the final six miles leading from Zoutelande to Flushing.

The commando next carried out an abortive night attack on Kapelsche Veer Island on the Maas and, as the war ended, raided and took the surrender of the garrison on the Island of Schouwen.

Unlike their fellow soldiers who survived, those who were killed were denied the satisfaction of knowing of the commando's successes and its place in the annals of amphibious assault landings. The curtain of death which had been drawn over them denied them the soldierly pride and sense of achievement to which they were entitled. Hence the importance of their epitaphs.

Coincidentally, a generation of grieving relatives, parents, wives, brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces and nephews, was left to mourn. At the time and down the years relatives have been asking questions about a grandparent, a brother, uncle or cousin who had given distinguished war service and paid the supreme price. In the confused, fleeting and often ill-documented events of war some of these questions have to remain unanswered but Major Bob Perry's researches have answered others. More specifically, however, he has done a signal service in honouring in this compendium, all of those of 47 Royal Marine Commando whose gravestone epitaphs will live on in permanency long after veterans who survived have gone. This carefully researched, detailed and thoughtful compendium, by analogy, also gives notice that thousands of others who lie in military cemeteries all over the world are not forgotten.

Professor John Forfar MC FRSE BSc FRCP FRCPE  
Medical Officer  
47 Royal Marine Commando (1942-1945)

April 2008