

Service Record

Walter Beauchamp

1939 to 1945 War Service in Combined Operations

Service number – JX454777/C.O.

1. 1935-1945 Star
2. France and Germany Star
3. Victory Medal
4. Defence Medal
5. Legion D'honneur

D-Day Landing, Beaching and Sunk

9.30am 6th June 1944, 32nd Landing Craft Flotilla, Leader on LCT 859.



My career in uniform began with the boy scouts 1st Whiteparish troop.

The doctors wife Mrs Wilson Smith was anxious that her only son 'Jock' should help the war effort and her acquaintance with the military lead to her offering to assist the then commandant of Southern Command, Sir Claude Auchinleck with Jock as a guide/messenger at HQ Melchet Court, but Jock needed a companion.

Me, as escort with Jock on the 2 mile cycle ride from Whiteparish church to Melchet Court and then to take on the role of guide/messenger with Jock.

9am to 3pm with a free lunch in the officers mess.

Melchet Court has some 300 rooms/offices and staff officers from all areas came and went, following our direction to and from.

But there were quiet times when boredom set in so I took my prize cork cricket ball to practice catching it against the side of the entrance door wall. Many officers raced around wondering where the strange 'clonk' then echoed round the court came from, but it's secret remains until today.

However our services were not required for long as the HQ and all the staff moved out to the Middle East and the Libyan Desert we believe.

Jock disappeared to public school, Wellington College as I returned to school briefly and then to humble work at the poultry farm.

I can't be precise about dates but I was too young then for National Service but they offered preference for those who reached certain standards; so I enrolled in the ITW Initial Training

Wing, but this did not fulfil my ambitions and the long cycle ride – Whiteparish to Salisbury and back (16 miles after a day's work was a bit much)

However another opportunity presented – The Home Guard – Whiteparish Troop

This was 1942 and the Luftwaffe was in full flight bombing Southampton docks and some of the stray bombs landed in our locality but this was hardly action packed, though the Home Guard training did include some un-armed combat lessons, the occasional Rifle Range and mass assaults on railway bridges. The anti-tank ditch in West Grinstead on a Sunday Morning. Then at last the chance of a breakthrough to the real thing.

The chance to join the Royal Navy for certain grades or skills. I was 17 years and 2 months So I applied, I had some knowledge of Morse Code, Semaphore and flag signals so I passed my medical and was OK and then awarded my call up date – 17th February 1943

I joined HMS Arthur the training establishment for many recruits, formerly 'Butlins' holiday camp, Skegness. And so began a 5 month training course in Naval Signals etc.

I'll spare you the detail, but I passed out top of my class and awaited a draft to a real ship.

Service in Combined Operations from September 1943 to June 1945

I joined the Navy in February 1943 and completed a general visual signalling training course and was drafted to Portsmouth division, to be allocated to a destroyer for general service duties, but as with all best laid plans the situation changed.

Lord Louis Mountbatten took command of the newly formed force to be known from then on as Combined Operations. Priority was given to crewing up the many new landing craft that would form the force for the landings in Normandy in June 1944, D-Day. But first the training, the months of exercising, the night exercises, the beachings, the convoy trips, the gales, the sleepless nights on the bridge, the tiring conditions on board etc...

The craft were not designed for crew to live on board although that was the reality of the situation. It was better than the Nissan Hut on the beach at Hoppers Pier, a pebble beach opposite Rothsey on the Clyde. It was heated by a solitary coal stove, so cold and damp that the rats lodged there got the space by the stove if we were late back from an exercise.

To join the 32nd LCT flotilla I embarked, Glasgow to Dunoon and awaited the lorry onto Hopper Pier. On the jetty at Dunoon I was interrogated by a sinister looking Naval officer who demanded to know "Are you my replacement Signaller?", "Do you know the Landing Craft Signals Codes etc?" I replied "Yes, I am the replacement, No, I don't know a thing about landing craft signals". He instructed me "You'll have to learn them immediately and work up to the high standard of the chap who's leaving us". That was my introduction to Lt Jack Iddison Whitehead, commander of the 32nd Flotilla LCTs. A man who over the ensuing year I came to admire, detest and serve in the struggle to attain that level of ability and confidence that would be needed for the big event.

After weeks of tuning up, the Flotilla moved its base to Lamlash on the Isle of Arran and then to Oban. "where next?" everyone asked. Rumours spread, to Norway? But Mark 3 and 4 LCTs were hardly up to the North Sea in winter, a maximum speed of 8 knots and no keel and welded plates that split in bad weather resulting in a broken back for the craft. Where then? Inverness and the Moray Firth. Its wide clear water, the sheltered anchorage

of Beulieu Basin, the sheltered Loch and jetties of Cromarty and the wide sandy beaches of Burghead would make the ideal training area for landing and beaching practise for the ultimate invasion of France. A nice cushy glide through the Caledonian Canal and we are there, well some of us would be. However only the American Mark 5 LCTs were small enough to pass through the Locks. The Mark 3s and 4s were destined to make the long, slow and hazardous voyage through the in-shore route, past the Isles of Muck, Egg and Rum, in and out of Loch Alsh, Loch Ewe on to Ullapool, eventually round CAPE WRATH and the open water North of Scotland. The journey took days, the wind and rain seemed never ending, but as my flotilla commander told me on the bridge of a cold wet LCT "people paid a lot of money for such a scenic voyage as we were getting for nothing". At this point the weather got even worse, a westerly gale was brewing and we altered course at top speed (8 knots) for the shelter of Loch Erriboll. After a few hours the sky cleared and the sun shone briefly and despite the cold I really did appreciate the beauty of the Loch and the white cliffs surrounding it. I could understand why a few people paid to do the journey that we were undertaking.

With a break in the weather we made a 'dash' for the Orkneys and sheltered there for 2 days before pressing on past Duncansby Head, just a little step north of John O'Groats, then onto Wick for the night. The next day we sailed through the Moray firth past Kessock into Beaulieu Basin, Journey's End!

The flotilla staff established a base ashore in an unfurnished council house on the beach at Kessock, but our quarters were in the Small Arms Rifle range at Inverness Castle some 2 miles away. At last the luxury of a hot shower, the first proper was for almost 2 weeks. We cornered a space with wooden bunk beds close to the open door. The army loaned us 6

blankets each and our hammock acted as a mattress. The deluxe facilities were seldom used after that as the sailing, loading, beaching and work up programme with the 3rd British Infantry division was about to begin

First the Night Exercises.

Slip at 3am. Load at Rose Marque then out to Burgh Head to beach after dawn then return to Kessock. On one trip we had unloaded our troops at Burgh Head returned to Rose Marque and become beached on a failing tide and unable to sail for several hours. We did eventually float off, the other craft had long returned towards Inverness. The sea was calm, the sun was shining and we had all the waters of the Moray Firth to ourselves! Steaming smoothly to Inverness alone (well almost) in the distance, but heading towards us, another LCT, dead ahead! As the distance closed the skipper called to the helmsman "PORT 20!" The Flotilla Commander said "Why?" The skipper pointed to the approaching craft. The flotilla commander said "we're senior maintain course" we did and so did the other craft and we were now closing rapidly. "PORT 30!" said the skipper, "Maintain Course" replied the flotilla commander. A brief moment when neither craft gave way and suddenly the other craft swung sharply to starboard, unfortunately we swung sharply to port with the result that we collided broadside on, and each completed a full circle and went our respective ways, exchanging insults as we left the scene. Some loss of paintwork, some loss of face, but no admiralty board of enquiry.

The work up continued through to Christmas 1943 and into 1944. With no leave AWOL was becoming a feature throughout the squadron. The only possible route back to the South was the railway. Get on the train from Inverness to Perth. The number of AWOLs rose

trying to get through Perth to Glasgow, but Naval and Army MPs caught most at the Perth Station or they turned them back to Inverness and gave up the attempt.

A.B. Tattersall a well known 'skate' in the flotilla had failed again. He sat on the steps of the flotilla office with two lesser known companions. I walked (not marched) up the path toward the offices. The F.O. recognised Tattersall, having seen him as a defaulter on several occasions. "Back again" He sneered, and then to the other two "Are you his escort?" "No sir" they replied "We're given up too". It was rumoured that about 30% of crews were ill or absent without leave. Commanders were summoned to a conference, the pressure of the work up was eased and leave granted to improve morale and relax some of the pressure before the start of the big voyage south and the preparation for the landing wherever that might be.

The voyage South then began.

The convoy formed up 32nd and 38th Flotillas in the lead out of the Moray Firth and south along the Scottish coast and along to North East English waters. Keeping an eager eye to the east for the possibility of Nazi air attack. We had no radio contact, the light was fading and the sea became rough. Then a flashing light from the shore. It said "All Method to Methil" – what could that mean? It transpired that 'Method' was the name of the convoy and 'Methil' was a small harbour down the coast, so much for communication skills!

We plodded on south, the sea now calm, and the sky cloudless. The tank deck was empty, the 3rd British infantry's hardware too precious to risk by sea. A solitary aircraft appeared to the east, "Aircraft bearing RED 40" but no confirmatory call from the man on the Port Olerkion 20mm Anti Aircraft Gun. The tranquil state of the sea and sun had lulled Alf Olton

to sleep. The Engineering Officer was at the back of the bridge and shouted to Alf. So rudely roused from his slumber he rather rudely suggested that the EO mind his own f'ing business. Not amused the EO advised the skipper of the events to date. The skipper tried his luck with Alf and after receiving even stringer abuse from him he decided it was time to apply instant discipline. He convened an instant disciplinary hearing and pronounced punishment, 14 days stoppage of pay, 14 days stoppage of leave and 14 days No.11s (2 hours of drill and marching at the double with back pack, gaiters, belt and rifle). The stoppage of pay and leave were almost academic since none of us were likely to get the leave or opportunity to spend our meagre pay. The back pack and rifle were different! And as we had an empty tank deck the No.11s could start immediately. Under the charge of the coxswain it began smoothly enough, but coxswain was needed at the wheel, so the skipper decided to take on Alf himself. We could look down from the bridge and see Alf performing;

Skipper "Double March"

Alf – Slow jankers shuffle

Skipper "Double!"

Alf – Slow shuffle

After several rounds like that the skipper called "Halt" Alf obeyed. Skipper demanded "Double March" Alf did not obey; he glared at the bridge, grabbed his rifle and carefully pointed it at the Bridge and shouted "Yes you Bastard and if I had a bullet I would!" Mutiny? Or Comedy? The skipper smiled as he turned away and said to me "My crew love me. When we go over the other side (France) all the small arms and ammunition are up here with me". On arrival at Portsmouth some two weeks later Alf was taken ashore to complete his

punishment and we later learned that the medics at Haslar had declared him mentally unfit for further service.

Meanwhile the voyage south continued, Flamborough Head, Grimsby, Ipswich and the passage through the straits of Dover and the final run to Portsmouth.

Force 'S' assembled in the coastal area from Brighton to Portsmouth and Southampton.

Flotilla Staff HQ is established in the 'Vernon' we were billeted in the barracks there and the waiting game; servicing and loading as D-day approached. Each day the same question;

"Any news?" As Flotilla Signaller I went wherever the Flotilla Commander went when we sailed. At last the FO said "we're going the afternoon". Back to the mess at lunchtime and

the same question again "Any news?" Those spare crew or staff who had not been drafted

to craft now knew that they would not be on the first assault on D-Day, to some a

disappointment, to most a great relief. Tubby Barnes, glad to be missing part the first part

of the show, his relief was followed by unusual generosity. He offered his tot of Rum and

"Good Luck, you won't be coming back". I was 18 and T-Total but thought that it was too

good an offer to refuse, so I drank too much to his dismay. His gesture was followed by

others. Thorpe the postie said "I do hope you will be ok". Blakey, older and fatherly "be

careful and look after yourself". But the best offer was from Vic Madre the stoker who had

been sent ashore that morning. No D-Day for him!! He had thoughtfully, but wrongly,

managed to bottle his tot for several days and bring it ashore. "Come back to the barracks

and have a proper drink" he said, so I did. Two or was it three tots and a quick nap on a pile

of hammocks. I vaguely remember the march across the parade between the stalwart and

sober comrades, back to the flotilla offices to await the return of the flotilla commander and

proceed aboard. However fate intervened, history recalls the decision of IKE to postpone

the invasion by 24 hours because of the weather, in reality the reason was that I was not fully fit at the time and they were "Waiting for Wally".

Fully loaded with our four 105mm self-propelled guns chained to firing positions on the tank deck and surrounded by the support vehicles we slipped our buoys, formed up as a flotilla in line ahead and sailed out of Stokes Bay down past Gillkicker signal station and into Spithead part Portsmouth Harbour gate and slowly out towards the NAB Tower and joined the massive armada that was assembling in the channel for the D-Day landings.

With dawn we saw the mass of other landing craft moving slowly towards the French coast. Our target was 'Sword' Beach, the most easterly and near the mouth of the Orne. We were sailing along the coast then signalled a 90 degree turn to port then given a range by the army gunners. Our self-propelled guns commenced a barrage of shots to targets on shore. Four 110mm guns from each landing craft in our flotilla joined by other craft. We turned to circle and come in behind the assault LCAs and prepared the run into the beach. An LCA crossed ahead of us and was hit by shellfire or a mine and blew up and sank instantly. We were beaching at high tide so the beach obstacles were not a great problem, but we had to go in at full ahead and cut engines for the last cables to avoid breaking up the beach for craft coming in on a later wave. Kedge anchors were dropped to assist the un-beaching when un-loading was complete, with the tide setting along the beach and craft landing or unbeaching anchor cables became crossed. We beached straight and hard, opened the bow, dropped the ramp and unloading commenced straight onto the sandy beach and high and dry. Under the direction of the beach master, Bren gunners, SPGs and support vehicles climbed up the sand dunes and away. We commenced raising the ramp but a shell from what we guessed was German 88mm hit the winch and the ramp could not be closed. A few

more shells landed on the beach and some between the craft now crowding the beach sending columns of water over us. I cowered in my corner of the bridge and remember thinking "the next one can't land in here" it didn't. Then we commenced to wind in the capstan to use the kedge anchor to pull us off the beach as planned, but then disaster, our propellers became entangled with the kedge wires of others craft that had been carried along the beach by the receding tide. We swung around, hit some underwater mine and then another explosion and the engines were out and we were taking in water. At this point the flotilla Commander left the bridge and dashed to the hatch on the quarter deck to try and organise some damage control. As he leant over the hatch we hit another beach mine, the blast from this rushed up through the open hatch and the Flotilla Office was about to do down the hatch was blown backwards and lay unconscious on the deck. At this point we were taking in water rapidly and listing badly, the skipper ordered "Abandon Ship".

There followed one of those classic moments when in the middle of a dire situation a kind of silent movie comedy occurred. The Flotilla officer out of this world, two seamen stood by him, one of them, Fisher, calls to the bridge "what shall I do with the FO sir? Skipper replies "Is he dead?" Fisher shrugs helplessly "Don't know Sir" and the skipper replies "Better bring him". They lifted him up by his arms and another explosion rocked the whole craft followed by a lurch toward the sea. In this confusion the FO was dropped, as he hit the deck for the second time he opened his eyes. Without a word the two seamen picked him up and carried him to the catwalk to await rescue. The FO never knew how close he had come to being abandoned.

At this point I had the task of ditching the signal book and codes and then clutching my semaphore flags run to the stern and frantically signalled SOS to a LCP (L) which thankfully

got the signal and came alongside and took us all on board and away from the beach and out to the offshore fleet, to the 'Scylla'. Where getting on board in the choppy sea proved difficult and climbing the scrambling nets to get inboard was pretty hair-raising. We were taken into a mess deck and I found a spare bunk, by then the lack of sleep meant I dozed off only to be wakened by one of the ship's crew offering the traditional tot of rum to all survivors. The smell was too much for me so I declined, much to the joy of the chap who was offering. It was many years before I could face another rum.

Next morning we attended the burial at sea of Petty Officer EM Stafford, our engine room chief who was fatally wounded when we were mined off the beach. We never saw our officers again and we were then transferred to a corvette for the voyage back to Portsmouth.

From there I was sent to a Holding Depot to await a draft back to the Flotilla and a return to the beaches, back to the 32nd LCT Flotilla with JI Whitehead recovered from his D-Day injury and insisting that I was drafted back as his signalman

This was the start of a long, hard and sometimes dangerous period from July 1944 to May 1945 spent leading convoys of landing craft over to the Normandy beaches and later to the Ports of Cherbourg and Le Havre, but that's another story.

The months following the landings were full of incidents, not the immediate dangers of the first landings but in many ways almost as hazardous, a mark 4 LCT caught in a force 8-9 gale was frightening, cold and dangerous. The craft had no keel and the blank bow battering into the eye of the gale was often broken by the sheer force of the sea. On one occasion we

left Le Havre with a convoy of 14 craft. I was on the B Class Motor Launch providing the escort and guidance, no wireless communication this period! Five craft developed engine failures and crept back to Le Havre. One broke in two, the bow and half the tank deck floated down the channel provoking an admiralty warning to shipping.