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STORM ASHORE: A WORM'S EYE VIEW OF D-DAY

This edition of *Goorangai* is an edited transcript of the address presented to the RAN Staff Acquaint Course members at their end of course Mess Dinner held on 17 October 2005. The speech was delivered by the honoured guest, CDRE John Goble, RAN (Retd).

First, may I thank you for inviting me to be present for this excellent dinner. This afternoon at the Staff College I was privileged to attend a very professional address presented by means of PowerPoint. I have reached the age where something more in the nature of memory jogging is needed so I am relying on 'Paperpoint'. Please bear with me!

The title of my informal address this evening – 'A Worm's Eye View' – is a summary of activity leading up to, and on D-Day, and during the ensuing build up. In addition, I propose to enlarge on some of the planning factors and the magnitude of the overall operation where my knowledge is based on later reading. I will try and keep within the time granted, and will be pleased to take questions later.

How did I get there? It was then the custom for junior RAN officers to attend a range of courses in the RN, generally known as Subs' Courses. Qualification in these courses covering Gunnery, Signals, Navigation, Torpedo and so on, were designed to equip us with the necessary knowledge to undertake the duties in small ships. On the completion of the courses in late January 1944, I was sent on short leave pending an appointment on loan to the RN.

Appointments for Junior Officers were determined by a Commander RN known by the grand title of 'Naval Assistant to the Second Sea Lord' (NA2SL). On completion of courses we were advised to call on NA2SL to discuss a preference for our next move. I duly made an appointment, had a short discussion, and when asked where I would like to go, requested 'Destroyers'. 'I will see what I can do', said NA2SL. Soon after, I received an appointment to 541 Landing Craft Assault Flotilla. This was hardly what I had expected, but then three other RAN Subs probably had the same thought as they also ended up in LCAs. The Flotilla was based at Queensferry on the south side of the Firth of Forth, and just to the west of the famous bridge.

The Flotilla was manned by Royal Marines, although the maintenance crew members were RN personnel. I was told this strange arrangement arose because of a shortage of manpower in the RN whereas the Marines had a surplus for their battalions. It was deemed easier to cross train Marines for boat work than use already trained specialists from the Seaman Branch. In fact it is recorded that to provide crews required for the larger landing craft the RN paid off a number of old escort vessels. It was fortunate that the Battle of the Atlantic had turned in favour of the Allies from mid-1943, and thus the escort situation was not so critical.

The LCA was the smallest of many specialised vessels ranging upwards in order of size through Landing Craft Medium (LCM), the Landing Craft Tank (LCT) and its various configurations, namely Landing Craft Gun (LCG), Landing Craft Rocket (LCR), Landing Craft Flak (LCF), Landing Craft Infantry (LCI), and the larger Landing Ship Tank (LST) and Landing Ship Infantry (LSI). The LCA could be described as a rectangular box about 40 feet long, straight sided, flat bottomed, with a bow door ramp, and powered by two Ford V8 engines. It had one limitation; a lack of power in going astern and, in that mode, a tendency to ingest sand or mud into the cooling system with the risk of engine overheating and at worst engine seizure. There was a certain amount of protection built into the craft at various points. Empty, they weighed about 10 tonnes and had a top speed of about 8 knots.

This highly efficient war machine normally had a crew of four, a coxswain, signalman, deck-hand, and engine-driver, and, as a flight leader a Sublieutenant or Second Lieutenant (RM). It had three benches, one in the centre, and one each side. It accommodated a platoon of 30 men, in some considerable discomfort. They had no visible horizon when seated and this, we soon discovered, caused early onset of 'mal de mer'.

When I joined, the Flotilla was engaged in its work up, including station keeping, beaching and unbeaching, signal exercises, compass swings, and so on. Shortly afterwards the Flotilla took part with others, in a landing rehearsal with troops, on a beach about 22 miles to the east known as Gullane Bay. We made the first half of the passage from our base to Leith, being the port for Edinburgh, where troops were embarked. I cannot recall the name of their regiment. They could well have been part of the 51st Highland Division. We then set off in column into a stiff North Easter being led by a navigational craft which had better seagoing qualities than the LCAs. It was not a difficult transit by any means but being a journey of about an hour and a half, we had quite a bit of movement on the craft and some shipped a fair amount of water.

On the run in to the beach, one Coxswain, concerned about the amount of water in his craft exhorted his crew to greater efforts in getting rid of it by ordering, 'For Chrissake Bale out!', whereupon the soldiers, no doubt having read press releases by Royal Air Force Public Relations, promptly leapt over the side into about 6 feet of water. Fortunately no one was drowned, but it did impress on me that an order given in a joint service situation and readily understood by one service might not be so interpreted by another. The old chestnut, 'Bag lunches will be provided' springs to mind.

Soon after this misunderstanding, the waterlogged craft sank, and was not seen again until later in the day at low tide. Before a recovery could be arranged one of the Marine officers and I went out to it and, among the small arms still on board, we managed to salvage a Sten gun each! The recovery was interesting. The first attempt to move the craft was made by a large army truck that dug itself into the sand and made no further progress. Then a special heavy recovery vehicle known as a Scammell, after the manufacturer, dug itself in. After a bit of conferring, the Army Engineers brought in a Sherman Tank, which dragged everything higher up the beach in one long tow. It was quite impressive! The exercise lasted a couple of days then we all headed back to base. I think the Army decided to go by road.

Our next move took place at short notice, when we were ordered to transit the Forth Clyde Canal to join our LSI anchored off Greenock. The Canal was completed in 1791. I did not know this at the time, but have recently looked it up! It began at Grangemouth, about 10 miles west of the LCA Base, and ended at a place called Bowling to the West of Clydebank. It was some 40 miles long and meant negotiating 39 locks. Each lock could take two LCAs, so it was a fairly slow progress. At intervals along its length were pedestrian bridges which were raised by a 'bridgekeeper' who lived in a cottage nearby. Sometimes both halves were raised (rather like the Tower Bridge) and sometimes only one half, which obviously left a narrower gap. I was detailed to be 'Tail end Charlie' and tow another LCA that was unserviceable. We had it on a short double bridle and all went well, until we came to one of the half – opened bridges, when the towed craft took on a sheer and just clipped the end of the unopened span. As we carried on the 'bridgekeeper' lowered the half span, then started jumping up and down shouting, 'I canna get me locks shut!'. I called back, 'Send the bill to the Admiralty', and waved farewell. In due course I was invited by M'Lords to render a Collision and Grounding Report. Reflecting on this minor incident I can claim to be the only Australian to have transited the canal in an LCA, while towing another, and being required to report on a collision with the property of the Lon-

don Midland and Scottish Railway. A world record perhaps.

It took most of the day for the group to get to a place named Maryhill about 2 miles north of Glasgow and 10 miles short of the canal exit. There we moored up overnight and piled into trucks to go to overnight accommodation. Next morning we set off again and all breathed a sigh of relief when we passed through the last of the lock gates. Another 15 miles down the Clyde saw us alongside our LSI named *Empire Mace*, one of 13 transports built in the USA and handed over to the UK under Lend Lease. The ships were all named after medieval weapons, thus, Broadsword, Battleaxe, Crossbow, Halberd, Lance, Mace and so on. They were crewed by the Ministry of Transport under the usual merchant service sign on/sign off arrangement. The ship remained at anchor for a few days giving us the opportunity to carry out further exercises and in due course we sailed through the Irish Sea for Southampton.

In the Solent and along the coast we trained both as a group and in smaller detachments, until eventually soldiers were embarked. This was our first contact with the Army units we were to land on D-Day. The assault Battalion nominated was the 6th Battalion Green Howards. The name stemmed from the fact that in about 1746 there were two regiments each commanded by a Colonel Howard, so to distinguish between the two they became identified by the colour of the facings on their uniforms and the name lived on. This regiment was part of the 50th Northumbrian Division which was recruited from the area between Newcastle-on-Tyne and Stockton-on-Tees. The division was, as they say, 'battle hardened', having been in the 8th Army from El Alamein to Tunis, then to Sicily, and Italy. It had been recalled to England for the invasion and thus became part of XXX Corps.

We then took part in a major rehearsal landing troops at a beach known as Studland Bay just south of Bournemouth in Dorset. The weather was not too good but things went quite well as a beaching exercise, although the troops left the craft without being in much of a hurry. We decided that in a real situation urgency would prevail but for them this was just another boring old exercise.

Taking part in this rehearsal was a number of DD tanks. DD stood for Duplex Drive. The tanks were fitted with a 'skirt' which, when raised, gave them a freeboard of about a metre, and buoyancy. The drive propelled them along at a slow speed until they came to the beach hull down, then lowered the skirt, blew off the waterproofing and gave fire support. One had to admire the courage of their crews. With a thirty ton 'keel', if the skirt collapsed they would plummet to the bottom. Two tanks and crew were lost on this occasion. On the subject of tanks, a number were converted for special purposes such as bridging, gap crossing, mine clearing, flame throwing, and the AVRE (Armoured Vehicle Royal Engineers). The AVRE fired a mortar charge weighing 20kg, designed to blow up concrete emplacements. Many of the tank designs stemmed from lessons learnt in the ill-fated Dieppe raid in 1942.

Here I should give you an outline of the planning leading to Operation Neptune, being the lodgment and establishment of the beachheads.

In April1943, Lieutenant General Morgan was appointed Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (yet to be appointed) with a brief to prepare a plan for an invasion of Northern Europe. Normandy was selected because it gave the Allies an element of surprise and the beachhead could be isolated. Allied Air Forces could provide air cover over the battlefield, and the location was such that the German Army could not quickly move in reinforcements. The landing was planned for low tide to avoid landing craft being damaged or sunk by beach obstacles, and to give more space to deploy troops and vehicles in the first waves.

The original plan, approved at the Quebec conference in August 1943, envisaged three Divisions in the assault force; however, when General Montgomery was appointed as Commander of 21st Army Group in February 1944, he pressed for two more Divisions in order to extend the beachhead. The Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower, agreed. This was approved, but led to a delay until early June while additional craft were transferred from the Mediterranean. Early June provided the desired combination of tide while 'twilight all night' simplified the marshalling of the ships and craft on the approach during the dark hours. Furthermore, airborne divisions due to land on the east and west flanks would be assisted by the moonlight conditions.

Operation Neptune planned on the landing and establishment of beachheads, spaced along a 100 kilometre front, of 175,000 men, 3000 guns of all types, 1,500 tanks and 15,000 other vehicles by the end of D-Day. Once ashore the beachheads were to be expanded to link up with other landing areas.

Concentrating the forces involved the heavy naval units sailing from northern ports including Northern Ireland. The lighter units and craft sailed from the southern counties ports, estuaries and inlets. All vessels were sailed to arrive at a set time at Point Z situated 8 nautical miles SE of the Isle of Wight. In an area of 5 nautical miles radius all units slotted in to five swept channels, cleared and buoyed by minesweepers with each channel having an outbound and inbound lane.

In about the third week of May all coxswains and officers were briefed at a shore location where a floor map of the area to which we were assigned was laid out. I cannot recall whether named features were marked on the map. It was more in the nature of, '541 goes here and this is what may be expected. You will be lowered about 6 miles off shore and a navigation craft will lead you in. On your left during the run in will be ships and craft bombarding shore defences to keep the enemy's heads down. Enemy gun positions will be heavily bombed by the RAF during the night before the landing'. Beach obstacles were covered in the briefing, and these would be visible due to the low tide.

Troops of the 47 Royal Marine Commando land at Gold Beach near Le Hamel on D-Day. An LCA can be seen behind the two troops moving ashore (Image from the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London)

Now a word about the German forces, which did not get a mention during the briefing, perhaps because this was not part of Neptune. There were 6 Divisions along the landing area, two of them static. Inland to the SE of Caen, at the East of the British area, were the 21st Panzer and the 12th SS Panzer Divisions.

Later we were 'sealed' in the ship and briefed that our destination was Gold Beach, King Sector, Green, just to the west of a town named La Riviere. I was briefed that after the landing had taken place other craft in the flight were to return to the ship, and I was to report to a Control Craft off the beach to act as a despatch boat. This was expected to be for about three days. We would be fed from a Landing Barge Kitchen. Full of optimism I packed a pair of swimming trunks. After this we were all keyed up, and ready for the 5th June, but as most everyone now knows the weather intervened resulting in a 24 hour postponement; so on the 6th June *Empire Mace* anchored about 6 miles off shore and lowered the first flight of LCAs. The troops were landed without incident, they staggered off the craft suffering from the violent seasickness which had overtaken them all. This was the story on all the beaches. There was little of the 'Allied Forces Storm Ashore' as the press liked to headline it.

We had a struggle to get off the beach, and it was only when an LCT came charging in alongside us, and the Captain, a Lieutenant, agreed to take a line and help us off when he had unloaded that we were able to dislodge ourselves. With his astern power he got us in fine style. We then reported to the Control Craft and for a time he had nothing for us to do, so were able to clean up the shambles left by 30 breakfasts. No need to go into the details here.

Meanwhile LCTs, amphibious trucks (DUKW) and various craft were

heading in to off-load. Some of the DUKW struck obstacles, the first sign being a rear wheel blown skywards. We were told by the Controller to head off any more to stop them going in. We had a bit of a stern chase to catch up with one group, when fate caught up with us. We struck an obstacle that exploded under the engine room, and the craft quickly sank.

The four survivors took to the water fully clothed, boots and all, but two drifted away and were lost in the sea conditions. I do not know how far we were from the beach but it seemed to be a long swim, maybe 500 yards. Ashore we met up with the rest of the LCA crews who had been unable to get off the beach. During that afternoon I was informed by an officer with the Beachmaster Group that they expected the beach would be bombed overnight, and we should dig slit trenches for some protection. Everyone knows that Marines are tough and when I passed this on to the Sergeant, he was unconcerned and said. 'Ah, we'll be right sir'. At about 0130 a Ju 88, at 200 feet, flew along the beach. No bombs landed nearby but he could have dropped them elsewhere. I glanced over to where the Marines had settled down and sand was flying up in all directions.

Late in the afternoon of the 7th we were directed to go towards Arromanche and board an LST (Number forgotten) for passage back to Southampton. The First Lieutenant was pleased to see us because when I reported to him he handed over responsibility for guarding about 500 POWs. On arrival at Southampton the disembarkation authorities ordered us to go to Lowestoft. Our suggestion that we should await the arrival of *Empire Mace* was turned down. Later the reason for this became apparent. The planners had expected 20 percent of the forces to become casualties and any one uninjured had to be moved out of the area.

Landing Craft Tanks (LCTs) beaching at Gold Beach on D-Day (Image from the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London)

On arrival at Lowestoft I was debriefed by an officer who must have been a barrister. He asked me what happened to our craft, and I replied, 'We struck a beach obstacle'. He then said, 'What sort of obstacle' and I said, 'it was a shell about the size of a 4 inch strapped to the top of a pole'. He fired back, 'How do you know that if it was underwater?' I explained that at the next low tide I went out to the craft and it was surrounded by poles each with a shell held on top by steel straps'.

We were at Lowestoft for a few days then back to *Empire Mace* in time for the first V1s (flying bombs) to arrive in the Solent. We did a number of transits as part of the build up, using ships' motor lifeboats to supplement the shortfall of LCAs to land personnel. By this time we were able to recover a number of craft with the assistance of special recovery vehicles. During this period I happened to see a copy of the Operation Neptune Orders for Force 'G' lying on the table in the conference room. All the briefings had been verbal so I took the opportunity to read the section affecting our sector. This set out the defensive emplacements and the calibre of guns able to enfilade the beach. Had the first briefing mentioned this I think I would have died of fright.

Now for my impressions of the operation. There are three: first, the success due to meticulous planning and organization; second, the overwhelming application of firepower and third, the appalling waste.

I would like to end this informal address with a small post script. On the anniversary of D-Day in 2004, a national newspaper printed an article by an author described as a Military Historian. It stated, 'Gold Beach marked the centre of the landings and included the town of Le Hamel, where in 1918, Australian General Sir John Monash fought a successful battle which is regarded as the first ever to co-ordinate the use of infantry, artillery, tanks and aircraft'. Any one with the slightest knowledge of WW1 would know that the German Army never advanced as far as Normandy. A polite email suggesting the above statement needed correction was ignored. If we were to land near Hamel where General Monash fought the battle, we should have landed about 5 kilometres to the North East of Villers-Brettonneux. [Editor's note: This would be a remarkable feat for an LCA as this is some 80 kilometers from the nearest coast.]

About the Author: John Goble was born in Brighton, Victoria and entered the RAN College in 1937. In December 1941 he was posted to HMAS CANBERRA for a short period and later served in HMAS AUSTRALIA in the Coral Sea and Solomon Islands actions during 1942.

In 1943 he attended courses in the UK to qualify for promotion to Lieutenant and on completion, was posted to a Landing Craft (Assault) Flotilla that took part in the D-Day landing on 6 June 1944. He was then posted to HMS BATTLER, an escort carrier built in the USA and part of the British Eastern Fleet based at Trincomalee, Sri Lanka.

He was among the first group of RAN officers to qualify as a pilot shortly after WW2 and served with the RN until 1948, which included a year in 827 Squadron on board HMS TRIUMPH, a Light Fleet Carrier. In 1949 he returned to Australia as a member of 816 Squadron on board HMAS SYDNEY and in 1951, he returned to the UK to attend the RAF Central Flying School. He then served as a Flying Instructor in the UK until returning to Australia to become CO of 817 Squadron.

Between 1955 and 1959, he served on the Naval Aviation Staff, then a year as XO in the Battle Class destroyer, HMAS TOBRUK and from there as Commander (Air) in HMAS MELBOURNE.

In 1960 he attended the US Armed Services Staff College and on return became Commander (Air) at NAS Nowra. In an unexpected move he was then posted as the first XO of HMAS SUPPLY. From 1964 to 1967 he was Director of Naval Air Policy. During this period the Government approved the acquisition of the Tracker and A4 Skyhawk aircraft. This was followed with two years with the Joint Planning Group in the Department of Defence.

In 1969 he Commanded HMAS VAMPIRE and in 1970, HMAS STALWART. He then moved to Nowra in Command, which was followed by a year in the RAN Trials and Assessment Unit. After a six-month period as CO of the carrier HMAS MELBOURNE in the latter half of 1973, he was appointed COS to the Fleet Commander for two years.

Commodore Goble retired from the RAN in February 1976 to study for a career in Law from which he retired in 1992. He lives in Sydney with his wife Annette.

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