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SCU-NEWSLETTER No. 3-19
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1. The 'Exercise Tiger.' In SCU-Newsletter 2-19 - I said I would write about the disaster that befell the US forces training in Devon heading for Slapton Sands in April 1944, that later became known as the 'Night of the Bloody Tiger.' I feel involved as I was standing on Slapton Sands just a few months later and the area had an eerie feel to it. All three of us felt it - Dennis Smith, our driver and me. I will do so now - but in deference to any descendants that might read this letter in the USA - I intend leaving out many of the subsequent details. However, this Newsletter is longer than some but important for a number of reasons including (a) being somewhat ignored by historians and (b) I simply want to write about it to help clear my lingering bad memory of the area. Books *have* been written about the event and I mention just one or two in the new 'Books' section at the end of the Newsletter.

1.1 The Evacuation of the South Hams. As part of the necessary preparation for the successful invasion of German occupied France, it was vitally important that all troops had to undergo a series of training schedules and then full-scale exercises under conditions as near resembling those of the five landing points in Normandy as possible.

In the South Hams area of Devon lays Slapton Sands and the immediate landward area was designated for specialised use with live ammunition. Slapton Sands with its small ley, low cliffs at either end of the flat coast road was similar to the beach and cliffs code named **Utah** - west of the River Vire in Normandy - a target beach for the US forces on D Day. It was smaller, had fewer fortifications but was well away from German planes crossing the Channel towards the more populated areas of England.



A notice of requisition was passed to the Devon County Council under the Defence Regulations Act of 1939 specifying that a certain area of the South Hams be fully evacuated of civilians and livestock by the 20th December 1943.

This gave six week's notice for the moving of about 750 families, comprising about 3,000 people, 180 farms, villages, shops, etc. Some 30,000 acres would have to be cleared in these weeks so that troops could move in and start setting up camps, defence points and ringing the area with guards.

The area took in the villages of Torcross, Stokenham, Chillington, Sherford, East Allington, Blackawton, Strete and Slapton and many hamlets. The requisitioned land covered the coast from just north of Strete to just south of Torcross and formed a diamond like area.

All movable possessions from homes, shops and farms were to be taken and useable crops still in the land could be removed. Nothing was to be left apart from empty buildings and churches.

Meetings were convened in the various village halls telling people of the plans and how they could get help in the form of packing cases, transport and food and assistance with the actual work of handling heavy furniture, farm equipment and livestock. The people were naturally taken aback by the order to evacuate but it was wartime and one knew almost anything could happen!

1.2 A number of dummy runs took place leading up to a major test on the night of April 27/28th 1944. Full-scale practice landings for the D-Day invasion got under way in the early months of 1944.

Two of the many earlier practice landings happening during March/April on Slapton Sands.

Some were under live fire to replicate the kind of conditions the troops could expect on D Day!



The biggest rehearsal was 'Exercise Tiger' planned at Slapton Sands in April for 23,000 men of Maj. Gen. Raymond O. 'Tubby' Barton's 4th Infantry Division and support elements. The whole exercise commenced on Wednesday, April 26, when the first assault consisting of infantry, combat engineers, and medics were taken out into the choppy English Channel. At dawn on the 27th that first assault wave stormed the broad Slapton beach, facing simulated machine-gun fire, some live ammunition and even fake dead bodies. The landing was evidently marked by 'wild confusion,' with troops arriving in the wrong order, traffic jams, and a lack of senior naval officers to take charge.

The troops forming the second and third assault waves were loaded aboard eight hulking, flat-bottomed LSTs (Landing Ship Tank) with massive bow doors, each ship of 4,800 tons could carry 300 men and 60 vehicles straight onto a beach. Men, vehicles, and supplies were crammed into the 322-foot-long vessels, nicknamed '*Large Slow Targets!*'

1.3 E-Boat Raid on the LST.s That opening phase of Exercise Tiger was watched briefly on April 27 by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of the Allied armies, General Bernard L. Montgomery, Allied ground forces leader, and Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, the overall D-Day naval commander, but things started to go awry from the beginning. On that morning, Rear Admiral Don P. Moon, the U.S. naval commander of the exercise, postponed H-hour for 60 minutes, and some units of the 4th Infantry Division did not receive the message.

Royal Navy destroyers had been assigned to protect the LSTs, but owing to an error in the paperwork the landing craft and their escorts were on different radio frequencies and could not communicate.

Further, one of the ships, HMS Scimitar, had to return to base at Plymouth after being holed in a ramming on April 26, and her captain was unable to inform the Americans.



He asked for permission to re-join the convoy but was refused. This left the rear of the 'invasion flotilla' unprotected.

Commander Bernard Skahill was the US officer responsible for the LSTs. Directing the flotilla from the bridge of LST-515, he had no way of knowing on April 27 that he was to be protected only by the destroyer HMS *Saladin* and the under-armed corvette HMS *Azalea*. The *Saladin* was 30 miles away and did not catch up with the LSTs until after 3 am.

During the night of April 27/28, the heavily laden LSTs - inadequately protected and vulnerable along with two causeway pontoons towed behind LST 58 made their way along the coast. Admiral Moon's Force U convoy finally consisted of LST's 515, 496, 511, 531, 58, 499, 289, and 507. It churned slowly through Lyme Bay, off the Dorset resort of Lyme Regis, heading for Slapton Sands, about 40 miles westward.

They took a large loop round so as to approach Slapton from the sea just as would happen off Utah beach on D Day. Then, shortly before 2 am while the flotilla was 15 miles off the coast, all hell suddenly broke loose when nine diesel-powered German E-boats from Cherbourg appeared on the scene. They were like foxes loose in a chicken coop.

Picture of a German E-Boat: The raiders screamed across the dark water among the landing ships and fired streams of green tracer shells that spread panic and chaos. One of the enemy boats fired two torpedoes, and a sheet of flame leaped from LST-507. Fatally damaged, she started sinking as some of the 447 soldiers and sailors on board began throwing themselves into the sea.



Lieutenant James Murdoch, who survived the death of LST-507, reported later, 'all of the Army vehicles were naturally fully loaded with gasoline, and it was the gasoline which caught fire first. As the gasoline spread on the deck and poured into the fuel oil which was seeping out of the side of the ship, it caused fire on the water around the ship.'

Floundering helplessly in the black water and trying to calm panic-stricken men, Navy Corpsman (*Medic*) Arthur Victor watched ammunition explode from LST-531's bow 'like a Fourth of July celebration' and 'bodies flung in all directions like rag dolls.'

By now, confusion swept through the ambushed LST flotilla. Exercise Tiger, a dress rehearsal for the Normandy invasion only a month and a half away, had swiftly turned into a nightmare of blind firing, panic, and sudden death. One LST crewman said that the E-boats had the landing ships 'trapped and hemmed in like a bunch of wolves circling a wounded dog.'

Confused soldiers shot at their own boats, believing they were firing at the Germans. Other GIs, unaware that they had been issued with live ammunition, thought that the explosions and flames around them were part of the exercise. Men drowned, and Sherman tanks and trucks sank.

Around 2:30 am, an E-boat loosed a torpedo at LST-289. Another explosion lit up the Channel waters, and the LST's stern was severely damaged, but her crew managed to keep her afloat. Eventually she was nursed into Dartmouth harbour. See picture of LST-289 - it was miraculous that she managed to escape the carnage that had befallen the flotilla.



Another view of the stern of LST 289

LST's 507 and 503 were sunk and others like LST 289 damaged during the E-Boat attack. A Royal Navy task group led by the destroyer HMS Onslow raced to the area, but the E-boats eluded it.

I do not want to dwell further on the tragedy unfolding amongst the terrified soldiers and sailors in the damaged fleet of LST's - *but just think for a moment*. It was pitch black, large areas of the sea were blazing, petrol and ammunition were exploding, men trying to save themselves. *Just writing about it fills me with horror*.



1.4 'The Bigot's' Among the missing were 10 officers who knew the 'Bigot' security details of Operation Neptune, the naval phase of Overlord, and it was feared that if any had been captured the crucial D-Day element of surprise would be lost. Navy divers were sent out to retrieve dog tags but I understand, eventually all 10 men were finally accounted for. SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) censored the incident to avoid alerting the enemy to its importance.

There was the most secret 'Bigot list' and the people on it were known as 'Bigots.' The details of the invasion plan were so secret that adherence to the list was rigidly enforced. The term 'Bigots' was used to designate the highest level of military secrecy, appeared on amphibious operations planning documents prior to Operation Overlord.

One common etymology is that BIGOT is a reversal of the code words 'TO GIB' thus 'BIGOT' meaning 'To Gibraltar.' The context of this etymology is the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942: 'TO GIB' was stamped on the orders of military and intelligence staff travelling from Britain to North Africa to prepare for the operation.

1.5 The cover up and the questions. 'Exercise Tiger' with its death toll of 749, caused great alarm in the Allied military hierarchy. Admiral Bertram Ramsay RN was in command of all Allied Naval forces in the coming invasion of Europe. He called it 'a flop' with 'much to criticise,' and the US Army's official history recorded that 'almost everything went wrong with this putative combined operation.'

Yet, if Slapton Sands reflected poorly on the American training and state of readiness for the imminent Normandy invasion, it also brought an indictment against the Royal Navy.

Citing muddled communications, inadequate escort, and '*an unfortunate series of oversights which began before the ships even left port,*' a top-secret report charged, '*Much of the blame for the high death toll in Exercise Tiger must lie with the Royal Navy staff at Plymouth. The American LSTs were given incorrect radio frequencies, preventing contact with the Royal Navy. The ships were carrying much more fuel than they needed for the exercise, so many of the men in the water who survived suffered terrible burns.*'

To safeguard the Overlord assault, General Eisenhower clamped a veil of secrecy over Exercise Tiger. This was lifted in July, a few weeks after the June 6, 1944, invasion, when a SHAEF statement revealed what had occurred off Slapton Sands. Charges were made later of a cover-up by Ike and the War Department, although accounts of the tragedy eventually appeared in several publications, including official Army and Navy histories.

Nevertheless, in the subsequent weeks and months, the incident went unreported. The dead of Slapton Sands seemed to have been forgotten and denied their place in history, and the mystery of what happened there lingered. Many of the GIs' bodies were never found, although some Devonshire residents reported having seen US troops burying corpses in an unmarked grave in a farm field. That by the way has never been confirmed. However, questions were raised but went unanswered for years.

Eisenhower lifted the embargo in July about the disaster. Dennis Smith and I were there on Slapton Sands at the end of that same month for the first live demonstration of our new MI6 (Section VIII) ship-to-shore 'telephone.' I have long since wondered if that gathering of high ranking Naval and Army Officers on the beach - with Captain Slocum RN officiating - knew about the scene that had earlier unfolded in the waters of the English Channel in front of them?

Surely Slocum must have known the secret but it did not save me - just 18 - from a severe tongue lashing from the great man there and then - on the shoreline of Slapton Sands!

He was just as fierce as he looks in this picture. Slocum was a distinguished regular Naval Officer but recruited into MI6 in 1937. (See *SCU-Newsletter 2-19*).



Please note: I have used British and US books and official papers in my research for this Newsletter. Any mistakes in this rather short summation of the tragedy - as to timing or personnel - are entirely mine.

2. The Book Section! There are several books freely available about Exercise Tiger on Amazon and elsewhere. **'The Invasion Before Normandy'** by Edwin P. Hoyt - **'Exercise Tiger'** by Wendy Lawrance - **'Exercise Tiger: The D Day Landing Tragedies Uncovered'** by Richard Bass.

Finally, **'The Forgotten Dead.'** This is by the late Ken Small - who after the war lived nearby and learned of a 'Sherman tank' lying off shore. His story of its recovery and final recognition by the US Government for the whole sad wartime episode is truly excellent. This particular tank had been a 'casualty' of an earlier practice 'assault' on Slapton Sands.

I am adding a picture of Ken Small's Sherman now on the beach taken by his son Dean Small. I do so in honour of this man who tirelessly harried the authorities on both sides of the Atlantic. The tank and its memorial plaque are on a dais beside the road across the beach.

I have seen this very impressive memorial to 'Exercise Tiger.' The first time it was surrounded by visitors so as we were staying nearby we went back later.



Ken is standing on the right.

With warm regards and best wishes,
Geoffrey
Richmond - August 2019.