

THE GLOBE & Laurel



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It is estimated that over 17,500 Royal Marines took part in the D-Day operations, and by the end of the campaign in North West Europe, some 25,000 had been involved.

The Royal Marines and D-Day

by Capt Derek Oakley MBE

In June 1944 the strength of the Royal Marines had risen to its peak of 78,400. There were detachments in over 60 HM Ships world-wide; nine RM Commandos were spread throughout Italy, Yugoslavia, Burma and the UK and over 5,000 Marines were manning a wide variety of landing craft; in addition there were two armoured support regiments in Centaur and Sherman tanks plus port, beach, provost and many other parties and units such as 30 Assault Unit.

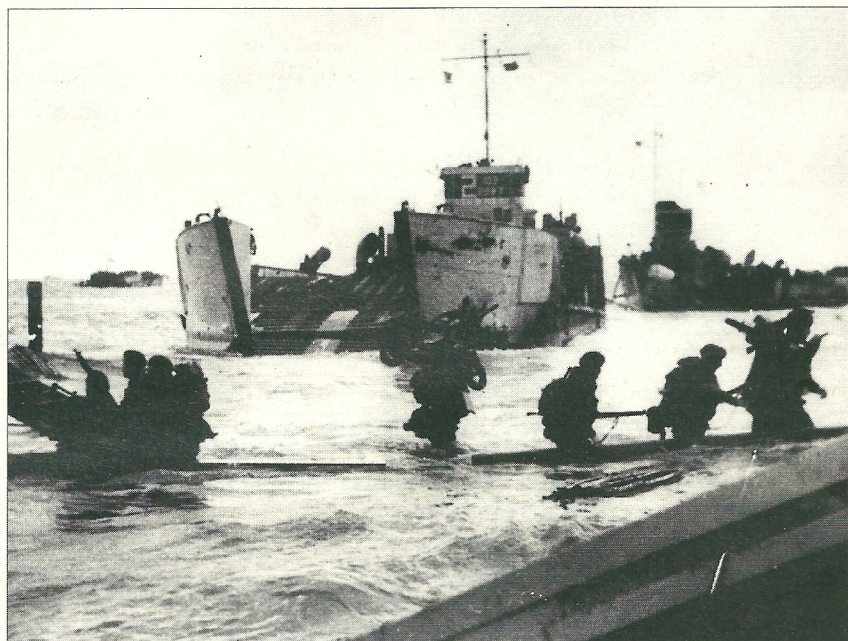
In all it is estimated that over 17,500

took part in Operation *Overlord*, the Normandy landings compared with 2,700 Marines at Trafalgar and 5,800 at Jutland. Such was the Corps commitment on 6 June 1944 and in the subsequent months of operations across North West Europe culminating in the defeat of Germany in May 1945.

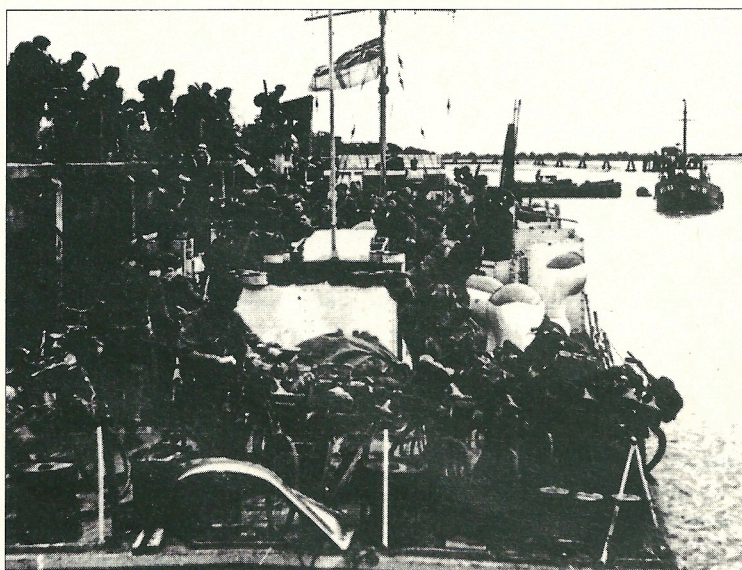
The Commando Story

40 (RM) Commando had been formed in February 1942, as 'A' RM Cdo, and first saw action at Dieppe that August. Subsequently 41(RM) Commando formed in October 1942

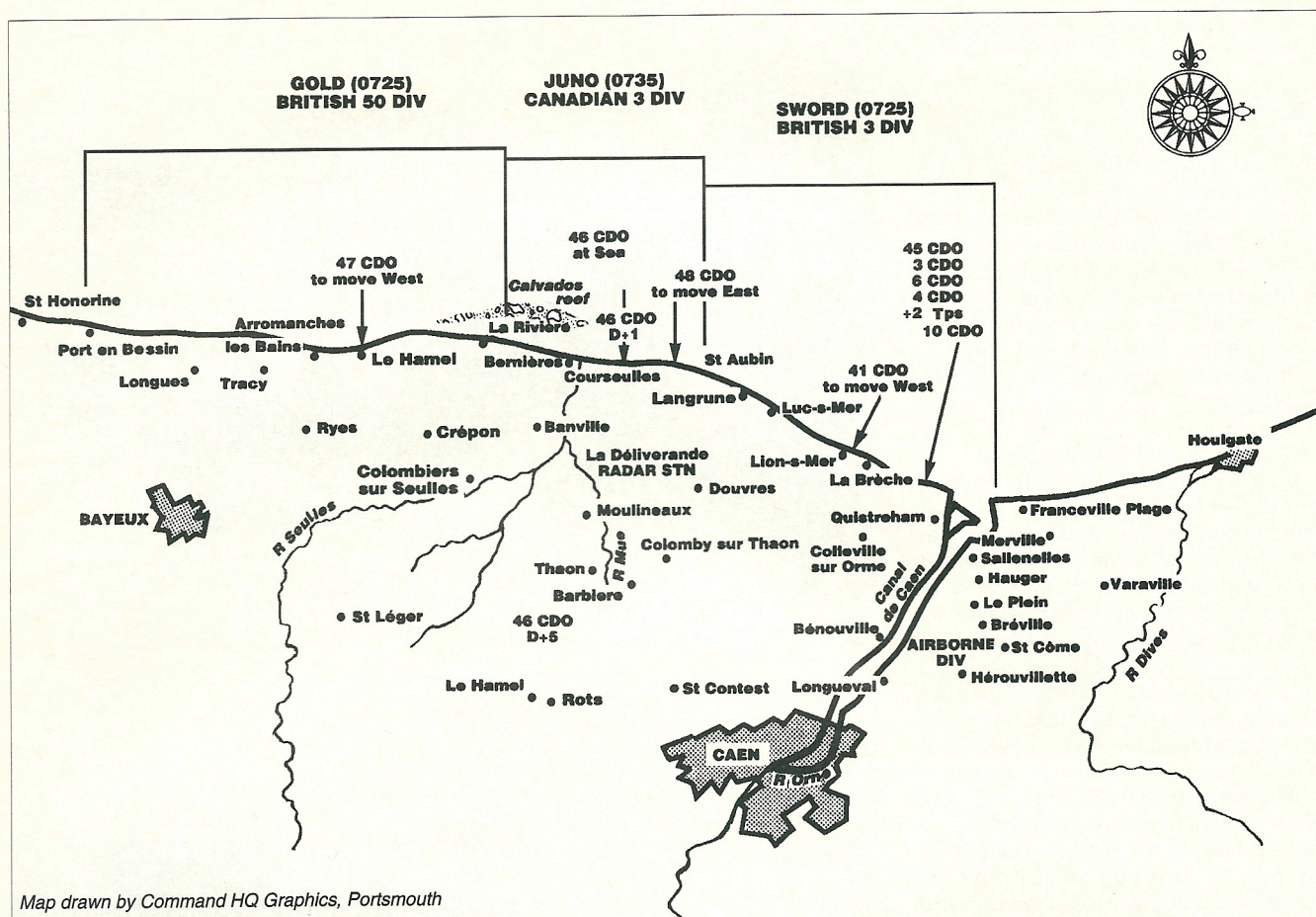
from the 8th Battalion, with 42 to 48 Commando emerging in the next eighteen months, largely from the reorganised battalions and brigade headquarters of the Royal Marines Division. For *Overlord*, five RM Commandos were involved in the assault force. The 4th Special Service Brigade (Brig B W Leicester), consisting of 41, 46, 47 and 48 (RM) Commandos landed under command of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division on Juno and Gold beaches, whilst 45 (RM) Commando was in the 1st Special Service Brigade (Brig Lord



48 RM Cdo land near St Aubin-Sur-Mer.



(Above) LCAs form up in the Channel.
(Left) 45 Cdo Embark on LCIs at Warsash.



Map drawn by Command HQ Graphics, Portsmouth

Lovat) with Nos 3, 4 and 6 (Army) Commandos and two troops of No 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando, mostly French, on the left flank on Sword beach, landing under command of the British 3rd Infantry Division. All except 41 Cdo, who had already taken part in the landings in Sicily and at Salerno in Italy, were formed for *Overlord* and were mostly raw commandos.

On D-Day 45 Cdo (Lt Col N C Ries) landed alongside No 6 (Army) Cdo at H+90 near La Brèche on Sword Queen beach which had been taken earlier by 8 Infantry Brigade. They pushed South and East across the Orne River and Caen Canal penetrating as far as Salanelles and the outskirts of Merville by dusk.

On D+1 45 attempted to take Franceville Plage on the coast but were forced back by heavy enemy resistance including self propelled guns. In the first three days of the fighting they lost 30 killed, at least 24 missing (mostly becoming prisoners of war) and 42 wounded including the CO who was evacuated, Major Nicol Gray assuming command, in all nearly a third of the unit strength. They

subsequently took up defensive positions on the high ground east of the Orne until the end of August.

Further west the units of 4 SS Bde had been given individual tasks. The main Brigade objective was the wireless station at Douvres, a mile inland and midway between Juno and Sword beaches. 41 Cdo (Lt Col T M Gray) landed at H+90 near Luc-sur-Mer under heavy fire and advanced westwards taking Lion sur Mer, while 48 Cdo (Lt Col J L Moulton), which had serious problems in landing amongst beach obstacles under very heavy enemy fire, landed near Bernières at H+125. They had a fierce battle around the village of Langrune and the port of St Aubin in their attempt to advance eastwards to link up with 41. They were supported by Centaur Tanks of one of the RM Armoured Support Regiments. The two Commandos had not linked up by nightfall and were relieved that no major counter attack came during the night.

The western most Commando to land on D-Day (H+90) was 47 Cdo (Lt Col C F Phillips) on the left of Gold Beach. As they approached the beach

they were fired on by 75mm guns located near Le Hamel, and three craft, including the CO's, were mined as they turned to run in on what appeared to be a deserted beach. They swiftly moved inland skirting Arromanches, taking La Rosiere by 1730, and pressing on towards their objective of Port-en-Bessin, a small harbour which was tactically impracticable to take from seawards.

Meanwhile 46 Cdo (Lt Col C R Hardy) was left kicking its heels at sea that night. The Commando was prepared for a cliff climbing role to take the gun batteries at Houlgate or Benerville. They came ashore at 0900 next morning at Bernières and after capturing the strongpoint at Petit Enfer, patrolled inland to the Brigade objective, the radar station at Douvres La Deliverance.

On the afternoon of 7 June, 47 Cdo, who had dug in around Port-en-Bessin, started the difficult approach to the port, with the support of a naval bombardment from HMS *Emerald* and artillery fire. Very fierce fighting ensued against a well dug-in and determined opposition and by the time they took Port-en-Bessin that

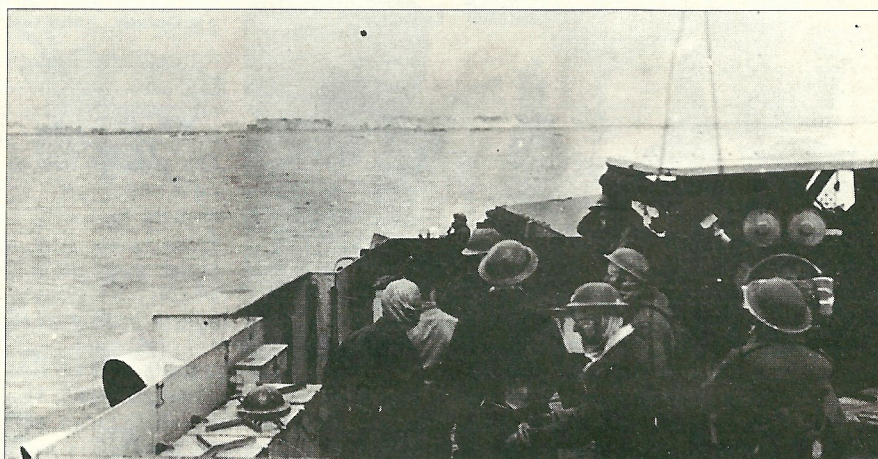
(Right) 45 Cdo land, near Ouistreham

night, 42 Royal Marines had been killed in the first two days of fighting. In the next week, 4 SS Bde took Douvres (9 June) with 46 Cdo pressing further south to take the important villages of Le Hamel and Rots, whilst the remaining Commandos reinforced 1 SS Bde to the East of the Orne. Later in the campaign 41, 47 and 43 Cdos spearheaded the assault on the island of Walcheren, while 45 and 46 Cdos continued in the drive across North West Europe.

Other Royal Marines Units

One Troop of 30 Assault Unit, a combined intelligence unit formed from 30 Commando, and consisting of RN Officers and Royal Marines landed on D-Day with the express purpose of gleaning as much intelligence as possible from the Radar Station at Douvres. The remaining troops of the unit landed subsequently, acquiring naval intelligence on the Cherbourg peninsula and later throughout North West Europe.

The RM Armoured Support Group of two regiments and an independent battery with 80 Centaur tanks and 20 Shermans landed in support of operations. They were designed to fire from LCTs on the run in and then become mobile land artillery. The RM Engineer Commando, a formation of 180 all ranks, had one section each with 1st and 4th SS Bdes, as well as providing six Landing Craft Obstruction Clearance Units (LCOCUs) with underwater swimmers for clearing obstacles on the

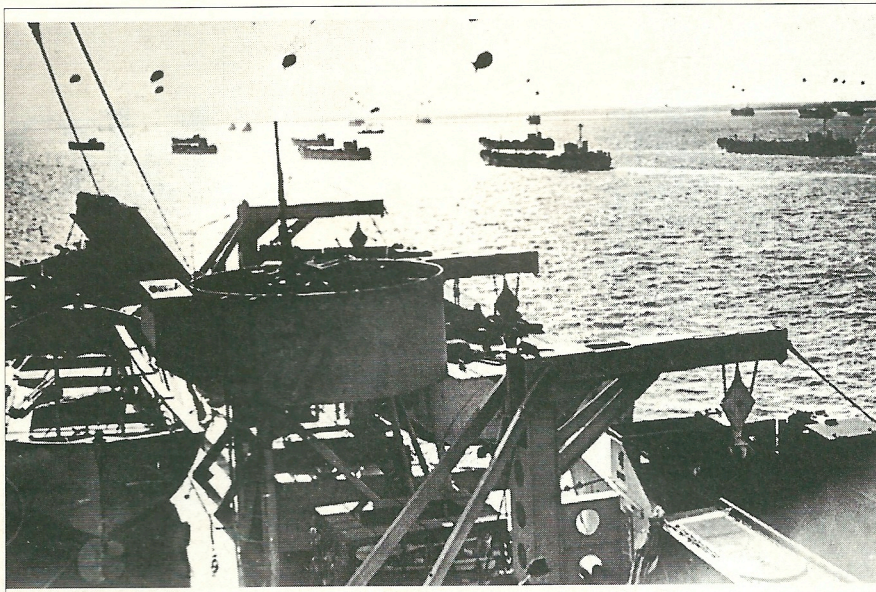


(Above) An RM gun crew on LCG (L) 1007 bombarding Courseilles.



beach. There were many other Royal Marines involved in the landings such as Port Parties, Beach Parties, Dock Clearance Companies, Provost Companies, Signals Detachments and many officers, NCOs and Marines with naval headquarters ashore. There were many individuals involved on UK staffs, for instance Col Sam Bassett who had led the Inter-Services Topographical Unit in the months before D-Day, in seeking out information and intelligence on proposed landing beaches. When he appealed for holiday snaps and postcards, over 10 million pictures were eventually collected world-wide!

HMS Serapis with HMS Warspite and Ramillies, off Sword Beach, with gliders and Dakotas carrying airborne Troops overhead.



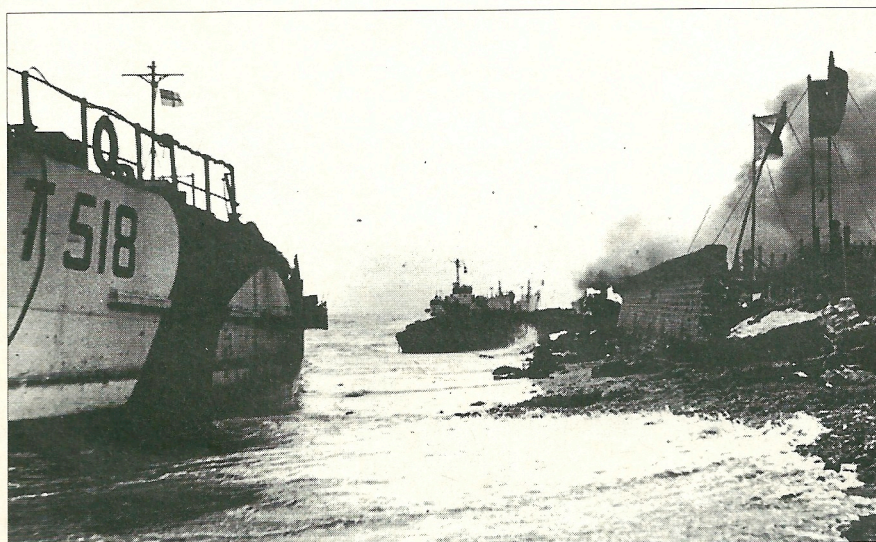
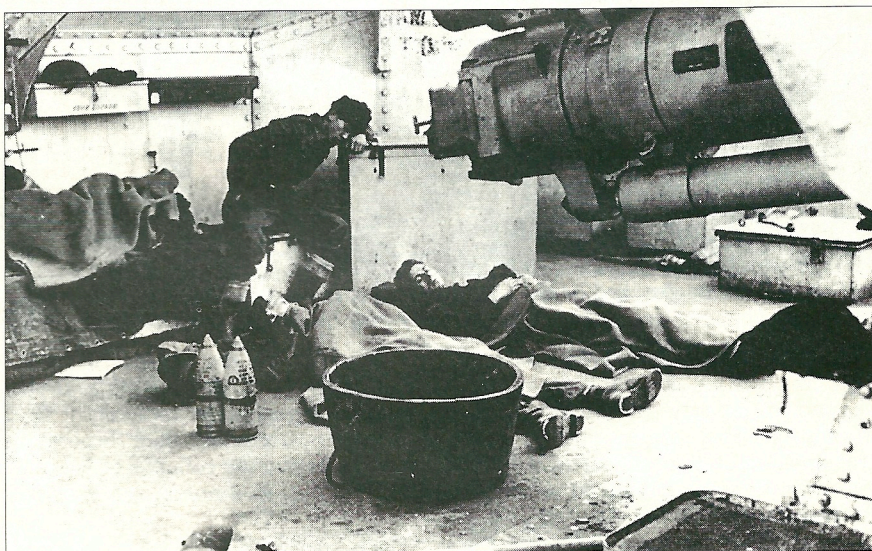
View from a landing ship of the Fleet heading for Normandy.

Landing Craft

It is estimated that the Corps provided two thirds of the assault landing craft crews. Most of the minor landing craft crews and guns crews for the support and flak craft, as well as headquarters and signals elements for the three naval assault forces were Royal Marines. When the RM Division and the two Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisations were run down in 1943 and early 1944, many hundreds of Marines were retrained as landing craft crews, a new role which

(Right) An RM Gun crew in LCG (L) 1007 rest after the initial assault on Courselles.

(Below) LCTs and LCAs on Nan Beach, St Aubin-Sur-Mer, where 48 Cdo had landed earlier in the day. The tide was lower at the time of the initial landings.



augured well for the future of the Corps. The composition of the three naval assault forces varied as did the number of LCA flotillas in them. For instance Force J1 had ten LSIs carrying 72 LCAs and 4 LCS(M), whilst J2 had 9 LSIs with the same number of landing craft. In addition there were numerous LCM and LCVF flotillas aboard such ships as the SS *Clan Lamont* and SS *Monowai*. Most of these were concentrated in ports along the South coast. In addition there were gun crews aboard the LCGs and LCFs of the major Support Flotillas and some aboard the LCT(R)s. Force J alone had some 3,200 Marines on their books.

Bombarding Ships

There were Royal Marines detachments in 21 of the naval bombardment ships. In the Eastern Task Force, providing covering fire for

the British and Canadian troops on Gold, Juno and Sword beaches were the battleships HMS *Warspite* and *Ramillies*, the monitor *Roberts* and the cruisers *Scylla*, *Sirius*, *Arethusa*, *Mauritius*, *Argonaut*, *Frobisher*, *Danae*, *Ajax*, *Orion*, *Belfast*, *Diadem* and *Emerald*; whilst in the Western Task Force, covering the American beaches were the monitor *Erebus* and the cruisers *Hawkins*, *Enterprise*, *Black Prince*, *Glasgow* and *Bellona*. In addition the battlecruisers *Nelson* and *Rodney*, and other ships *Ceres*, *Despatch*, *Capetown* and *Adventure* took part in the operation. The Marines manned at least one main turret in these ships and a proportion of the anti-aircraft armament. Sizes of detachments varied considerably with *Warspite* having about 250 marines,



Lt Col J L Moulton directing an M-10 Tank destroyer past a knocked out Centaur of the RM Armoured Support Group, during 48 RM Cdo's attack on strong points at Langrune-Sur-Mer.

while cruisers had between 80 and 120, including RM Bands which served in nearly all these ships, manning the gunnery control transmitting stations in the bowels of the ship. It is interesting to note that neither the British nor the Americans had an aircraft carrier in the force, the air cover being provided exclusively by the RAF.

Whilst it is always difficult to evaluate casualties, in the first week of the campaign the Royal Marines lost 183 killed, including 136 serving in Commandos. Similarly it is not easy to list the exact number of decorations awarded for Normandy operations. However it is certain that the following awards were made to Royal Marines during this period: 4 DSOs, 3 MBEs, 14 DSCs, 8 MCs, 1 CGM, 5 DCMs, 22 DSMs, 15 MMs and 75 Mentions in Despatches (including two posthumous).

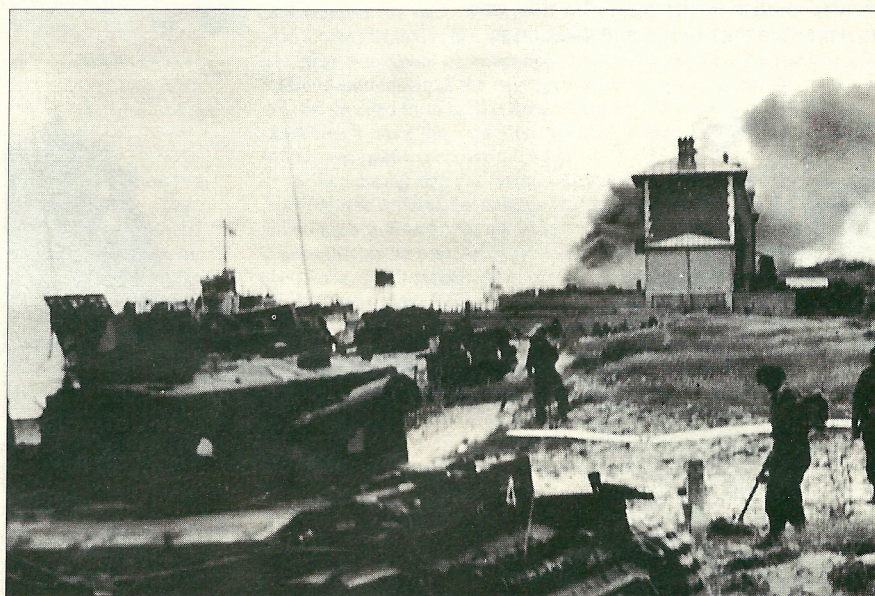
Conclusion

There is no doubt that Operation *Overlord*, in which about 200,000 men

A Centaur of the RM Armoured Support Group, near St -Aubin Sur-Mer.

took part, was the beginning of the end of the Nazi war machine. It still took a further eleven months for final victory to come, and then three more months before the collapse of Japan. It was the biggest amphibious operation

in history and in which the Corps played a vital and significant role. It also gave us a *raison d'être* for the future. Ever since then combined operations and amphibious warfare have been the name of our game,





(Left) Marines of 48 Cdo digging in, near Pegasus Bridge, 9th June 1944, Horsa gliders in the background.

(Below) Naval Beach Commando, Juno Beach (included in the photo are Lt Cdr B C Lambert RNVR, Sub Lt Parsley RNVR and L/S Springall).

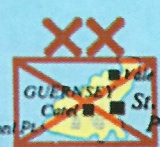


resulting in an expertise in commando techniques and landing craft which was fully justified in Korea in 1951, confirmed in the landings at Port Said in 1956 and exploited in the retaking of the Falklands Islands in 1982. It is to

those who lost their lives and to their loved ones, to those who were permanently scarred and to those who were fortunate to return that we pay tribute for their bravery and courage fifty years ago.

(Below) DUKWs unload stores and equipment from LCTs anchored off a Normandy Beach.





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