

MEMOIRS OF A
"BIGOT"
OPERATION OVERLORD
PHASE NEPTUNE

NORMANDY 1944
By
CAPTAIN Q.R. WALSH, U.S. COAST GUARD (RET)

A "BIGOT" recalls his participation in Operation Overlord, Phase Neptune - The Invasion of Normandy 6 June 1944.

Captain Quentin R. Walsh, U.S. Coast Guard (Ret) was ordered to the staff of Commander United States Naval Forces Europe (COMNAVEU) Grosvenor Square, London, England in September 1943 and subsequently posted to the staff of Commander, Advanced Bases, Captain Norman Ives, USN. Advance Bases were the ports contemplated for capture and operation by the Allies in Normandy and Brittany.

To be a "BIGOT" I was subjected to a process called "Positive Vetting", a deep and detailed security check by British and American intelligence on all personnel handling the key secrets of Neptune, code name for the Invasion of Normandy, the assault phase of Operation Overlord.

Two important aspects of the Invasion should be remembered.

First, the name of the game was Cherbourg. We had to capture, clear and operate a deep water port to stay ashore. Monthly storms are common in the English Channel. Fair weather seldom lasts more than a few days.

Second, an amphibious operation cannot be allowed to bog down. Momentum must be maintained. Being a Bigot I actively participated in the planning of Mulberry, Gooseberries, Pluto, Rankin Case "C", and Quiberon Bay.

MULBERRY - was a Gibraltar size artificial port capable of handling 12,000 tons of equipment each day as it moved up and down with the tide while connected to the beach by articulated pontoon piers that carried traffic to the beach. It took eight months at a cost of millions of dollars to build, and hundreds of tugs to tow its massive sections for assembling at Omaha Beach. The Army insisted it was necessary before Neptune was launched unless we captured a major port

within a few days and Cherbourg was too strongly defended to be captured at once. I was involved in the numerous towing problems. This was one of the most top secret plans. Any person with knowledge of it could not leave England until after the invasion.

GOOSEBERRIES - Over 70 ships were sunk in about three fathoms of water parallel to the shore to provide sheltered waters for landing and other craft at the beaches.

PLUTO - Pipeline under the ocean was a three inch welded steel pipe welded into continuous runs thirty miles in length and rolled onto huge floating drums for laying by tug boats. Fuel landed at Liverpool, England by tanker could be pumped to channel pumping stations on the Isle of Wight and then piped to depots at Cherbourg.

Rankin Case "C" - was a plan predicated on surrender of German forces in France to the Allies with a landing at LeHavre without German resistance. We would land at LeHavre and race for Berlin. General Clarence Heubner represented our Army and presided over the planning sessions from 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. daily in an old fort near Portsmouth. Captain Norman Ives and I represented the U.S. Navy. Admiral Sir Philip Vian, R.N. represented the British and was responsible for the Cross Channel Operation. Our Air Force was represented. About twenty officers worked Monday through Wednesday, then reviewed and critiqued the plan on Thursday. Rankin was approved after our return to London. Thereafter, a curtain dropped on it. Few officers read the plan or were aware it existed. I have never met anyone who ever heard of it.

Did supporters of the Morgenthau Plan, which would have reduced Germany to an agricultural society, combine with the Russians in blocking implementation of Rankin, and seek Germany's destruction via the policy of unconditional surrender? Did Harold "Kim" Philby, a high ranking member of British intelligence, who turned out to

be a Russian spy, safeguard the Kremlin's future interest in Germany?

When the planning concluded Ives and I were invited by the British Admiral in command at Portsmouth to have lunch with him in Admiral Nelson's cabin aboard "Victory", Nelson's flagship in the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar. I felt honored by the occasion.

QUIBERON BAY - In planning for Overlord, it was assumed that our Army would need additional ports but some of them were too small and a grand scheme for a military port of entry in Quiberon Bay was planned. However, it was not necessary after successive German defeats on the Beaches, the breakthrough at Avranches, and culminating in the Falaise pocket.

The Normandy planning, for all intent and purposes, was completed about the end of January 1944. Then I was ordered by Admiral John Wilkes, USN, the future Commander of U.S. Navy Bases and Ports, France, to organize, train, and command a United States Navy reconnaissance unit to enter Cherbourg with our Army in order to make an initial report to our Navy of the Port damage by the Germans, obtain information on the mine fields in the harbor and establish a United States Navy Headquarters.

I arrived Base 2, Roseneath, Scotland in April 1944 and selected 52 men from 300 volunteers, all I was allowed by the Army. At my request 10 officers and men from the 28th Infantry Division were provided to train us in reconnaissance operations from 0600 to 2200 daily, six days a week. The live ammunition course was the only one omitted. Most of the training was in the Loch Lomond area. Base 2 provided logistic support and training facilities. I ran a tight ship. The tougher the training would make it easier to solve future situations.

Arriving in southern England I reported to Admiral Don Moon, USN, in command of Assault Force "U", Utah Beach and then to General Lawton J. Collins, 7th Corps, U.S. Army at Breamore. I told him I was going to carry out the reconnaissance of Cherbourg for the Navy. Collins ordered me to land over Beach Utah on D+4 because he planned to capture Cherbourg D+20 instead of D+6. More German Divisions had arrived Normandy. I was to report to his headquarters later in Normandy and ordered not to carry written orders, operational plans, no diary, and no cameras. In my book Collins was one of our excellent, outstanding Generals. With all his responsibilities he gave me at least thirty minutes of his time and had a staff member show me a wall map of the German Forces in Normandy.

In the marshaling area I briefed my outfit for the first time on their mission and objective - Cherbourg. Then we waterproofed our vehicles and shifted into wax impregnated outer garments for defense against possible gas attack. We were in these clothes until after Cherbourg was captured. We got soaking wet going over the beach. As a result, it was like walking around in a steam bath all day when the weather was warm but in an ice pack at night or when the weather was cloudy and cold, which it was most of the time.

The James A. Farwell, a Liberty Ship, carried us and about 500 others to Utah Beach, where we landed 9 June at LaMadeleine. The Germans were shelling the area. While assembling near St. Marie Du Mont a German air raid bombed us with anti-personnel bombs. The pellets went through our jeep tire rims. We had six men wounded. Four were evacuated to England. We reported to the 7th Corps near St. Mere Eglise and went into Cherbourg with the 79th Division by going over the top of heavily fortified Fort Du Roule about 6 A.M. 26 June. Then we were in the street fighting until 1900 when we reached the water front. Then I sent my first message to the Navy chain of command on what we could see at the time of the damage done by the Germans.

I was the Senior Officer Present for the U.S. Navy in Cherbourg from 26 June to 29 June when I was relieved by Captain Ives.

The German General, Karl Von Schlieben, and Admiral, Theodor Krancke, in command at Cherbourg surrendered only themselves and their staffs. German pockets of resistance continued. The last fort did not surrender until 29 June. Cherbourg was not a safe city until 1 July 1944.

With a heavily armed unit, I cleaned out the last resistance in the Cherbourg Arsenal Area by sheer fire power with sub-thompson machine guns, hand grenades and bazookas, and took hundreds of prisoners; then captured Fort Du Homet and liberated 52 American Paratroopers who were prisoners in the Fort; established a U.S. Navy Headquarters, and interrogated free French, slave laborers, and German prisoners to get information on the German mine fields in the harbor. This information was plotted on a harbor chart and sailed by small boat out to our mine sweepers outside the harbor.

Admiral John Wilkes, USN, Commander of U.S. Ports and Bases, France arrived with his staff 15 July 1944. I briefed him in detail on the harbor and city.

I was then assigned to Assistant Port Director under Commodore Barton from 15 July to 2 August, at which time I was ordered to carry out the reconnaissance of Brittany.

Captain Norman Ives had been ordered to carry out the reconnaissance of Brittany. On 2 August his command was ambushed by about 600 Germans. Ives was killed with 16 men and a large number wounded. The survivors were rescued by the Army.

On 2 August I was directed to re-assemble my original reconnaissance party, and augmented by an additional 350 men, ordered to carry out the reconnaissance of Brittany ports, including Brest. We

departed Cherbourg 6 August. I reported to General Troy H. Middleton, 8th Corps, of General George Patton's Third Army near St. Malo, Brittany and entered St. Malo the day it was captured, then went on to Roscoff, Morlaix, and Carantec, keeping Admiral Wilkes informed.

I was outside Brest when ordered 8 September to report to the CG, First Canadian Army and carry out the reconnaissance of LeHavre. I moved 400 men with their vehicles and equipment from near Brest to Cerlangue, just east of LeHavre in 48 hours. The British bombed the port for about two hours while infantry and tanks attacked, on 10 September, LeHavre surrendered 12 September, thousands of Frenchmen were killed, many in air raid shelters. The Port was devastated. It was all rubble. The streets could not be located. The French blamed the Americans because we were going to operate the Port. Admiral Wilkes was informed about the mine fields, possible channels and that the Germans had systematically destroyed the port.

On 17 September 1944 I was relieved as Senior Officer present for the United States Navy by Captain S. F. Arnold, USN.

By this time the chest condition which had bothered me since July became more aggravated. Previously, I had been hospitalized in an Army Hospital in London for two weeks in December 1943 with viral pneumonia in both lungs.

Arriving Cherbourg I was hospitalized for a week; then flown to London as a single passenger in a small Army plane.

I returned to the States in October 1944 on orders from the Commandant of the Coast Guard, even though COMNAVEU had already anticipated I would be in a planning section about assigning our Navy's landing craft for crossing the Rhine River in Germany.

My original Task Unit suffered twenty-five percent casualties; three killed, ten wounded. Our food rations, supplies, and equipment came from Army Units to which we were attached.

Normandy was a blood bath. Cherbourg was a slaughter house. We should always remember the remark of General Sir Frederick Morgan, one of the Neptune planners: "It was going to be a close run thing, a damned close run thing - the closest run thing you ever saw in your life." And it was!

Persons interested in more details about my tour of duty should read my publication in the Caroline County Public Library, Denton, Maryland: "Little Known Facts of a Well Known War: Beach Utah to Cherbourg, Brest, LeHavre".

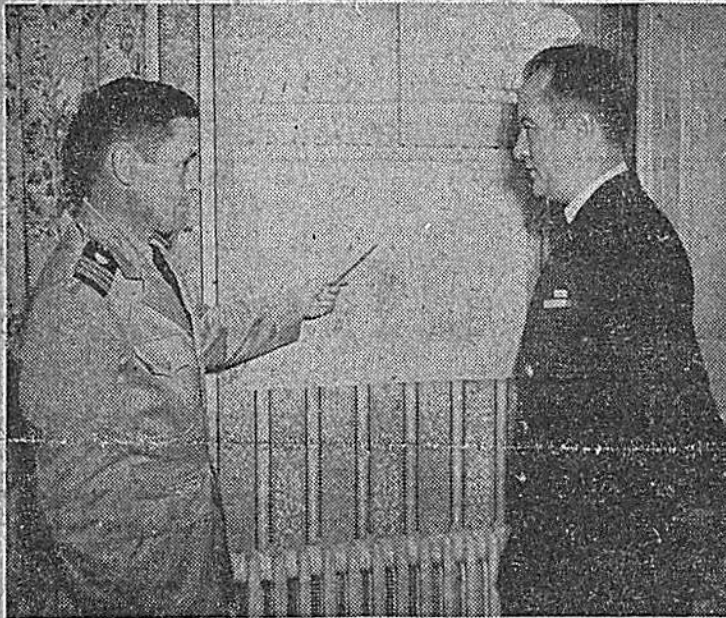
I had several interesting experiences with the French people. Enroute to Cherbourg, I returned to our bivouac near St. Mere Eglise one morning to find three Frenchmen complaining that American Paratroopers had killed some of their sheep for food. Each Frenchman had three German horses on halters. The German Army had thousands of horses in Normandy which were branded on the neck or flank. I told the Frenchmen to take their complaints to our Military Government Unit at Utah Beach. However, as they started to leave I told them to leave the horses with us, because they were German property and all such property now belonged to the United States. They talked among themselves for a minute, then asked me to forget about the horses and they would forget about the sheep.

If you face Napoleon's Statue in Place Napoleon, Cherbourg and point left you will see a waterfront street on which I took over all the building for our U.S. Navy Headquarters. A Frenchman and his wife lived on the ground floor of one of the buildings where he repaired German cars and trucks. He was told to leave and why. Forty-eight hours later he was still there and refused to leave and belligerently remonstrated with us. He was accused of being a collaborator

because he had worked for the Germans. He was ejected with his household goods and his screaming wife. Forty-eight hours later I received a request from one of our Military Government Representatives to find him a large work space in Cherbourg so he could still repair cars. I paid no attention to this request. The French were using cars that had not been run for years. They were breaking down and blocking roads. Our Army lifted them off the roads and put them in adjacent fields.

Another officer and I were driving into LeHavre about daylight from my headquarters when we met an old man with a sack slung over his shoulder. We stopped and said, "Good morning grandpere." He came over to the jeep and said, "You destroy my home, my business, my city. You kill my family, my friends and my people - and you say, 'Good morning' to me." With that, he spat on the jeep and trudged off.

Comdr. Walsh at Cherbourg



(Official U. S. C. G. Photo)

Comdr. Quentin R. Walsh, U. S. C. G., of Groton, left, points out harbor installations at Cherbourg to Capt. A. C. Richmond, senior coast guard officer in London and formerly basketball coach at the Coast Guard academy, after he led a small naval reconnaissance party from the water side of Cherbourg before its capture. Commander Walsh with a Seabee lieutenant caused the surrender of three forts at Cherbourg, capturing 400 Nazis and releasing 50 American paratroopers. He is now operations officer at Cherbourg. Captain Richmond was basketball coach at the academy in 1926-27-28.