

HMCS ALGONQUIN - D - DAY DIARY



Excerpts from the
personal diary of
C o m m a n d e r
D e s m o n d P i e r s,
R C N .



JUNO BEACH LANDINGS AS SEEN FROM HMCS ALGONQUIN, TUESDAY, JUNE 6, 1944

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HMCS Algonquin Lt. Commander Piers with Lt. Gen. H.D.G. Crerar,
Commander of the 1st Canadian Army and staff officers.



HMCS Algonquin, 1944.



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D-Day. Tuesday, 6th June, 1944.

Everything proceeded according to plan on the voyage across the channel. The weather was blustery, and very uncomfortable for the soldiers in the small landing craft. I hope that our Canadian seasick pills were a help. ALGONQUIN had a very easy ride over – right astern of the headquarters ship HMS HILARY. We were acting as an escort in case of an enemy attack by destroyers or E-boats. Such an attack was most unlikely, but there was always a possibility. The only real and present menace was from mines. The gallant sweepers had cleared the channel hours before, but the danger comes from making contact with floating mines that had drifted into the swept channel by the strong tide. We had two such scares. A rapid alteration of course and speed on each occasion put us clear just in time.

It was still dark at about 0400 on D-Day, Tuesday, 6th June, when things began to happen. Our force was about 35 miles from the coast of Normandy. Flares, rockets and gunfire began to light up the sky from inshore. Probably the paratroops had landed, and the RAF were doing some night bombing. Anyway, it was apparent to us that the element of surprise had been lost, and that we could expect a very hot reception from the shore batteries when we got closer in. Hands were closed up at Action Stations and the ship prepared for battle. It was getting close! Up in the sky a big full moon was smiling down between scudding clouds when it got the chance in the clear patches.

About 0500, the eastern sky began to brighten into daylight. First thing we knew, there was the coast of Normandy, right in front of us, about ten miles away. To our surprise all was now quiet ashore. Shortly after this, the Cruisers opened up on the big shore batteries, using aircraft to spot the fall

of shot. The assault had now begun. At 0600 we arrived at the lowering position, where the big ships stopped to lower their landing craft. At this point ALGONQUIN was detached from escort of the headquarters ship. We proceeded by ourselves, in towards the beaches to our bombardment position.

Our orders were not to open fire until 0700 unless the shore batteries were menacing the approaches. By this time there were hundreds of craft of every description within range, but to our surprise and comfort, hardly a shot was fired to oppose our assault. I began to wonder if we were in for a nasty surprise in the form of some new German secret weapon.

With guns trained, loaded and ready to fire on our pre-arranged target, a battery of two 75mm guns, the destroyers moved in as the spearhead of the assault to a distance of 3 miles. In terms of modern gunnery that was pretty close! Resistance was sporadic. Then we let loose. Our own target was in between some houses right on the beach. First we plastered the area with salvo after salvo of accurate broadsides. When there was no further reply from the 75 mm guns, we set about demolishing the houses along the waterfront which looked likely places for snipers nests. At this point “Chief” Johnny Lloyd came up from the Engine Room to see the fun. In his honour, he picked out a target that looked like a summer hotel, right on the beach. We blew it to smithereens! Pleased with the progress in the battle, “Chief” cheered us on, and then went back to tell the boys in the Engine Room how things were going!

Shortly after we opened fire, the RAF came in and bombed the beaches with a monstrous concentration of high explosives. We couldn't see the bombers because of the cloud, and this factor also affected adversely the accuracy of the bombing. At times the bombing smoke obliterated our target. This called for some choice invective from ‘Corky’

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Knight, the gunnery officer! One concentration of bombs landed in a forest in the rear of our target. When the smoke cleared there was no more forest, just a few shredded tree trunks.

The assault now proceeded absolutely according to plan. The Germans seemed incapable of opposing the landing until our forces got ashore. Nor was there any secret weapon to give us a nasty shock. The weather was not in our favour. A strong breeze was making things very difficult for the small landing craft. 'H' Hour (the time the landing craft were due to touch down on the beaches) was planned to coincide with low tide so that the troops could get to the beaches before the landing craft got fouled up on water obstacles. In this area the range of the tide is about 30 feet, almost as much as the Bay of Fundy. The tidal currents presented great difficulties. However all of these factors were taken into consideration in the original plan.

At 'H' Hour, 0745, we ceased fire, and the first flight of landing craft touched down on schedule. They carried units of the ROYAL ENGINEERS, who had the unpleasant task of clearing away beach obstacles while under concentrated enemy fire. ALGONQUIN was close enough inshore to watch it all in detail. Our direct bombardment was over, and our next job of indirect bombardment would not take place until our army observation officer got established ashore. So, during the lull in our own duties, we were interested spectators

of the historic events taking place right under our bows. It seemed incredible that we had come this far without a scratch.. The scene around us was indeed incredible also. Landing craft were now swarming ashore on



all beaches. Mighty bulldozers were ploughing up the masses of shore obstacles, racing against the incoming tide. Sappers were disposing of landmines. The German pillboxes and strong points which had withstood the bombardment were subjecting the shoreline to incessant fire. Buildings were ablaze, and also a few landing craft. Overhead the Spitfires and Thunderbolts roared defiance to the Luftwaffe. But the challenge was not accepted, and we enjoyed immunity from air attack. Things were going well. As it was just about 0800, I nipped down to my sea cabin and turned on the BBC news. It quoted a German report that the Invasion had begun, but as yet there was no official announcement by the Allies. So I returned to the bridge, to my ringside seat, and got Hardy to bring my breakfast.

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About an hour later, while we were still prowling around waiting for a target to be allocated, a beach craft came alongside and asked us to take some casualties from ashore. There were six, or rather five, as one was already dead. A mortar had landed right in their landing craft just as it hit the beach. They were Royal marine commandos. "Doc" Dixon had the ward room fully prepared for such cases. Four of the five survivors were very seriously wounded. Aided by the ship's first aid parties, "Doc" gave transfusions of plasma, and tended awful shrapnel lacerations. I chatted with one lad on arrival: he seemed all right, but the shock and loss of blood had not yet taken their toll. He died a few hours later, during our indirect bombardment. A second died during the night. We buried the three at sea after dark. The other three were on board for several days before we had a chance to transfer them to a hospital ship. These casualties made us realize how bitter the fighting was for the men on the beaches. We were indeed lucky to be afloat, especially after the initial assault.

ALGONQUIN waited for a call to fire until 1100. It was a battery of three 88mm guns, positioned two miles inland, and this battery was holding up the advance of our troops. In order to make our shooting more accurate, I moved the ship close inshore and anchored: this seemingly dangerous action was necessary because of the strong tide and the tremendous concentration of shipping in the vicinity. As we could not see our target, the firing had to be done from maps. The fall of shot was observed by the army officers ashore, and he told us by wireless where the shells were landing. The first salvo was close, the second closer and the third was reported as a hit. This was good shooting! A second and then a third group of 4-gun salvos were fired, and again every single one found the target with direct hits. That was 13 salvos out of 15. After that the army officer told us to

cease fire, as the battery had been demolished. He added a brief code, "very accurate". I only wish we could have observed the results ourselves. The Germans must have been very shaken, not being able to see where the shells were coming from.

For the rest of D-Day we just sat and watched and waited for more calls for fire, which never came. We kept in touch with our observation officer ashore, but the advance inland was so rapid that he was unable to get into a position to give us a target. However, this gave us a chance to revert to more or less normal condition aboard, and prepare full meals instead of just soup and sandwiches. As the bridgeheads ashore became firmly



Andy Irwin (second from right) loading guns on HMCS Algonquin. D-Day, June 6, 1944.

established, weird and wonderful things began to happen on the beaches. Masses of equipment arrived in incessant waves. Such important items such as jetties were soon under construction. During the day the weather improved and the wind moderated slightly. By evening the sky was quite clear. The full moon began to rise over the beaches on the eastern flank. It was about this time when the seaward horizon became black with aircraft. As they approached they could be identified as tow and glider planes, hundreds

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upon hundreds of them. It was a beautiful sight to watch. Most of the planes carried paratroops, spilling parachutes of all colours. As this huge armada approached the landing point, it was met with determined flak from German AA batteries inshore. We watched four huge four-motored planes come down to destruction, and cheered wildly as a fifth made a magnificent forced landing.

It took over an hour for all the gliders to arrive. They must have landed about 15,000 troops.

It had been an amazing day in every respect. And that is the story of D-Day as seen from ALGONQUIN.



June 6, 2014. Seventy years on, RCN Veteran Andy Irwin who served on HMCS Algonquin during the landings at Juno, meets with a member of La Regiment De La Chaudieres. It was this regiment that the Algonquin gunners had aided by destroying the German 88mm guns that were holding up the Chaudieres advance into Beny-Sur-Mer.

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