

BY J.K.EMMERSON, "Staff Reporter." **With the British Commandoes. Delayed :-**

---

[J. K. Emmerson is a Barnard Castle boy and son of Mr and Mrs J. T. Emmerson.]

I suppose you have seen our write up in the papers of June 22<sup>nd</sup>, especially Alan Moorehead's report on the Dairy Express, but for goodness sake don't worry about it because it didn't seem quite like that to me.

We are now allowed to discuss certain of our experiences within limits, so here goes for a brief account of my doings.

As you will probably have gathered from various accounts, which incidentally tell the story much better than I can, we were first of all sent to a camp where we spent 14 days in very close seclusion, during which time we didn't speak to any civilians, and only got out for an occasional march. The camps were very well run, there was a huge N.A.A.F.I. (but despite its size there were some lovely large queues) and a cinema tent giving three shows a day, changing the title of the show daily. It wasn't comfortable, but it was recreation, and so we whiled away the time playing cards and reading. I personally spent most of the time working, since although there were no training facilities to keep the troops occupied, there was quite a lot of work to be done issuing operation orders and amendments to them. Finally, we embarked in landing craft and put out to sea. It was rather a rough crossing,

and quite a few of us (self excepted) were sick. On the way over we were told the time and place we would beach, but it didn't seem real even then, although we had had long lectures on it, and were finally given the actual maps while onboard, so that we could see the real names of all the towns, and recognise it as Normandy.

So I settled down and had some tea. I made quite a good meal, after which I had a smoke and a chat on deck before going below fairly early and securing the most comfortable corner in Nt. 2 boat deck, where already there was hardly any room to sit down on account of loaded rucksacks and gear, etc. Before long I settled down to sleep. Early next morning we were rudely awakened (the few who did sleep) and told to eat our breakfast. I found I didn't want mine somehow or other, so I strolled out into the cold breeze on deck and watched the dawn break, giving me an ever-increasing horizon, enabling me to make out the invasion fleet. It didn't appear to me to be as big as I thought it should be, but then, we were just a small part of a small sector. As daylight broke the port and starboard gunners started calling out "Aircraft Red 45\* angle of sight 30," and so forth, to the skipper on the bridge.

They were all Allied planes mostly coming back from France where they had been strafing enemy strong points and neutralising gun batteries. Some may have been our air umbrella, but it didn't seem to be necessary to provide an umbrella with so many of our planes passing backwards and forwards. There were planes of all descriptions, but there seemed to be a preponderance of American Lightnings.

We passed comfortably close to minesweepers which had done such a magnificent job the night before, and we realised that the little red flags on the buoys were marking the shipping lane. Suddenly someone shouted, "Did you see that flash. They must be shelling." All eyes were turned to the horizon, and sure enough small pin-points of light were visible in the brightening, but still cold grey dawn (at sea the dawn is nearly always very grey and very cold, and this was no exception).

As we drew nearer the noise of the explosions could be heard, and the matlots immediately stated that they were naval guns. By this time the whole horizon was twinkling, and the thunder of the guns became louder and more insistent. It was like an autumn electric storm, with thunder and lightning rumbling in the distance. Just as we were debating whether the dark smudge on the horizon was the French coast, we were ordered below.

There was silence below. I don't know whether it was cut to the rough sea or the shape of things to come, but even the gunfire was only a distant rumble. I settled down in my corner and tried to sleep. I had an idea that I would need most of my energy and all the sleep I could get.

At last the order came "Kits on," and we all dived for our rucksacks and equipment. There wasn't much room in the boat deck to swing a rucksack,

and the rolling of the boat didn't make it any easier. There were sharp oaths and grunts as we all tried to put our packs on at once, and the boat rolled us together, and then silence again. I expected this to be a long, tense wait, but it was short. I barely had time to check that my matches and cigarettes were waterproofed (I discovered later that they were not) before we beached.

We hit the beach with a sudden, grating jar. It sounded as though we had hit an underwater obstacle, and then we were heaving and struggling up the ladder on to the deck. Suddenly we saw the beaches and France spread out before us. The scene was impressive, but we were too pre-occupied to be able to take in more than a broad outline. We scrambled down the ramps and into the water. It was up to the waist and cold. As we were going off I heard someone say "We've been hit." (I discovered later that the starboard engine was on fire.)

To compensate for the weight of my rucksack, I had put an extra Mae West in the back pocket. Now I regretted it. Each wave that came in after me lifted me off my feet and threatened to overbalance me. We had one overpowering obsession, and that was to get off the beaches as soon as possible. We tried to run, but our heavy packs the soft sand and the weight of water in our clothes shackled us.

The din was terrific. We knew the Bosche was shelling, but we didn't know if it was accurate or serious, and there was a continuous staccato of rifle and machine-gun fire. Occasionally there were vivid orange flashes. There was a burning tank, and I remember wondering dully how so much metal could blaze so fiercely, sending up such a pall of black smoke. One or two ships were on fire in the water and destroyers and gun boats were blasting the Hun as fast as they could load.

I don't think it is possible to find adequate words to describe everything that happened on that beach; it was impossible to notice everything and the multitude of noises were unintelligible.

I followed a line of dripping men carrying rucksacks and wearing green berets like myself (we had enough to carry without wearing tin hats) until we came to a gap in the wire where the mines were being cleared. Brigadier The Lord Lovat was standing there sorting us out. He was cool as the proverbial cucumber, and except for his wet clothes, might have been standing in Piccadilly Circus.

I stepped to one side and lay down to await my turn (it was safer lying down). I then discovered that this part hadn't been cleared of mines, but as I was still intact I stayed there until I could get through. The next pause was at some beach houses; they were blasted, but gave us cover against an enemy machine gun until a tank mopped him up.

We then crossed the road and moved along a ditch. There was a man lying in the ditch smoking a cigarette. His left shoulder was shattered, but he wasn't complaining, just waiting to be picked up by the Beach Medical Organisation (they did miraculous work). After the ditch, we struck off across a marsh about one foot deep. I was a quarter of the way across when the enemy started to mortar us. Every time we heard a bomb coming close we fell full length in the slime, but the ground was too soft for them to do much damage. The marsh had three nasty little gullies running across it. They looked harmless enough on the surface, but they seemed to have no bottom, and we got thoroughly smeared in black, stinking slime. A German multiple mortar (the Sobbing Sisters) shook us up (if that was possible). When we

were halfway across another one opened up, but we got it after the first salvo, thank goodness.

After a while we reached the shelter of a cornfield surrounded by fairly high hedges. The Atlantic Wall had been pierced; we were through the beach defences and in open country with room to manoeuvre. The cornfield was not under fire, and we lay down waiting for the rest of the boys to come up so that we could form up in our respective sections. Meantime, the tanks went forward and knocked out a concrete machine gun nest.

The rest of the trip across country was more or less uneventful. Snipers were the main trouble. For the most part we ignored them, as we pushed on to link up with the forces holding the bridges.

We passed through two small villages on the way, still containing a few demoralised Germans too scared to come out. The villagers gave us a sober welcome; some with their homes in ruins just stood and stared; some had tears in their eyes. Tears of joy mostly. There was a tense atmosphere of relief, cries of "Vive la France" from our ranks and a response of "Vive la Angleterre." One woman even produced a camera and took our photographs. I wondered whether it would be possible to buy films, or whether she had saved it for some special occasion; but not for long; we were working to time schedule and it was hard work carrying the packs. But at last, despite snipers, we arrived at the bridges and scuttled across. They were still under machine gun fire, and I discovered to my surprise that our section had collected four prisoners somehow. We took them along until we met a batch on the way back, so we handed them over, glad to get rid of them.

The Brigadier selected his headquarters and we set to work to dig in with the picks and shovels we carried. I never did like digging very much, but I did that night, and then at last we had something to eat.

There followed at dusk the most impressive sight I have ever witnessed. Some glider-borne troops came down in the fields around us, towed by 4-engined bombers, they came over low, slipped their cables, circled the fields, and then came in, some skidding sideways and coming to rest in hedges, others losing their wing tips on the anti air landing stakes. And yet all got down safely. One pushed its nose over the wall of the orchard where we were digging in. (See photos in the daily papers dated 10 June, with myself in the foreground.).

We were glad to see these men arrive, as the Hun were staging a counter-attack and we were rather tired. I regret that my camera was not available then, I was cautious; it was double waterproofed in my pack, and I hadn't had time to dig it out.

For the time being at any rate, the story must finish here, and looking back I wouldn't have missed it for anything.



Lance corporal Ken pictured in his tent (probably shared) somewhere in France, partially obscured by a bale of hay - an impromptu seat. Note the rucksacks (unlikely to be all his), the bicycle against the tree