

Moving from one World War to the next, Cachalot and author/maritime researcher Roy Martin brings us, on the 70 th anniversary of the D-Day landings, these accounts of the Merchant Navy's involvement in them, and

How the Press saw it

A number of newspaper correspondents joined the merchant ships for the Normandy landings; this was probably the only time in any war that the Merchant Navy had its own correspondents. The Ministry of Information hand-out that they were given said that there were 1,000 merchant ships manned by 50,000 men, all volunteers.

Though the figures have obviously been rounded, there were over 850 merchant ships from Europe, mostly British; and another 200 or so from the USA. In addition some of the requisitioned ships still had part MN crews. The merchantmen all signed 'V' articles, which required them to transfer between ships as needed, or work ashore. Their bonus was 200 cigarettes per week – valuable currency!

The first of the merchant ships were at their lowering positions off all five beaches at dawn on D-Day. There were 72 of these LSIs (Landing Ship Infantry), half of them manned by the British Merchant Navy. The Royal Navy and the American forces provided the other half between them.

Edmund Townshend, the correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, was given blue battledress, with a war correspondent's shoulder tabs and a big MN badge on the chest. 'I don't envy you, old man,' said the news editor. On D-Day he sailed from the Thames aboard the British Liberty *Sampep*.

Townshend was a very experienced war correspondent, but when he returned on Sunday 11 June he wrote:

Just back in port from the most dramatic and exhilarating voyage of my life, in my eight days afloat as one of the first war correspondents accredited to the Merchant Navy I have been given an insight into the comradeship, courage and unfailing good humour of this brotherhood of the sea. I shared with them the hazards of war.

On the morning of D-Day in the Strait of Dover, he watched the ship astern (*Sambut*) take a direct hit, 130 troops and six crew members lost their lives. Later, in another ship, which was loaded with 800 tons of high-explosive ammunition, the chief officer observed: 'One enemy shell into this lot and you won't know where to look for your typewriter.' *Sampep* carried six hundred troops, as did most of the Liberties:

More than 30 different units of all three services were represented among the men we took to France. All were supremely confident ... Hard-bitten desert fighters from the Eighth Army and Dunkirk survivors.

He concluded:

Britain's Merchant Navy is living to-day its proudest hour. At last the chance has come for the men of the merchant ships to hit back. To-day the men are loading up again with fresh supplies of war material for their shuttle service to the armies in the field.

Peter Duffield, the *'Evening Standard Merchant Navy Reporter'* joined what may have been the trooper *Neuralia* in the London Docks.

On 7 June *The Times 'Special Correspondent with the Merchant Navy'* wrote:

MERCHANT NAVY'S PART IN CHANNEL CROSSING COMPLEXITY OF PREPARATION AND LOADING

Proudly prominent among the banners borne by the armada of liberation was the Red Ensign of the Merchant Navy, whose high duty it was to carry the allied fighting men and their machines to the last decisive battle-fronts. In doing so the Merchant Navy has redeemed a promise made as its ships cast off from Dunkirk and Narvik, Greece and Crete. ... With our own Merchant Navy went the merchant ships and seamen of our allies.

This civilian non-combatant service has had a glorious and costly acquaintance with all the hottest sectors in this world-wide war. It has shared set backs and triumphs.



Empire Lance was one of a class of thirteen infantry landing ships, based on C1 Victory ships, built in the USA for the Ministry of War Transport. They were managed by liner companies.

Purpose built, their histories over a short period were as complicated as their designations. For instance: this type C-1-S-AY1 LSI(L) was laid down in Wilmington as the *Cape Pine* and completed as *Empire Lance* in 1943. In 1945 she became *HMS Hugo* but in the same year reverted back to the MoWT and *Empire Lance*. Returned to the US Maritime Commission in 1949 as the *Cape Pine*, she was finally scrapped in Baltimore in 1966 as the *Imperial Lance*.

The balance of the MN and RN LSIs were mostly railway and other packets modified to carry LCAs.

He goes on to describe 'Previous Offensives', continuing:

It was then that the Merchant Navy made its long-looked-for return to Europe; it carried the soldiers to Sicily and later to Italy. Now it has carried them to Hitler's 'western fortress.'

Years of planning and preparation, invention, and work preceded the sailing of this host of merchant ships. with ships specially designed for this greatest amphibious operation of all. These last ships were designed in the Sea Transport Division of the Ministry of War Transport and built in California. (*he refers to a class of thirteen of the Infantry Landing Ships, like the "Empire Lance".*)

Besides special ships, special equipment had to be invented, such as the davits holding tiers of landing craft in the big troop-carrying ships. Hundreds of ships had to be specially fitted for the job. And then, before the Sea Transport Division of the Ministry of War Transport could go ahead with its master plan, details of all the ships to be engaged – the position of obstructions, space between decks, and so on – had to be collected and listed.

The loading plans of all the ships were prepared at a secret war-room in London: at the ports ship's officers cooperated and made improvements where possible. The technical men in the Ministry of War Transport and the Movements Directorate – many of them normally with well-known shipping lines.

He goes on to describe tactical loading at some length and then writes several paragraphs about the part played by the coasters; 'V' articles and the 26,000 lives so far lost while serving on ships of the British Merchant Navy.

On a coaster *The Daily Mirror* man John Hogan wrote on 7 June 1944:

GREAT ARMADA STRETCHED OVER THE HORIZON

The guns have finally been checked, and the ship's clocks on board synchronised. Everything is now ready for the signal to hoist anchor and sail with our cargo of men, ammunition, petrol and mines.

Months of preparations have ended. Invasion talk, gossip and speculation are no more. Zero hour has come. For twenty four hours we have known that we will sail soon.

Imagine the biggest lake you know plastered with autumn leaves and you have a picture of what I can see from the salt sprayed bridge of our ship. Everywhere on the sea are steel ships. You can't get away from them, can't look anywhere without seeing long lines of troop ships, supply vessels, assault craft and warships – stretching away to faint blobs on the horizon.

Hundreds of ships ride at anchor in our convoy. Big ones that carried passengers, small ones that used to be grimed with coal dust, and strange ones that will race to the beachheads loaded with Commandos, tanks, bulldozers. I sailed for hours and still had miles to go before the leading vessel of this gigantic convoy came up within sight.

Today has been just another day on board this coaster, if you overlook the dozens of soldiers who swarm over the decks and live in a huge canvas tent slung on deck. Brown tents are to be seen everywhere. Sleek warships are alongside us, and mine-sweepers stretch out on the port side.

He goes on to talk about two members of the crew and their experiences evacuating troops from Dunkirk. Then on 12 June he wrote:

The men I sailed with to a Normandy beachhead are back in port again – enjoying a brief spell of shore leave before weighing anchor once more – washed and shaved for the first time in a week. In the little town where we celebrated our return and toasted the boys we left on the sandy beach, no one noticed the Merchant Navy men ... the men who worked in flannels and vests under dive-bombing attacks and snipers' bullets.

They drank their beer unheeded in a bar crowded with civilians who talked of only one thing – the invasion. And when the evening ended they returned to their ship – to find her already loaded with hundreds of tons of bombs, shells and ammunition and awaiting orders to sail.

This is the life of the Merchant Navy in this huge Combined Operation. Protected only by light anti-aircraft guns, they are the most cheerful crowd in danger. They up their tin hats and swear steadily at the *Me 109s* and *Ju 88s*, and then grin as the bombs explode harmlessly in the 'suds' (?). That happened twenty five times one night while I was with them, and in the morning they had forgotten that ordeal to the extent that they never mentioned it. Such coolness is typical of the Merchant Navy.

On the way over, in between the watches they played Nine-Card brag on the mess-room table, oblivious to the roar of fighters and bombers above. Only when the kitty of 25s (*Shillings*) – won by the Major who landed on the beach next morning – was cleared did they think of the picnic ahead. And then, when we did drop anchor among the dozens of other vessels, they were disappointed by the lack of 'excitement.'

While we lay offshore a big landing-barge passed us, packed with about two to three hundred squatting Germans, including three generals with their suitcases already packed. On the beach French women were helping with the wounded. They had put on white frocks with red crosses. Two newcomers joined us during that first afternoon – two glider-pilots who obeyed orders to return to the beach immediately after landing.

He noted that the youngest member of the ship's crew was seventeen year old Charlie Brooker, who had hitch-hiked from Barnsley to Hull with only (5?) shillings in his pocket, and had a 'rare do' explaining things to his mother. Charlie joined the Merchant Navy just in time for D-Day. ...

Now the men I lived with for a week – eating, sleeping and bomb-ducking on hundreds of tons of petrol and ammunition – are sailing for the beachhead again, with their neat pin-stripped suits with the silver M.N. badges stowed away. They are wearing their patched flannels again – the battle dress of the Merchant Navy.

On 12 June there is a piece written by a correspondent describing what Fred Skinner, a Daily Sketch photographer, had told him of his trip on 'the first ammunition ship to reach the beachhead':

'AMMO' SHIP TAKES HER OWN DOCKERS

There were 18 coasters in our party. We had a load of 5,000 (?) tons of ammunition. The normal crew was nine, but we had 80 people on board, including 65 dockers, average age 35, some over 50. Tents were erected for them on the hatches, but the men took them down and went to sleep on the ammunition with cases of T.N.T. as pillows.

The sea was so rough that it looked as though the ammunition couldn't be landed. Then a call came through from the gun post 'unless we get that ammo this might be another Dunkirk. You should have seen those dockers rip into it. They worked for 30 hours with only one hours break and got all the stuff ashore.

The aft gunner shot down an F.W. 109 fighter-bomber, but Tom Humpreys, the master, would not allow the ship to claim it. 'You'll get me into trouble' he stormed ' opening fire before the Navy has its crack.'

...after a bomb dropped near the ship and doused all the lights. The men, who were playing cards below, scrambled on deck to find out what was up. After the lights were got going again it was discovered that someone had swiped the 'kitty.'

They reckoned that this was the nearest they came to 'a real set-to.'



Many of the coasters were beached and discharged by DUKWs and Rhino ferries when the tide came in. These three sitting ducks were US built N3 'Jeeps' under the Red Ensign.

In *The Daily Sketch* on 7 June 1944, C W Kingdon wrote:

The vast panorama of ships which fills the roadsteads here – one of our finest natural harbours – knocks the most impressive peacetime Naval Review into a cocked hat. I have seen something of the supremely important part that the Merchant Navy is going to play, and particularly that of the coasting craft which will be among the first to follow the assault troops to the invasion beaches.

Three of the first ships I saw were all well known peace-time packets, now packed with troops and carrying “ducks” slung from the davits.

Altogether there are well over 4,000 ships of all kinds ... (*including*) troop ships with two rows of “ducks” slung one above the other on the same set of davits.

We have our sailing orders and time and shall soon be off in company with a host of similar craft and protecting warships to another part of the roadstead to pick up half-a-hundred troops who will camp on the fore hatch.

The ship's holds are packed with a general cargo of food, stores and spares for the troops, aircraft and fire services. There are hundreds of bicycles and also a prime selection of beer, rum, chocolates and tobacco.

In the same paper A D Divine, who may have been the one who was said to have been on the merchant LSI *Empire Spearhead*, wrote on 8 June:

But in a measure the journey home has made a deeper impression on my mind even than the hard moments of the landing....At two o'clock we turned into the swept channel that led to England. By that time there must have been a hundred of us L.S.Is of one type and another and now coming up astern of us, faster than ourselves, the personnel ships began.

He goes on to list some of the liners and flags he has seen, then:

As one convoy passed us we could see the leading ships of the next coming over the horizon. The sheer size of it all was almost too great for the eye, too heavy for the imagination. There has never been anything like this in history: there are not words enough to describe its complexity, not adjectives enough to summon up for those who were not there its staggering immensity.

Another cutting, this time from *The Daily Mail*, says:

TUG JOINED INVASION BY ACCIDENT

WITH THE ALLIED INVASION FORCES, FRIDAY.

Nobody planned it that way, but the tiny British tug was sent to France on D-day and was the only one there – a dirty, gunless little harbour ragamuffin amid the fleet of invasion giants.

On the eve of the assault, a landing craft loaded with ammunition had engine trouble just outside the harbour. H.M. (*sic*) tug *Empire Folk* was sent out to help. The skipper Arthur Hall, 41-years-old north-country-man, had no idea the invasion was on when he got the call on Monday night (5 June).

He pulled alongside the helpless vessel and said: "we are going to take you back to port." back came the reply "You are going to take us to France." ... Hall thought his leg was being pulled. "But pretty soon," he said "the cruiser *Scylla* pulled up and Admiral Sir Philip Vian told us to take the L.C.T. in tow and head for France."

"The commanding officer of the landing craft had to come aboard, because we didn't know the way through the mine-swept channels." "We didn't know it was an ammunition ship, either, until he came aboard." "No," put in the first mate Francis West, "If we had, we would have given her a longer tow-line."- *A.P.*

With the help of contacts on the WW2 Talk Forum and elsewhere, the story has been pieced together. The *LCT 413* suffered engine failure off the Nab tower and was towed to Normandy by the MOWT tug *Empire Folk*.

Empire Folk was one of several tugs and salvage vessels stationed off Spithead and other assembly areas off the south coast. This small ship had been built in Doncaster in 1942, as a river and estuary tug. She was less than one hundred feet long and her beam was restricted by the width of the lock between the shipyard and the river, making her less suitable for sea work. Two of her sisters also made it to France, one arriving on 8 June and the other on the 10th.