Southampton and the D-Day Landings

Cachalot Roy Martin attempts to set the record straight, yet again, with regard to Southampton and the British Merchant Navy's contribution to D-Day and Operation Overlord.

With the present coverage of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the D-Day landings, you could be forgiven for gaining the impression that Portsmouth was the centre of all the activity; and that the Royal Navy carried out the maritime side single-handedly. In fact more than twice as many troops and infantry landing ships sailed from Southampton; and more than half of the infantry landing ships from all ports were British merchant ships, with civilian crews.

Rather the same rewrite of history was achieved with the so-called 'miracle of Dunkirk'. Over 90,000 of the 309,739 British (198,309) and French troops were saved by unacknowledged merchant ships. When that was over around 130,000 British servicemen were still in France. All but 20,000 and about 30,000 members of the Second BEF, were rescued from the Breton Peninsular, again by merchant ships. Those from Cherbourg and St Malo landed at Southampton and were hurriedly moved to camps in other parts of the country, as the public had been told that 'every last man' had been saved from Dunkirk. The Second BEF had only been in France for a few days; so wits in Southampton said that BEF stood for 'Back every Friday.'

Most of the ships went on to embark Polish and Czech troops and civilians; plus many British people, from other parts of France, and beyond. The bulk of the troops were landed at Plymouth, while civilians went to Falmouth.

After this Southampton Docks were closed to all but coastal traffic, mostly colliers for the power station, gas works and domestic coal; plus tankers? Many of the pilots were transferred elsewhere; some as far north as Scapa Flow and the convoy assembly anchorage at Loch Ewe. Thus Southampton and southern Hampshire became the obvious place to centre the British and Canadian assault troops.

When the Allies began planning the Landings the Admiralty assured them that they would handle the marine side; they appointed the experienced Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, who had planned the naval side of the North African and Italian landings.

Frederick Leathers had been made the Minister of War Transport in 1941, when he was made a peer. He assembled a formidable collection of shipping men, who from then on controlled every aspect of commercial shipping. For the only time in its history, the Merchant Navy was controlled by a unified organisation at the heart of government. It fell to the MOWT to organise every detail of the mercantile side of Operation Neptune, to meet Admiral Ramsay's requirements.

As at December 1943, the plan envisaged no US naval forces being involved in Neptune; but, at about that time, Ramsay advised the Admiralty that he would require a total of 467 HM ships for the operation; plus almost 150 minesweepers. The Admiralty were shocked!

Then General Montgomery took command of the British Army component of Overlord. On examining the plans Montgomery decided that the three divisional landing would result in the British and Canadians fighting on too narrow a front; so he demanded two more divisions. This two-thirds increase threw an even greater burden on the ANCXF. It not only affected the number of naval ships and landing craft that would be required, it also meant a need for a proportional increase in the already staggering total of merchant ships to achieve the necessary build-up. Ramsay knew, as did Montgomery, that there was no point in landing an invasion force unless you could ensure the immediate flow of supplies that only the merchantmen could bring.

To stand some chance of meeting the new demands, D-Day was to be postponed by a month until 5 June and the Admiralty laid-up several capital ships. At this point that they sought the help of the United States Navy, the US Merchant Marine and the British Merchant Navy. The American component of Operation Neptune became the responsibility of Rear-Admiral Alan Goodrich Kirk, USN.

Even by June there would be insufficient merchant ships to carry the vehicles required for the initial assault. Each Liberty sized ship could carry 120 lorries and 480 troops; twelve British Mk III landing craft would be required to equal this.

Montgomery had to agree that the number of lorries could be reduced from 3,200 to 2,500 per division. Even this meant shipping nearly 3,000 more of these space hungry beasts, together with drivers, mechanics and petrol and spares. The General also had to accept a reduction in the number of landing craft that were to have been modified as gunships, so that they could carry some of the extra vehicles.

There was not only a shortage of ships and landing craft; there was an even greater shortage of tugs to move the two Mulberry harbours. Many of the sections for these pre-fabricated harbours were constructed in and around Southampton and then 'parked' near Selsey and Dungeness.

Fortunately the merchant service had risen to the occasion and over 32,000 men, and at least one woman, had volunteered for the task. This was in addition to the many already serving on specialized units such as tugs and salvage vessels. A press release at the time of the invasion says that 50,000 manned one thousand ships. Their bonus was an issue of 200 cigarettes per week.

Meanwhile the Admiralty continued to pressure the Admiral to reduce his naval requirements; which, fortunately for the success of the mission, he refused to do. He put his faith in the willingness of the United States to participate; he was not disappointed. That said the British Royal and Merchant Navies still provided more than three quarters of the eventual fleet. The total combined Royal Naval contribution had now increased from 467 to 702 warships and the number of minesweepers had doubled. The Merchant Navies contributed over 850 ships.

Demands for equipment and supplies had to be met, without affecting the war effort elsewhere, on land, sea and air. Food still needed to be imported and distributed; fuel supplies, mostly coal, were maintained. Labour had to be directed to where it was

required. Areas of the country and coast had to be cleared by evacuating their populations so that training could take place and temporary embarkation points established. All this, and much more, was achieved without computers; though Bletchley Park had the use of the GPO built Colossus One computer: the improved version, Colossus Two, came into operation just in time for the landings. The very existence of the world's first electronic computer was a closely guarded secret and its use confined to decoding high-level enemy signal traffic.

There could be no question of having all of the troops and supplies close to their loading site; to do so would have caused bottlenecks and left the concentrations even more vulnerable to attack by the enemy. There was also the problem of alerting the German reconnaissance aircraft. So troops and supplies were hidden as much as possible, often far from the loading ports until needed. These 'dumps' were all over southern England, as much as sixty miles inland, and troops and their vehicles were hidden in woods and on common land. There is a photograph that appears to show US troops in Upper Hill Lane, it is not clear why they were in Southampton.

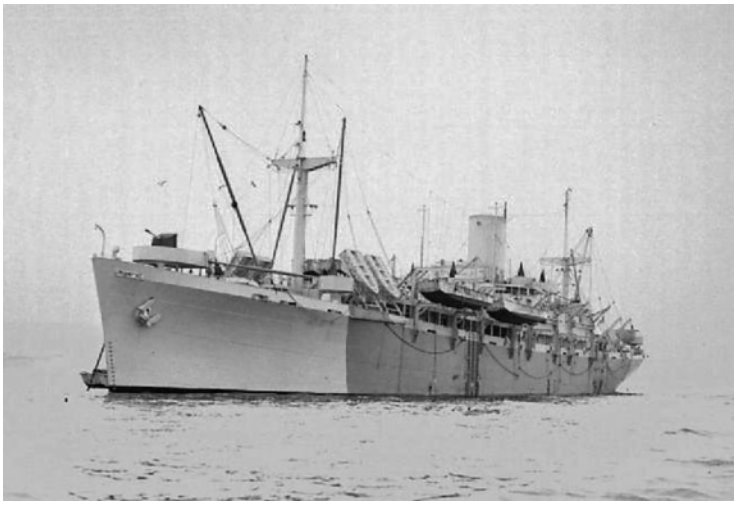
Similarly, too many loaded ships lying at anchor would attract unwanted attention; but it was essential that sufficient materiel be preloaded to meet all the requirements of the assault phase. Almost 300 ships had been selected as Transport ships. Other cargoes included petrol, spares, and rations. These ships came, in equal numbers, from the Americans and the British. Bulk oil tankers were also employed to ship petrol and water.

The Green Howards boarding *Empire Lance* in Southampton.
Another LSI(L) can be seen, also embarking troops

The troops to land at Juno and Gold beaches were to board at Southampton, those for Sword were transported to an anchorage off Lee on Solent by two paddle steamers. Once loaded they went to designated anchorages in the Solent. The salvage ships assembled off Hillhead and tugs off Lee on Solent. One newspaper correspondents assigned to the Merchant Navy said that it 'knocked the most impressive peacetime Naval Review into a cocked hat.' The Americans for Omaha mostly embarked off Weymouth and Portland, those for Utah left from Devon ports.

Admiral Ramsay insisted on three principles: The most immediate was to land the maximum military force and the maximum amount of stores and equipment in the first three days. The next was the 'Build-up' after D+3, with a regular schedule of daily convoys from each of the loading ports, avoiding alternating peaks and troughs in the arrival of materiel. The third concerned the operation of the various classes of landing craft; where possible these were to use the same port and berth for each visit. A repeating three-day timetable was to be kept to.

There were several classes of vessels employed as assault and troop ships. Out of the total of 77, the United States provided 20, the Royal Navy 16, plus 5 Headquarters ships; the balance remained with the Merchant Navy and the US Merchant Marine. The 40 British merchant vessels came from several sources. Many had been packet ships; the bulk of the packets were owned by the various railway companies. Two small ferries came from the United States and three had been British passenger liners. Another 13 had been built for the MOWT in America on Lend/Lease; these had been modified while under construction. A number of passenger liners, and two packets, acted as troop ships and many of the MT ships and coasters carried troops and their vehicles.



Empire Spearhead
Imperial War Museums collection

The 13 US built ships were modified Victory Ships, built in California and bareboat chartered to the Ministry of War Transport. All were Red Ensign ships at D-Day. They carried 1,310 troops. The ships were manned by a normal wartime complement of about 80. For example the *Empire Spearhead* (managed by Royal Mail Lines) had Captain Hill, four deck officers, plus a Purser; the fourth Officer was the Troop Officer. The three Radio Officers were sent on a signal course to a former school for young ladies; one remembers a plaque extolling them to "Be Modest and Preserve Our Honour". The famous Roedean Girls School, near Brighton, was taken over by the Admiralty in April 1941. Roedean claims to be the only girl's school to have an Old Boys Association – the Sparks would have been eligible!

The Boatswain was in charge of a deck department of 12. The Chief Engineer had 6 engineers and 2 electricians. There were 12 engine room ratings, plus a Winchman, a Plumber and a Storekeeper. The biggest increase was in the catering department, where the Chief Steward was responsible for 20 stewards, 7 cooks and 4 bakers.

In addition, a naval officer was the Senior Naval Officer Transport, SNOT! Other naval personnel included: four to man each assault craft, a number of signalmen, known in the navy as 'bunting tossers', plus medics. The merchant LSIs carried 18 DEMS gunners. On the LSIs the DEMS gunners were naval ratings; on other merchant ships they also came from a special section of the Royal Artillery, many ships having both soldiers and naval seamen at the same time. The ship's crew, particularly the Apprentices, when they were carried, helped with handling the ammunition.

For the Normandy landings, the merchant ships were provided with two Seaborne Observers from the Royal Observer Corps. These 796 men were all volunteers; they stood 'watch and watch', four hours on and four hours off - a tiring routine. They were civilians, but were given the rank of Petty Officer RN for the duration. Their job was to identify any over-flying aircraft as friend or foe and hopefully avoid any friendly fire incidents. An Air Staff Officer said that: in the majority of cases the fire has come from warships and not from the merchant ships. 'Indeed I personally have yet to hear a single pilot report that a merchant vessel had opened fire on him'.

One R/O said: It seems a contradiction in terms that merchant ships, manned by civilians, should play such a role. To steam into an enemy shore and land hundreds of invading troops can hardly be described as other than a hostile and aggressive act. Nine of the LSIs were transferred to the Navy between the end of June and September 1944, but they were never needed as landing ships again.

One photograph shows tank landing craft about eight abreast, all the way along the Southampton new docks.

Some of the smaller packets were adapted to transport casualties; with one exception they were British. Most discharged their patients at the Outer Dock at Southampton, the peacetime base for the Southern Railway packets to France and the Channel Islands. Outer Dock had the advantage that it had rail lines alongside the berths; it was also close to the Southampton Terminus Station. The dock is now Ocean Village. From Southampton casualties were dispersed all over the south of England, many to country houses that had been converted into hospitals.

All but one of the Hospital Carriers carried six landing craft adapted as 'water ambulances'. The Medical Staff were provided by the Royal Army Medical Corps and Queen Alexandra's Imperial Nursing Service, as it was then; or the United States Army, depending on which task force they served. In addition to transporting casualties, the ships were effectively floating Accident and Emergency centres.

The US war correspondent Martha Gellhorn was probably on the *Prague* and describes the operation. There is a slightly shortened version of her article online. This was published in The Guardian in 2004, it is well worth reading.

It was obvious to the British that there would be a need for salvage vessels to assist casualties and remove wrecks. The Southampton salvage company Risdon Beazley became the project managers, with a direct phone line to Southwick House. Metal Industries provided the McKenzie brothers, as Principal Salvage Officer and deputy. The husbandry remained with the ship managers.

The Royal Navy tended to look down on the merchant service, and even the other fighting services. In the case of the merchantmen, this could be because so few of their officers were from Public Schools, and many had worked their way up 'from the deck'. The popular saying at sea was the naval officers were gentlemen, trying to be sailors; merchant officers were sailors, trying to be gentlemen; and the volunteer reserve were neither, trying to be both..

Admiral Ramsay's Order of the Day said: Our task, in conjunction with the Merchant Navies of the United Nations, and supported by the Allied Air Forces, is to carry the Allied Expeditionary Force to the Continent, to establish it there in a secure bridgehead and to build it up and maintain it at a rate which will outmatch that of the enemy.

Follow-up coaster convoys arrived Far Shore p.m. 6 June

The British and American Liberty ships arrived on schedule at 0700 7 June, with only the British *Sambut* having been sunk in the Dover Strait.

Much of this account is taken from Roy's book **Merchantmen at Normandy** *which details, very comprehensively, the role played by the ships and men of the Merchant Services not only in the D-Day landings but in the subsequent Operation Neptune. It is available as an e-book, at* ***£2.31*** *for the Kindle edition, or in paperback at* ***£7.69,*** *both from Amazon.*