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BEACHMASTER, RN

In August 1941 I was transferred off the *Edinburgh* to Cape Town on a merchant ship to join the battlecruiser HMS *Repulse*,[15] and then off Mombasa on 8 September 1941 I was transferred to the battleship HMS *Revenge*, where I became sub lieutenant of the gunroom.[16] After a spell in Mombasa we sailed for Trincomalee in Ceylon where I managed to see my father, who was Naval Transport Officer. After Ceylon we headed for Mauritius where I bought fresh limes for the gunroom. Because of an excessive use of fresh water due to boiler leaks we headed to Durban for repairs, where a generous person, Mr Alexander, offered to take six officers for a break on his farm. He met me at Merryvale railway station and took me home to meet his wife and his daughter Joan, who subsequently became a good friend. He was a charming man who had lost a leg in the First World War. They had a number of horses on the farm and one that had just been broken in.

Whether it was wise to put me, a naval officer, on a newly broken-in horse I do not know. However, the animal started galloping up a pathway between the neighbouring farm and the Alexanders', and when a large branch loomed in the way, I put my arm up and stupidly caught it in the branch. I was jerked off the horse and my right elbow was broken. With a greenstick fracture on my left wrist I was driven by old Alexander to the nearest military hospital where the doctors said I would have to have my arm amputated. Alexander would have none of this and drove me to Maritzburg where I was taken to the

Oribi Hospital. Luckily there was a Nuffield specialist on duty who immediately took me in hand. I was given a full anaesthetic and eventually woke up humming 'The Sheikh of Araby'. The arm had been set and the greenstick fracture had a splint, so back I went to the farm.

After a few days I returned to Durban and on 23 September 1942 was put ashore on medical grounds, having been paid off from the *Revenge* and billeted in Fleet House. I had to go from there to the Addington Hospital where the nurses used to hang a small weight on my right hand to try and straighten it. Gradually I managed to almost completely straighten my arm but it has never been quite as good as it was originally. Whilst based in Durban I worked at HMS *Afrikander IV* in the RATES office (the Admiralty training establishment) in West Street where there was an Admiral Scott, a pleasant man.[17] My job was to inspect plans for a new base to be built on the Bluff. It was a ridiculous job because I had not the faintest idea of what I should or should not approve.

One day the admiral sent for me and said, 'The drafting commander has gone on three weeks' leave and during his absence you are to be the drafting officer.' I went back to Fleet House that evening in high spirits and said to Dick Bainbridge, who had become a good friend, 'We are going home.' He asked me how I knew and I explained that I was the new drafting officer and the first two people to be drafted would be us. Dick was convalescing from lung damage sustained at Tobruk. Sure enough, within ten days the troopship *Britannic* was due to dock in Durban on her way to the United Kingdom with a considerable number of Italian prisoners aboard and I had nominated Dick and me to be repatriated on the ship.[18]

On the ship's arrival I took Dick to the admiral's office, and we both knocked and went in. Scott, who was rather clueless himself, said, 'What can I do for you, boys?' I said, 'Well, sir, we have come to say goodbye.' He said, 'What has happened to you?' I said, 'We have been drafted.' 'Oh,' he said, 'I am sorry to lose you, have a good trip', and off we went.

We sailed well out into the Atlantic and eventually turned eastwards, docking at Liverpool. Before leaving Durban I had bought

a long bag of sugar to take home with me as I knew there would be little in England. While walking down the quay in Liverpool with my bag of sugar over my shoulder, I was stopped by a policeman who said, 'Excuse me, sir, but I think you are losing your sugar.' The bag had a slit in it and the sugar was starting to trickle on to the quay. I saved the rest and took it to London with me. On arrival I reported to the Admiralty at Queen Anne's Mansions and was asked where the hell had I come from.

I explained I had been drafted from Durban, and the officer-in-charge said, 'Who the hell drafted you?' 'I don't know,' I explained. Looking through my file, he said, 'I see you volunteered for special service. Did you mean it?'

It was true that whilst in Durban, with a pretty girl next to me in the cinema, seeing the newsreels of the Malta convoys and full of bravado, I had volunteered for special service. Now, being confronted with reality and the Admiralty officer asking 'Did you mean it?', there was nothing else I could say but 'Yes, sir.'

On 18 March 1943, after a short leave I became a trainee beachmaster in charge of G Commando at HMS *Armadillo*, a cold grey stone building at Ardentinny on the shores of Loch Long in Scotland. In each commando, in addition to the beachmaster, there were two sub lieutenants. Our job was to go ashore in the first wave aboard an LCA (Landing Craft, Assault) and with my men secure the beach for the next wave of infantry. This involved assault courses, a 52-mile route march and unarmed combat. On completion of training we embarked on the troopship *Circassia* in the Gare Loch together with a large number of the army. In early July we set sail in company with the troopship *Durban Castle* and another ship, first out into the Atlantic and then south and into the Mediterranean.

At this stage none of us had any idea where we were going until one evening two sub lieutenants and I were given our orders that we would be landing the next morning, 10 July 1943, on the south-east coast of Sicily at Pachino in preparation for the Allied invasion. Our orders advised us that a large water tower at Pachino would be illuminated by the RAF and would serve as our landmark. That night

a fairly strong wind blew up with a rough sea. Our orders stipulated that we would board the landing craft held in davits and use the water tower, hopefully illuminated, as our point of arrival. We all blackened our faces and I must say that we were a little frightened. When the LCAs were slipped and the coxswain steered on the given course for Pachino, there was no sign of the water tower. The RAF had not only illuminated it but knocked it down. As we arrived near the beach there were cries coming from the water and two American doctors were picked up who had dropped by parachute, along with another group of Americans from North Africa. With typical American efficiency they had jumped by parachute at least a quarter of a mile offshore.

My position was just behind the ramp and I was to be the first man ashore, together with two leading seamen who each had port and starboard lights that were placed on the beach to guide the next wave of landing craft. When we landed ashore an Italian raised his arms in surrender by a small beach hut, but sadly we shot him and there were no other apparent residents. The lights were set up and the next wave of landing craft came in with the army and up and out of the beach. I took over the small hut as my headquarters and we buried the poor Italian about 50 feet away. The army eventually brought in troops in DUKWs[19] and by daylight there was a steady stream of army units passing up the beach. My commando unit held its position on the beach with an occasional night attack by German aircraft. By this time we all had our slit trenches and there were no casualties. What I will never forget is after about two days three Italian women came down to the beach to my hut and enquired of the Italian who had been there. We showed them where he was buried and they proceeded to dig him up with wails and crying. I felt terrible. They asked if they could take him away for burial, which we gladly allowed them to do.

To the west of Pachino, the Americans had landed at Gela and round the eastern tip of Sicily the British had landed at Syracuse. We eventually all moved up through Sicily. I took my commando to Lentini to await further orders. Commander Scott who ran our headquarters told me that we were being moved across by an LST (Landing Ship, Tank) to Bone in North Africa for a spell. This was a tented camp in an

olive grove with very little to do. I decided one day to go up the coast in my amphibious jeep to Tunis. Here there was a NAAFI and I bought a very smart pair of brown boots that became my pride and joy.

Back in the camp at Bone we found a vehicle dump nearby and several of the chaps picked up private vehicles, which we all worked on. When we eventually moved back to cross over to Sicily we were a very motley band with our own transport. Arriving back in Sicily, we were taken to Taormina which is just before Messina and at the time there were beautiful flowering creepers hanging from a large wall. Going north about half a mile to Messina we were overcome by a horrible smell of rotting bodies. It appeared there had been an attack by Allied forces, when they arrived there, against the escaping Germans who were evacuating their last foothold in Sicily. We were told they had taken up positions in the high land above Reggio, on the other side of the Strait of Messina. We assembled at Taormina and were told we would be proceeding across the Strait of Messina to Reggio into the toe of Italy and would be boarding the LCAs the following night at Taormina. I had all my gear in my amphibious jeep with my driver Able Seaman Waugh. I told him to drive the jeep aboard one of the LSTs the following day and report to me on the beach. Early in the morning of 3 September 1943 I boarded our LCA with my G Commando and headed across the Strait of Messina. It was a lovely clear night with a calm sea and we encountered no problems whatsoever. As we landed on the beach at Reggio there was no opposition but as it started to get light the Germans opened up from the hill above the town, but thank God they could not depress their 88 mm guns low enough to hit the beach. However, they could in fact strafe the LSTs when they landed later that morning. We cleared a path up the beach, having swept it for mines, and put down the white cloth strips as a safe path out for the army.

About half an hour after the landing a voice said, 'Have a cup of coffee, sir.' It was AB Waugh, with my jeep, who had brewed some coffee on the small stove we carried. On being asked how the hell he had arrived so early, he replied, 'Well, sir, it was such a nice calm night I thought we would drive over from Taormina to Reggio', which he had done.

As I mentioned, the beachmaster was in complete command of the beach during a landing and it was our duty as G Commando to ensure a safe path off the beach into the hinterland. At about half past ten that morning when the large vehicles were landing from the LSTs a DUKW motored up the beach and stopped at the exit road from the beach. On board was General Montgomery with some of his staff. We had learnt that he was a great one for haranguing the troops. He stopped and of course was surrounded by some of our army and started haranguing them. This was contrary to regulations, as my job as beachmaster was to ensure a continuous flow of vehicles off the beach.

I went up to him and during a pause in his oration said, 'Excuse me, sir, would you mind vacating the beach?'

He said, 'Who the hell are you?'

I said, 'Sir, I am the beachmaster in full command of everything that goes on on this beach and I am sorry, sir, but it is essential you leave the beach.'

He said a few more words to the troops and then I was pleased to see he moved on. That was my only direct contact with Montgomery during the war and I had the impression that he was an arrogant man. However, overall he turned out to be a very successful general.

When a few weeks later we arrived at Termoli on the east coast of Italy we found this was as far as we were destined to go in the near future, as the Germans had taken up a line about five miles north of the town.[20] Italy collapsed and the Italians surrendered in September 1943 to the Allies, and the various prisoner-of-war camps previously guarded by them had their gates opened and many of the British prisoners walked out into the countryside. After a short time, however, the Germans moved in and re-established control. Most of the prisoners who had escaped took to the hills and the Italian peasants around the countryside helped to shelter a large number. Commander Nichol in charge of G Commando told us to bring in as many escapees as possible.

Two MAS boats (Motoscafo Armato Silurante, an Italian motor torpedo boat or MTB) arrived and moored at the end of the quay. These were built of wood and had three Isotta Fraschini engines. The

centre engine had the ability to alter its exhaust from being straight through and very noisy into an underwater exhaust that was relatively silent and capable of doing 12 knots on its own. Italian crews manned these MASs but each carried two British army officers to ensure the Italians stayed loyal to us. A recce up the coast was done in one of them and we crept on to a deserted beach. Two of my men came ashore with me in the dinghy and we wandered into the countryside, not knowing what to expect. We came across a small Italian farmhouse and roused the occupants.

A very frightened woman appeared, whispered 'Tedeschi' to us, and pointed to behind the house. Obviously some Germans had bedded down there for the night. We said 'Grazie' to the woman, and crept back to the MAS.

We noticed that the riverbeds up the coast were dry and formed an obvious area British escaped prisoners of war could use to come down before boarding their rescue craft. By now it was October 1943. We carried out several more night recces up the coast and noticed that a train pulled out of one of the stations regularly at half past three in the morning. It was decided that Termoli was to be our base and the next little town behind the lines up the coast was Ortona. This was followed by Pescara further up, and then Ancona which had a small port and was easy to recognise because there was a hill behind the town.

There was a small restaurant down near the quay in Termoli in which we used to meet and discuss our plans over a glass of rather indifferent Italian wine. There was no light in the evenings as the Germans could have strafed us, and so our discussions were held by candlelight – all very cloak and dagger. Two army officers used to join us: one was the cartoonist 'Giles' of the *Daily Telegraph*, who always had pictures of pretty girls in his cartoons, and the other was an army officer about my age named Roy Farran.[21] We all decided that the only way to rescue our prisoners was at a chosen area at the end of the dried riverbed. A small group would be landed at a specified point and would go up into the hills and gather as many prisoners as possible. At a predetermined time several days later the prisoners would be herded down to the pick-up spot. The rescue party would arrive by one of the

MAS boats and, having flashed a torch signal ashore, would wait for an answering signal to verify who was answering. We would then put a dinghy ashore and pick them up. During my time there I found these small rescue operations quite emotional, as frequently those being rescued would kiss the deck and put their arms around us in thanks.

We discovered after a couple of weeks that the Germans would come down with a small radar van in an endeavour to close down these missions and we were obliged to establish pick-up areas further and further along the coast. One day Roy Farran approached me and said he had instructions to blow up a bridge on the coast road some 60 miles north of Termoli and asked if we would take him and his party. I told him I would. On the appointed day we boarded one of the MASs and proceeded up the coast at full speed until ready to turn west, when we would stop the two outboard engines and creep in with our single underwater-exhaust centre engine.

On this particular night as we crept in towards the beach, we stopped as usual and used our binoculars to check that everything was all clear. As I was looking through my binoculars the hair on my neck stood up and I realised that there was some sort of craft near the shore. Both Roy Farran and I came to the conclusion that it was a submarine on the surface charging its batteries, and the submarine was obviously not one of ours. The area Roy Farran wanted was a little to the south of this position and so we left and crept south before landing his party. After arriving back at Termoli I broke radio silence and reported to C.-in-C. Taranto what we had seen. We understood a couple of days later that Roy Farran had blown up his bridge and that an Allied aircraft had sunk the submarine which was still there and obviously had had engine trouble. This incident is mentioned in Roy Farran's book *Winged Dagger*.[22]

The C.-in-C. Taranto asked us whether it would be possible to capture a German prisoner for interrogation. We found the Germans were in the habit of sending a despatch-rider down the coast to their forward position just north of Termoli and I knew of an ideal area to obtain what was needed. Some areas on the road were very poor and the Germans were apt to put up a sign 'SS' which I think meant

'diversion'. One of these signs was copied and we took the MAS to a point where we knew there was a sharp bend in the road. The sign was put up together with white tapes leading off towards a pebbly area near the beach, and the MAS lay off, with two men standing near the diversion sign. Nothing happened the first night and we came back empty-handed. On the following night we hit the jackpot! Two of G Commando stood by the diversion sign and, lo and behold, a German motorcyclist duly arrived, skidded to a halt and tried to go onto the pebbly track. Our two chaps set on him, pulled his tin helmet over his eyes and donked him on the back of the head. He was then ushered down to the dinghy, taken aboard and locked up. We removed the sign and the tapes and then wheeled his motorbike down to the beach, into the dinghy and eventually aboard the MAS. After a brief inspection of the beach to ensure that everything was shipshape we returned to Termoli. I don't know what happened to the wretched German but he was taken away to an army area for interrogation. I still have a slight scar on my thumb from trying to ride the motorbike when I caught it in the handlebars!

On another evening we were due to pick up a party of escaped prisoners from a beach in a bay up the coast. As it turned out we were very lucky in that the two MAS boats were temporarily out of service and an LCI (Landing Craft, Infantry) was put at our disposal. This had a high freeboard and half the speed of our MASs. When we arrived off the rendezvous point the agreed signal was flashed ashore, but there was no reply. We decided, however, to put a dinghy ashore and I climbed into it with two other crew and started pulling ashore. Halfway to the shore we were fired at from a point in the northern part of the bay and it was most unnerving to see tracer bullets coming towards us and at the last moment going over our heads. My immediate reaction was to go backwards over the side of the boat into the water – as it turned out, a wise decision. Luckily the captain of the LCI went astern to cover us from the enemy bullets. I and one other got alongside the LCI and were quickly hauled aboard. This taught me a sharp lesson: don't go in if your signal is not answered. The operation for the night was abandoned and we returned to Termoli and on the way had a good

tot of Pusser's Rum. This confirmed our view that the Germans were keeping a good lookout round the coast.

A touching little thing happened one day when, rashly, I decided to go in the amphibious jeep towards the front line. An army officer immediately stopped me and said, 'Get to hell out of here.' The next moment a mortar shell came down and I realised this was no place for me. Going back, there was an area where the wounded were being held, including a German whose eyes were bandaged, and he was obviously in very poor shape. A kind British Tommy came up, lit a cigarette, put it in his hand and said: 'Here you are, mate.'

On a final occasion before the trip up to Chioggia,[23] I did a recce past Ancona. I crept in towards Ancona to get my bearings and saw that there were many dark shapes forming off the coast. I realised it was some sort of convoy forming up to go across towards Yugoslavia. I turned off, charged up the air bottles to fire the torpedoes and then let go both at the largest black object and scored two direct hits. By this time I was going full speed back to Termoli and, after we got in, our chaps patted me on the back. The next morning I was ordered to go to C.-in-C.'s office in Taranto. Everybody said, 'Goodo, you will get a gong.' I arrived at C.-in-C.'s office, was kept waiting, and then a captain came out and said, 'Right, go in.' I received the biggest dressing down of all time. Evidently intelligence knew all about the convoy and there was a destroyer waiting for it some distance off pointing at the target. This had blown the gaff. My reward was a loss of six-month seniority and a strong warning from C.-in-C. Taranto that we should keep well clear of everything that might involve other units.

Needless to say, I was mentioned in despatches for my efforts in rescuing escaped prisoners. This appeared in the *London Gazette* on 27 April 1944. Our little sorties up the coast started to attract various people who wanted to watch the proceedings. One of these was a charming Italian priest who had been a padre in a prison camp just south of Venice. He told us that when the camps had been opened many of the prisoners had escaped to the Venice area and he believed that if we landed him in the vicinity he could make contact and get them out safely. After one of our candlelight and wine discussions in

Termoli we considered the only way to effect this was to have a base roughly abeam Venice but over on one of the islands. Lussin Piccolo was chosen. I advised Taranto that if possible we would appreciate a little air cover due to the distance from Termoli to Venice, which meant our return would be mainly in daylight. After this was approved, a few days later I took the priest up in our MAS, got a fix off the hill behind Ancona, then crossed the mouth of the River Po. I duly dropped off the priest in his black habit, just south of Venice. As it grew light on our return trip it was heartening to occasionally see one of our aircraft appearing. We altered course off the Tremiti Islands to Termoli.