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Landing on Juno Beach

6 June 1944

The View from LCT 721

Charles John Cooke, RCVN

This first-hand account of the events of D-Day was written in 1976 by Lieutenant Charles John Cooke (1906-1983), Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, Commanding Officer of Landing Craft Tank [LCT] 721. At the outbreak of the war he had been a clerk in the Westminster Bank, a 'reserved' occupation. He had volunteered, was called up and joined the Navy in September 1941. He was drafted as an Ordinary Seaman to HMS *Hussar*, a fleet minesweeper, in January 1942. She spent the next five months on escort duty in the Arctic with the 'PQ' convoys to Murmansk. *Hussar* was involved in the action which saw the loss of HMS *Edinburgh* on 2 May 1942. His wartime diaries vividly describe the day.

Recommended for a commission in July 1942, John Cooke volunteered for Combined Operations and started training in Brighton and Scotland in September. In January 1943 he was appointed 1st Lieutenant on LCT 500 and made commanding officer of LCT 721 in June. He joined the ship at Middlesbrough. The Landing Craft, Tank, with a crew of 10 men and 2 officers, was a flat-bottomed vessel with a keel near the stern, fitted with two rudders and armed with two Oerlikon guns. It was 200 feet long, 38 feet in the beam, 300 tons displacement and capable of 10 knots.

John Cooke had managed to obtain a film, and took a camera on the D-Day assault. He took photographs from the bridge of the scene around him on Juno Beach. A mine exploded beneath the bow of LCT 721 as she approached

the beach. The damage resulted in a frustrating period under repair, and the LCT set sail on the second trip to Juno Beach on 24 June. Besides another interruption for engine repairs, the vessel performed a regular cross-channel shuttle service, delivering tanks and supplies to Juno and Gold Beaches, until granted leave on 7 September 1944.

The trips resumed on 5 October, and continued until the return leg of trip number 34 on 25 November. The effects of repeated beachings had weakened the structure of the vessel, and she broke in half in mid-Channel. The stern section remained afloat and was towed back to le Havre by LCT 691.

Lieutenant Cooke's Account

On Friday, 2 June 1944 a message was received on board LCT 721 to open and peruse all Secret Documents. Full security measures were to be enforced. We were in Empress Dock, Southampton and our instructions were to top up with stores and see that the fresh water tanks and oil reserves were full. We then proceeded to Osborne Bay which we reached about 10 pm.

The next morning at 8 am we were instructed to commence loading and we went to G2 Hard and took aboard 73 officers and men of a Canadian regiment with a variety of vehicles which they would be using for the invasion, such as Jeeps, Bren Gun Carriers, anti-tank guns and lorries.



Coming in to beach on D-Day on Nan White Beach, Bernières-sur-Mer. The church spire in Bernières is visible on the right edge of the photo, and on the left side can be seen the famous house in Bernières, known today as "Maison Queen's Own Rifles."

Also a load of chespaling for distribution amongst other craft for use on the beaches. We finished loading at 10 am and tie up at Calshot Buoys to await further instructions. Incidentally, water was rationed. The crew were not to exceed 6 gallons each per day for all purposes and the army personnel were allowed 1 gallon each per day.

The following day being Sunday, we just did a few jobs including reporting that our anti-aircraft balloon had struck a projection in the strong wind and become deflated. This was replaced the next day, Monday 5th June, by the RAF. At about 2 pm we received the signal from our Flotilla leader, Merryman, to slip, so we moved off with the remainder of the 35th Flotilla (10 LCTs) and Nab Tower was abreast at 1710 hours. The Channel was still rough with a strong wind in the region of 4-5 on the Beaufort Scale. While we wondered whether the invasion had started, our Flotilla took up its position in the great number and variety of naval vessels and steamed in a southerly direction. No navigation lights

were allowed, so speeds had to be very carefully regulated to avoid collision.

We continued on this course until we reached a position about half-way to the Normandy coast. Meanwhile the wind had abated somewhat, so the weather forecasters had got it right and it would be just about fit for us to continue with Operation Neptune.

It was just as well that we were moving slowly because our starboard engine stopped with a sticking governor at 0046 hours on D-Day. Fortunately the engine room ratings were able to free it at 0207 hours, so we did not lose our place in the column. I felt rather sorry for the Canadian troops, as they were unused to the rough weather and the craft's movement. I could see that a number were being seasick: not a very good start for an invasion force.

We stood off the French coast about 0600 hours and were to make for the beach at

Courseulles-sur-Mer. We circled about one mile off shore for some time, and it became apparent that the attack of the first wave was meeting with stiff opposition. Our flotilla was signaled to beach elsewhere, and we proceeded to Nan White Beach, Bernières-sur-Mer, at the eastern end of Juno Beach, hoping this would be less difficult. It soon became our turn and the tide was peaking when we beached at 1215 hours. As our orders were to 'Go full speed ahead' onto the beach, our chances of kedging off again were not too bright.

The crew were at the ready to lower the ramp but when we were about 10 yards off, there was a loud explosion forward. The crew were staggering about and the vehicles jumbled up, so it seemed that we had either been hit by a shell or had struck a mine. However, our momentum carried us on to the beach and we managed to wind the ramp down and the Canadians got their vehicles off to pre-arranged positions amid mortar fire and sniping. Meanwhile HMS *Rodney* and HMS *Nelson* were moving up and down the coast, firing at enemy gun-emplacements sited some distance

inland. The noise of near and far explosions was tremendous. LCT 721 suffered no further damage and I was able to kedge off at 1300 hours. We joined the five other LCTs at the assembly point. Two or three of our craft were unable to get off the beach.

We eventually set off back to the UK, keeping a lookout for damaged craft and mines, not to mention enemy 'E' Boats. The damage underwater caused a list which we were able to correct by adjusting our ballast tanks. After all the activity of the past few days, we were thankful to approach our shores again.

We arrived off Nab Tower at 0600 hours and signalled that we had been damaged. We were told to secure to Gilkicker collecting buoys to await inspection. At 1830 hours an Engineer Officer arrived on board and found that we a hole about 12 feet by 6 feet blown in the bottom of the craft. So there was nothing for it but to go into dock at Portsmouth for repairs, which were not completed until 24 June.

About to touch down at Bernières-sur-Mer at 1215 hours. LCT 670 is visible to the right along with a number of tanks and lorries that have just arrived on the beach.





Above: The view from the bridge of LCT 721. The congestion on the beach is apparent in this photo. Countless fires still burn in Bernières and there are numerous tanks, lorries and soldiers visible along the water's edge. A Sherman Firefly is visible in the next LCT and a regular Sherman in the second LCT.

Left: The stern half of LCT 721 in le Havre, December 1944 following the break up of the vessel in the middle of the English Channel.

This article and its accompanying photographs were kindly supplied by Mr. Gordon Cooke of London, England. Mr. Cooke is the son of Lieutenant John Cooke.