

D-Day As It Happened

Welcome to part one of the Royal Air Force Museum's special podcast on the RAF's role in the Normandy campaign. This one covers D-Day.

What you are about to hear is a dramatisation based on memoirs and letters held in the Museum's Archive. The accounts you are about to hear are reproduced verbatim from such sources.

Anchor in London Studio : This is London calling. You join us today at an RAF Station in the north of London, where a press conference is being held with some of the brave men and women of the Royal and Women's Auxiliary Air Forces who have been involved in the recent Allied landings in France. They will be able to tell us about their contribution to the build up for and opening of the historic events currently unfolding across the English Channel.

With us first of all is Leading Aircraftsman Harry Clift, who is an armourer with one of our Typhoon squadrons. Can you tell us about the differences you noticed in the build up to the invasion?

Leading Aircraftsman Harry Clift: Towards the end of May we were told that meals would be available to us at any time of day or night. If we were working into the night and after the work was completed we were hungry then a meal would be available in the dining tent. Items of food were provided that we had not seen since [before] the war. The standard of meals was greatly improved and butter, cheese and bread were placed on the dining tables. This was to build us up in readiness for the months that we would have to exist on Compo rations.

Reporter on the scene (France): How did you prepare, the day and night before?

Leading Aircraftsman Harry Clift: On the 5th June the Squadron was very busy attacking Radar Stations and strong points in the Invasion Area. At night in the dark we were issued with buckets of black and white paint and brushes. By the light of headband torches we painted black and white identification bands on the underside of all the aircraft so that they would be recognised as friendly when operating over the Beachhead the following morning.

Anchor in London Studio: Now, Pilot Officer Leslie Glover, you actually flew over the beaches, did you not? What was your role, and what was it like?

Pilot Officer Leslie Glover : In preparation for the D-Day landings, we ð were specially trained for several months to form part of a small combined RAF/Fleet Air Arm wing responsible for the direction of the naval bombardment on Normandy. The scene from ten thousand feet over the beach-head at first light on the 6th June, 1944, when the Allied fleet opened-

up as one, is something I shall not easily forget. We stayed with the naval guns until the battle moved further inland and beyond their twenty-mile range and absorbed an object lesson in the accuracy and effectiveness of this mighty weapon of war put under our control.

Anchor in London Studio: We have with us another pilot, too, Lieutenant Hubert Knilans, who is actually an American serving on attachment with one of our Bomber squadrons. Lt Hubert, you were involved in an operation to fool the Germans, by flying bombers low over the water so they would look like an invasion fleet on their radar screens. How did that work? It must have been demanding!

Lieutenant Hubert Knilans: Eight crews would fly for four hours. Eight more would take their place for another four hours. The pilots would have to do some precision flying. Each plane would fly thirty-five seconds on course, make a controlled turn and fly a reverse course for thirty-two seconds. Then a slow turn back on the first course while throwing out some more Window. I would be starting the original course slightly ahead of where the previous lot dropped into the water. Thus, there would be no interruption of blips on the German radar. I had to fly at 200 mph in a series of circles that carried me forward at only eight mph.

Reporter at the scene (France): And you had to fly with this precision for four hours?

Lieutenant Hubert Knilans: There were twelve air crew aboard my R-Roger Lancaster. Plt Off Castagnola's crew were coming along to share the flying and windowing duties. Harry, my Navigator, guided us into position. I began my hour of very intense flying duty. On course, turning, levelling-out, on course, turning, minute after minute.

All the time Harry's voice was droning in my earphones:

%ighten the turn, you're two seconds slow.+

%ou're three feet too low.+

%n course, on course.+

%egin turn. Now!+

%ease up, you're three seconds too fast.+

This went on for an hour. I had to keep within four seconds elapsed time and within five feet of altitude at all times. It was a relief to have Caz Castagnols slip into my seat. His navigator took over for Harry. Three others of his crew relieved those of mine who had been dropping window bundles at four second intervals for an hour.

The second wave took over from us. We had to return to base at an altitude below one thousand feet.

Anchor in Studio: All of this activity meant that thousands of aeroplanes were in the air that night. A complicated system of control was needed to prevent accidents and make sure everyone was in the right place, at the right time. Now, Sergeant Betty Morrell, you were in an Operations Room that night. How did you find the build up for the invasion affected you?

Sergeant Betty Morrell: Towards the end of May all was cancelled and everyone was confined to camp. Absolutely no-one was allowed out of the gates except for the ration lorries and an emergency hospital case and they had to be escorted by Security Police. All mail was censored and no one could make outside phone calls. The reasons for all this were kept firmly under wraps but it wasn't difficult to guess what was going to happen. Airborne troops were camped on the far side of the airfield and gliders were stacked in rows. Clearly something extraordinary was being planned. There was to be a big exercise on the night of June 4th but due to bad weather it was postponed for 24 hours. Well we had big exercises and postponements before but this time it all seemed very different.

Reporter at the scene (Anonymous Operations Room): It must have been very tense.

Sergeant Betty Morrell: The whole station was holding its breath. On June 5th I was on the afternoon shift, 2 till 10pm. The whole place was buzzing with activity, phone messages, signals and a lot of coming and going from the squadrons and Army units. At last the orders came through from Command and we were told what was going on. Our Squadron and others in 38 and 46 Groups were going to drop gliders and paratroops into German-occupied France, Normandy. This was it, the start of the long awaited invasion of Europe. Tonight's exercise was actually the beginning of Operation Overlord. A massive seaborne fleet was already heading towards the French beaches, June the 6th, 1944 was to be D-Day.

Reporter at the scene (Anonymous Operations Room): Were you busy that night?

Sergeant Betty Morrell: Not a soul went off duty that night. The night shift arrived but we were told to stay on duty. Not that I wanted to go, there was far too much going on. Our planes took off shortly after 23.00 hrs. The Ops room began to fill up, first Group Captain Abrahams, the Station CO, then a lot of other officers from the squadron offices, in fact anyone who was allowed to be there and not flying, came in and out during that night. The air began to fill with cigarette smoke. It was going to be a long night and the normal rations of food and drink soon ran out with all those extra bodies wanting sustenance. Around midnight, the CO left and reappeared a short time later bearing a large tray laden with new supplies. He said he had burgled the Officers Mess pantry and would have to own up in the morning. After a long long wait the signals came to say the drop had been successful and the planes were returning to base. We ate a lot of bits and pieces, drank lots of

tea and coffee, smoked a lot of cigarettes and waited for the planes to return. They all returned safely that night, there was a long session of de-briefing. When the morning shift arrived we were allowed to join the crews for a huge aircraft breakfast. Everybody hung about until the BBC told the world of the Allied landings then we finally collapsed into bed, excited and exhausted.

Anchor in London Studio: We are also lucky to have with us one of the glider tug pilots with us. Warrant Officer Donald Wood, you were flying that night. Can you describe to us what happened?

Warrant Officer Donald Wood: Operation Tonga got underway as Wg Cdr Booth took-off at 2249 hours on June 5th towing a glider. The remaining six of us took-off at, roughly, half minute intervals. [The glider pilot] Staff Sgt Saunders said that he had a jeep with trailer full of ammunition, a six-pounder gun, and six men. The cloud base was low and we flew at 1000 feet. We saw no one else at all, all the way there and back. As the visibility was so poor we descended, about 15 minutes from our ETA, to 800 feet and then, at the very moment the Nav cries %time+, we could just discern the vague outline of the coast. Staff Sgt Saunders called out %going now+and immediately pulled off. We turned away and landed back at base at 0240 hours after a flight of 3hrs 50mns. All the other six returned and all reported no enemy aircraft at all and only very light flak. Not one aircraft received any damage at all. We learned, a day or two later, that the bridge had been captured with great success.

Reporter at the scene (France): Were you involved at all in the resupply and reinforcement flights during the day?

Warrant Officer Donald Wood : On the morning of the 6th we briefed for Operation Mallard. This was to be a part of the very big airborne landing throughout the afternoon, onto what we named D.Z. ~~Nq~~ Fifteen of us were to tow fifteen Horsas loaded with personnel from the Royal Ulster Rifles. We were to drop late evening and, as we arrived overhead, we saw the landing ground absolutely crowded with both Horsa and Hamilcar gliders strewn everywhere.

We took off at 1844 and landed back at 2234 after a flight of 3hrs 50mns again.

Again, not a single German aircraft seen. All the way there and back we had a continuous cover of fighter aircraft overhead. There was again very little light flak, and that only on the very coast line itself. Again no damage of any nature to the aircraft.

Anchor in London Studio: Thank you very much, but I am afraid that that is all we have time for. In our next broadcast, we will be talking to some of the personnel involved in the operations to establish the beach head.