

WAR GEAR

ORAL HISTORY FROM THOSE WHO LIVED THROUGH WORLD WAR TWO

Wartime Memories of Leading Seaman Gunner Victor Urch

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BEFORE THE WAR

I was born on the 13th May 1925 in Portishead, Somerset; a small, country village some 10 miles south of Bristol on the Severn Estuary. Born into an established local family:- My father, Charlie, was a Machinist, Council Worker and Fireman; My mother, Gladys, and my sister, Doreen. We all lived together, along with two other families – Uncles, Aunties and Cousins, in Victoria Cottage in the High Street, Portishead. The cottage was a three-storey dwelling, next door to the Victoria Inn. Life, although hard, was enjoyable and carefree. The rewards of village and country life were immense, totally different to the majority of people living in the cities of the time, where life centred around continual hardship and survival. I was affectionately known to my friends and named “Chicken” – this was due to my slight stature.

ACTIVITY DURING THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC & BATTLE OF BRITAIN

My early years revolved around rural and community activities. I attended the local village school, and became a member of the Church Choir. I obtained part-time employment on a local, horse-drawn, Baker's round. I subsequently got another job in the village Co-operative Society where I served Customers, and delivered their shopping on my bicycle.

It was during these formative years, that I became an active member of the local Air Training Corps, having been fully aware of my father and uncles' involvement in service life. They had all enlisted during the First World War, and were with the Somerset Light Infantry. This was during the period when Bristol was blitzed; 24th November 1940 until 11th April 1941, and I quickly realised that family life, in a small country village, could well change forever.

With my father away for long periods of time – fighting fires in Bristol; family responsibilities became my main priority, and my thoughts turned to supporting my fellow neighbours and Country.

I enlisted in the Royal Navy on 2nd June 1943, not long after my 18th Birthday. Initially joining HMS Raleigh, and then HMS Drake(both shore based establishments in Plymouth) where I underwent my basic training. Being from the West Country, and Somerset in particular, I quickly earned another nickname – “Janner”; a name that was to remain with me throughout my Navy career.

EXPERIENCES IN GREAT BRITAIN

Having completed my basic training, which included Aircraft Identification and Gunnery skills, I was assigned to HMS Armadillo in Glenfinnart. This was one of the established, secret, *Combined Operations* units in Scotland. Initially used as a War Office camp, it transferred to the Royal Navy in 1942, and provided training facilities for Royal Navy Beach Commandos (who were not to be confused with Royal Marine Commandos). The job of the Royal Navy Beach Commandos was to go ashore in the first Landing Craft, and set up a protected base from which the Beach Commander could control the flow of incoming and outgoing Landing Craft.

I, like many others, joined the Training School; this comprised of between 500 and 600 men, both Officers and Ratings. The areas around Inveraray, Loch Fyne and Loch Long in particular, were used for “amphibious landing” drills, Special training in Reconnaissance and beach skills. I received training including Weapons usage, Gunnery training, Embarkation and Debarkation of Landing Craft.

The training was carried out under Battle conditions; Field Survival, and exercises such as rock climbing, assault courses, and route marches.

As part of *Combined Operations*, I, like many other RN personnel during this period, was linked to HMS Copra (HMS Copra was a Royal Navy shore base for the maintenance of Personnel Records, and the calculation of Pay and Allowances for those servicemen attached to *Combined Operations*). I also spent time assigned to HMS Finnart and HMS Dundonold. Being a crew member of LCI and LCI(L) landing craft, I saw the coming together of a varied range of services from the UK and overseas: it was here that I first encountered my training colleagues in the form of Canadian Commando and Infantry Divisions. I recall their intensive training programme (regularly under battle conditions), this enabled skills to be “honed to perfection”. Little did we know that our training would shortly be put to the test, landing Canadian Troops on Juno Beach on D-Day.

D-DAY & BATTLE OF NORMANDY

As D-Day approached, myself and my Royal Navy colleagues and other members of the Invasion Task Force, were transported to various secure areas where we all lived together until embarkation.

On D-Day -3, with the Canadian soldiers having joined their units, we embarked upon our designated Landing Craft (These were being held off, along the South Coast, waiting to depart). Due to a change in weather and sea conditions, we were held back in the Flotilla. With so many soldiers suffering “sea sickness”, the waiting was probably one of the worst moments. We all wondered what was to be our fortune, so many unknowns, our futures, and those of millions of others in the hands of so few.

The order to go was eventually given, and with our Canadian colleagues on board, we left our holding point, heading towards the beaches of Normandy; Juno Beach being our ultimate destination. At first the journey seemed endless, but as we approached the French coast the enormity of our task dawned.

“We knew that we had a job to do, that was what all those hours of training under battle conditions had been for – it was now “time to get on with it”.

The level of noise from Gun fire was tremendous as we lowered our ramps, and dropped-off our first wave of Canadian soldiers, some 200 yards from the beaches close to Courseulles-sur-Mer. Wishing them good luck, we returned to help load and disembark other soldiers from waiting vessels, repeating this exercise several times over the following days and weeks.

I was assigned to several different Landing Craft during Operation 'Overlord' – the Assault on the Normandy beaches, on D-Day, and in the days and weeks following, supporting various activities including HM LCI 390 and HM LCI(L) 246.

FOLLOWING D-DAY

The periods following D-Day were less traumatic for me and my fellow crew members- All of whom were regularly involved with running troops across to the beaches, and then to every port from LeHavre to Ostend – often returning with prisoners. The Ostend runs were out of Tilbury while the others were from Newhaven. These runs were repeated regularly until towards the end of 1945 when I, and many of my fellow Landing Craft crews were sent down to Poole for each Landing Craft to be repainted and refurbished to accommodate rocket launchers for the planned invasion of the Far East, which fortunately for myself, and the others, didn't happen.

In the weeks and months following, having left 265 Flotilla, I joined 253 Flotilla on 16th November 1944, subsequently leaving them on 31st July 1945 to undertake other duties at HMS Westcliffe and HMS Turtle.

Having survived the war, my final period of service saw me involved in returning LCI(L) 246, together with a number of other "Lease lend" Landing Craft, back to the USA.

I joined the "Lease lend" Flotilla at Plymouth, bound for Brooklyn, USA. On Wednesday, 19th June 1946 at 1500hrs, the Flotilla departed, and with the promise of bad weather and rough seas in the Bay of Biscay, eventually arrived in port at Gibraltar at 1600hrs on Monday, 24th June 1946.

Following a stay for minor repairs and regrouping, the remains of the Flotilla left Gibraltar on the 11th of July, arriving at Ponta del Garda (in the Azores) at 1800 hrs on Monday, 15th July for a 5 day stop over, whilst *en-route* to Bermuda. We arrived on Saturday, 20th July 1946. With a few days of another epic adventure nearing an end, the crew mates on LCI(L) 246 set off for Brooklyn, passing the Statue of Liberty, and Ellis Island, arriving late afternoon on Friday, 9th August 1946. Having enjoyed 7 days RNR (Rest and Recuperation) my crew mates, myself and some 'newly-found' friends all returned to England upon the Queen Mary, arriving in Southampton at 1700hrs on Wednesday, 21st August 1946. We all received a Hero's welcome before returning to Devonport, Plymouth on Friday the 23rd August 1946, from where I was subsequently discharged from the Royal Navy on 7th November 1946.

AFTER THE WAR

I returned home to my family in Portishead, near Bristol for a short period, before travelling by train to meet his Fiance, Marjorie, (whom I had met while on weekend leave during 1944). We met once again on the Railway Platform of Stroud Station, Gloucestershire. We subsequently married, and had two children, Keith and Kathleen.

I spent my working life in the Stroud valleys, employed by Erinoid at Lightpill [later to become BP Plastics] and have continued to enjoy the delights of country living. I retired early, upon closure of the factory in 1982. I subsequently took up a part-time role at a local Electrical Company in Stroud.

Since the death of my wife and soul-mate, Marjorie, in 2001; I have lived independently, devoting many hours to my Children, Grandchildren, Great-Grandchildren; to Friends and supporting other elderly members of the community. I later joined the *Combined Operations Association*, and I returned to the Normandy beaches in 2009 with my Son, for the very first time since 1944 – It was the 65th Anniversary of D-Day, and we attended all the major events, fully participating too. I attended, along with my three closest comrades, the 70th Anniversary in Normandy in 2014. We all subsequently received the Chevalier of the Legion of Honour from the Republic of France. I was presented with this Medal at the private residence of the French Ambassador in London on Bastille Day 2014.

My first return left me wondering why I had not gone back to Normandy *before*. I have returned every year since, and will continue to do so, health permitting.

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*This account, written by Vic's son Keith was as told to him and transcribed at various times during 2010/2011. Details have also been extracted from Vic's war time diary. It is not intended to be a *Historically Correct* account, but personal recollections of Comrades who were there.

Supplementary Information:

My complete service from 2nd June 1943 [when I volunteered] until my Discharge date on the 7th November 1946 is as follows: –

HMS Raleigh (shore base)

HMS Drake (shore base)

HMS Beechwood

SS Northland (Depot Repair/Accommodation)

HMS Newt	(shore base)
HMS Westcliffe	(shore base)
HMS Turtle	(shore base)

Left 265 Flotilla 16/11/44 – Joined 253 Flotilla 16/11/44 – Left 253 Flotilla 31/07/45