

Royal Canadian Naval Beach Commando "W"

E.G. Finley and Edward Storey

One of the many lessons learned in the Dieppe Raid was the need for highly trained personnel to supervise beach areas during and after an assault. The Royal Navy had supplied more than 200 officers and ratings for the Dieppe Raid, organised into "Beach Parties" "C," "D" and "H." Approximately one third of these men became casualties. It was clear that more intensive training was required. Approval was given to the suggestion made by Admiral Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations, to establish specialized "Beach Commandos" who would be trained at HMS Armadillo, located at Ardentinny, Loch Long, Scotland.

The principal tasks of the Beach Commandos entailed disembarking troops and vehicles from assault and follow-up landing craft, organizing and supervising suitable "beach" areas, and loading serviceable vessels either with wounded and/or prisoners. In the event of a withdrawal, they were tasked with organizing the loading of landing craft from the beach. For the Normandy invasion, each 85-member unit (together with 30 Royal Navy Beach Signals personnel) would join with a 443-man Army Beach Company to form a Beach Group. In theory a Beach Group was responsible for landing a three battalion assault brigade.

To provide adequately for its various planned amphibious landings, Combined Operations evidently decided that 20 Royal Navy Commandos would be required, two each for the three Army assault divisions, one per assault brigade, with 100% spare in reserve. Each of the 20 units was assigned an alphabetical letter. By late 1942, when Royal Navy Commando "M" became the first to be formed and trained at HMS

"Armadillo," about dozen others had already been organized.

At the beginning of 1943, Canada's Chief Naval representative (known as CCCS) in the United Kingdom informed his superiors about these Combined Operations developments and, even though some 500 Canadian naval personnel on Royal Navy loan were then serving in landing craft, he recommended providing an additional one hundred seamen to form an all-Canadian Beach Commando. His recommendation did not fall on deaf ears, for by mid-summer he welcomed a newly-appointed Staff Officer (Combined Operations). In September, as a direct result of the Allied leaders deliberations at the August 10-18 Quadrant Conference in Quebec City, the Canadian War Cabinet Committee authorized, among several major naval commitments; the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) to form a Beach Commando and a Beach Signal Section, with training in Britain to be completed by the spring of 1944.

The next step entailed the selection and appointment of the personnel for the Royal Canadian Naval Beach Commando "W" (hereafter referred to as "W" Commando or "W"), which represented the last of twenty-two such units. A general distribution Naval Message was forthwith promulgated requesting "medically fit" volunteers for a Canadian Beach Commando with "preference of selection... given to those who through no fault of their own have spent a considerable time ashore." In view of the steadily increasing number of Canadian officers and Ratings being discharged "medically unfit" from Combined Operations, the Senior Canadian medical officer (SMO) at HMCS "Niobe"

recommended to CCCS in December 1942 that, from a medical point of view, special attention with respect to any subsequent selectees should be given to the following:

1. under 35 years of age;
2. mental stability with no family history of mental disease or disorder;
3. no history of chronic illness - bronchitis, asthma, rheumatism, arthritis or heart;
4. standard visual acuity and hearing; and
5. free from Venereal Disease.

While "W's" three senior officers were in their early thirties, most of the nine beachmasters and assistant beachmasters were in their early twenties, with only one or two being past mid-twenties. As for the 70 plus ratings, the great majority had barely turned 20, with none even approaching the SMO's recommended upper age limit. With regard to the "preference of selection," research for this article has revealed that a high percentage of "W" personnel had logged considerable sea-time prior to volunteering and selection.

By early December 1943, most of the required Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve

(RCNVR) personnel had received their appointments and arrived in Ardentenny, Scotland, to undergo the basic beach commando training in HMS "Armadillo." The ratings, for some reason, had actually assembled there a month ahead of the officers. Chart 1 depicts RCN Beach Commando "W's" organizational structure and position classifications.

Officer ranks in "W" varied according to position. Both the PBM and the D/PBM (after the latter became CO) were acting lieutenant-commanders. The Admin officer and BMs held lieutenant rank upon appointment, while six ABMs, who arrived as a mixture of sub and full lieutenants, had all attained lieutenant rank by the beginning of 1944.

The actual number of POs and L/S attached to "W" varied throughout "W's" nine month existence, even though the original structure authorized six of each. At any one time there were never more than four POs, on which occasions as many as eight L/S would be on strength. Most of the leading hands were promoted from within the ranks after successfully passing the special Combined

Chart 1 Organization of Beach Command "W"		
Principal Beach Master (PBM)		
Deputy Principal Beach Master (D/PBM)*		
Administration and Stores Officer		
W-1 Beach Party	W-2 Beach Party	W-3 Beach Party
Beach Master (BM)	Beach Master (BM)	Beach Master (BM)
2 Assistant Beach Masters (ABMs)	2 Assistant Beach Masters (ABMs)	2 Assistant Beach Masters (ABMs)
2 Petty Officers (POs)	2 Petty Officers (POs)	2 Petty Officers (POs)
2 Leading Seamen (L/S)	2 Leading Seamen (L/S)	2 Leading Seamen (L/S)
6 Able-bodied Seamen (ABs)	6 Able-bodied Seamen (ABs)	6 Able-bodied Seamen (ABs)
14 Ordinary Seamen (ODs)	14 Ordinary Seamen (ODs)	14 Ordinary Seamen (ODs)
N.B. An extra OD was added later to act as bodyguard and messenger for the PBM.		
* Just prior to the Normandy invasion, the D/PBM in all Beach Commandos acquired the additional title of Commanding Officer. This enabled the PBM, who still retained overall authority to work more closely with the Army Beach Company commander.		



*Training with RCN Beach Command "W"
HMS Armadillo, Ardentiny, Scotland
December 1943 to February 1944
(Photos by Lt. G. Milne RCNVR)*

Left: AB F.C. Albrechtson "kills" AB H.D. Smith with a Fairbairn-Sykes Commando Knife.

(NAC PA 183055)

Below left: AB J. Skinner (left) and L/S J. Joyce practice hand-to-hand combat. Note the whitened 1937 Pattern Web Equipment and British manufactured Battledress uniforms.

(NAC PA 183056)

Below: Route marches with full equipment in the Scottish Highlands were a standard part of training.

(NAC PA 183052)

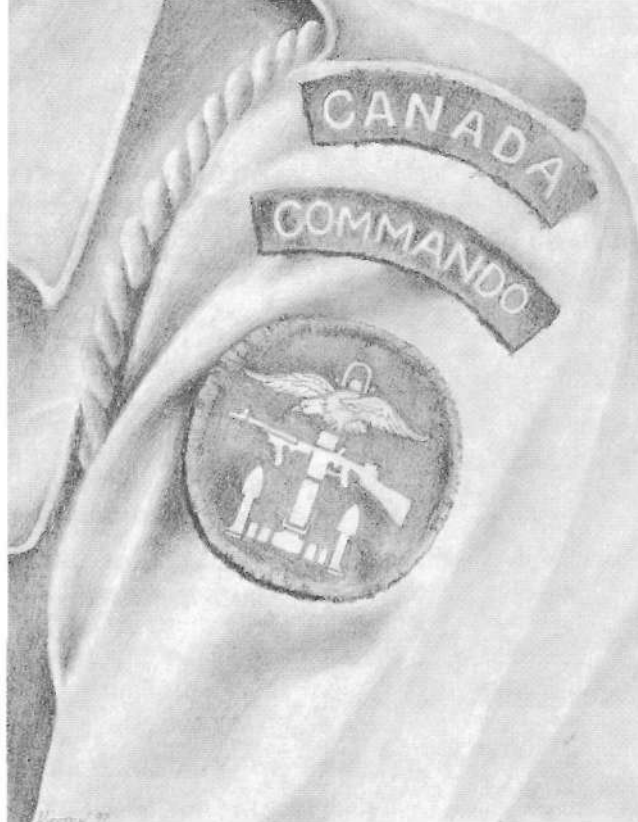


Operations "killick" course. With respect to the lesser ranks, which called for 18 ABs and 42 ODs, the Commando ended up with virtually all ratings in the former category.

The training received in HMS "Armadillo," which lasted 14 weeks, terminated in mid-February 1944. The extensive grounds, surrounding hills, and nearby Loch Long beaches provided an ideal setting for "W"'s introduction to Commando life. From a series of over 100 photographs taken by Lieutenant G.A. Milne, RCNVR, a Canadian naval photographer, it is apparent that most energy was expended on such activities as: assault courses, route marches, over-night bivouacs, beach drills, cliff climbing and unarmed combat lessons. During this intensive training, being soaking wet and cold seemed to be everyone's

perpetual state. The PBM remarked in a report that while "W" personnel had generally benefitted from reading the many available Combined Operations pamphlets and also several of the beachmaster accounts about the recent Allied landings in North Africa, it was questionable whether HMS "Armadillo's" total inventory of three Landing Craft Mechanized (LCM) and six Landing Craft Vehicle (Personnel) LCV (P) could be deemed adequate for training in beaching and unbeaching landing craft.

In mid-January 1944 "W"'s PBM, D/PBM and three original BMs attended a two-week Beach Organization course conducted by HMS "Dundonald" near Troon, Scotland. According to the Chief Instructor at this Combined Training Centre, all of them acquitted themselves very well. Then at the beginning of February the Stores



officer and two BMs were sent on Exercise "Roundabout" to observe how stores should be unloaded from various landing craft onto the beaches.

As "W" prepared to move south to HMS "Mastodon" at Exbury, we should note the assessments, made by CO HMS "Armadillo." With the exception of two officers who for medical reasons could not participate fully in the training programme, all ten others received quite creditable comments. Notwithstanding his earlier report which indicated that every "W" AB had failed very badly in their Leading Seamen examination, the CO stated: "The ratings proved themselves to be exceptionally keen and intelligent. They retained their enthusiasm to the end in spite of a long period of training in "Armadillo.""

On 16 February 1944 some 80 "W" members, loaded down with six tons of baggage, bade a fond farewell both to their short-term Scottish burrow and also to the RN Beach Commando which, with still another week of training to go, had shared occupancy of, as well as experiences on and around, the Ardentenny site.

Coincident with "W"s arrival at HMS "Mastodon" (situated on the 250-acre Rothschild estate in Exbury) was its formal attachment to Force J and instructions to work under G J3 with headquarters at Beaulieu. However, since Force

J had already received its entitlement of three Commandos ("L," "P," and "S"), the Canadian unit was in effect deemed spare. In any event, "W" henceforth remained on alert in case it was called upon to participate in a Combined Operations exercise.

Limited training facilities at or close to HMS "Mastodon" resulted in many "outside" opportunities being seized upon in order to prepare the unit for what was obviously not far ahead, and also to complement the otherwise monotonous physical regimen and occasional leave.

Over the ensuing six weeks, both in groups and/or as individuals, ratings and officers alike attended a wide variety of courses such as: land mines, booby traps, bomb detection and disposal, underwater beach obstacles, landing craft recovery, and aircraft recognition. Afterwards demonstration sessions would be held for the benefit of those who had remained at HMS "Mastodon."

A large percentage of "W" members finally did gain some practical beach experience around this period when G J3 arranged for most of the officers and some 30 ratings to observe certain large scale exercises - "Gold Braid," "Trousers," and "Prank."



(Photo by Lieutenant "Bus" Arless, NAC PA 182957)

*An unidentified member of Beach
Commando "W" waves in LCT #2232.*

Towards the end of March, "W" Commando learned that its present accommodation was required for operational Landing Craft Infantry (Large) LCI(L) flotilla crews and staff. About this same time, SO(CO) advised his superior, SCNO(L) - Senior Canadian Naval Officer, London - that while "W" was definitely the spare Commando in Force J and as such would not take part in any main assault, "it is most likely, however, that the party will be required for a diversionary assault such as Salerno or Anzio." Early in April "W" moved to HMS "Lizard" at Hove.

When, within two weeks, the whole matter of "W"'s role resurfaced, SCNO(L) apparently appealed to a higher Canadian authority. Finally, in mid-May, Force J was told to hold "W" in immediate reserve and to ensure it received all possible training, including exercise "Greengage" which was about to take place.

Meanwhile and as had been the case at Exbury, valuable opportunities for "outside" training became available. Particularly useful as it subsequently turned out were vehicle handling courses run by the Canadian Army, as a result of which practically every "W" member learned to operate a wide range of military vehicles. Noteworthy too was the experience gained by three officers who underwent a two-week outdoor battle tactics course and by 70 ratings who took a week of infantry and street fighting instruction at Canadian Army training schools. Throughout this fortnight period, the bulk of the Commando bivouacked under canvas.

While much of the time spent at Hove was devoted to assembling, sorting, fitting and servicing operational stores and beach equipment, the PBM's May report indicated that very little training gear had thus far been obtained. So whenever beach drills were held,



(Photo by Lt. "Bus" Arless, NAC PA 182960)

Above left: "W" Beach Commando boarding Canadian LCI (L) #298 near Southampton on 7 July 1944 for passage to Normandy.



(Photo by Lt. "Bus" Arless, NAC PA 182953)

Below left: Members of "W" approach "Mike" Beach in the Juno sector on 7 July 1944.

Commandos ("L," "P," and "S") had landed on JUNO Beach on D-Day, and soon after all "W" personnel must have begun to wonder whether, after so many months of intensive preparations, they would ever be called upon to carry out their mission.

A definite answer was continuously withheld over the next four weeks. The first major positive signal occurred on 13 June 1944 when RN Beach Signals Section Number 1 officially joined "W." As already mentioned, the Canadian War Cabinet Committee had authorized the RCN the previous September to allocate sufficient naval personnel for a Beach Commando and for a Beach Signal section. Since the RCN could not fulfil the latter part of this commitment, it fell to the RN to do so.

However, after a request shortly later from the London-based Canadian Naval Mission Overseas (CNMO) to have a Canadian LCI(L) transport "W" to Normandy for experience was turned down by Allied Naval Commander Expeditionary Force (ANCFE), a sense of pessimism returned. This was augmented at the end of June by a signal from HMS "Vectis" sanctioning nine days leave to "W" Commando.

Then suddenly out of the blue came the anxiously awaited and hoped for answer. On 4 July, less than 48 hours into their leave, "W" received orders to proceed to Juno sector on 7 July in Canadian LCI(L) #298 "for a period of experience in beach duties." Accordingly, urgent recalls were dispatched to those on leave.

At its departure from Cowes on the afternoon of 7 July 1944, LCI(L) 298 of Canada's 1st (ex-RN 260th) Flotilla had boarded seven Officers and 52 Ratings from "W" for the trip to Normandy. The remaining personnel, being those who failed to return from leave on time, would not join their unit for several days. The following morning "W's" advance party disembarked on Juno's Mike Beach near Courseulles and officially relieved RN Beach Commando "P"

most often the operational gear would have to be utilized. Even at that, one finds frequent references in official military documents to the necessity for borrowing and scrounging from any source whatsoever.

A number of ratings in "W" took advantage of the Royal Navy training staff and facilities to upgrade at HMS "Lizard." After taking the special three-week course, 10 ABs passed the Combined Operations Leading Seaman examination and one L/S similarly qualified as Petty Officer. Sanctioned by HMCS "Niobe," this method of advancing ratings from within facilitated bringing "W" more in line with authorized staffing classifications.

At the end of May, six 3-ton trucks and two single-deck buses transported "W" Commando from Hove to Southampton (from where the convoy transferred for the ferry passage to Cowes on the Isle of Wight) and thence to HMS "Vectis" (Pines Camp). Within a week Force J's three RN

which, having suffered casualties during and after Operation Neptune's (seaborne portion of "Overlord") D-Day assault, returned to the United Kingdom for regrouping and rest.

Regarding the rather sudden move to Normandy, "W"'s CO commented:

Fortunately no stores were required to be taken initially and this eased the strain of recall and embarkation. Arms, extra blankets, tents and a few other odd items were the only articles of stores brought. As "W" Commando's role has been and still is one of relief, it has taken over the equipment (from "P" Commando) as it has taken over the beach.

Throughout the first week, which coincided with the Allies concentrated drive against Caen, frequent "dog fights" occurred over the beach area and protracted and intense air raids took place against the anchorage each night." In spite of all this, "W" managed to carry out its several tasks satisfactorily enough to prompt the local Army beach Group Commander to request that it not be replaced by "P" Commando which had since returned to the United Kingdom.

Notwithstanding this request, on 18 July 1944, "P" was reassigned to Mike beach and "W" took over from "S" Commando on Nan Beach near Bernieres. During the ensuing four weeks at what was mainly a stores disembarkation area, "W" apparently helped immeasurably in creating daily records for tons of stores and military vehicles off-loaded. Regarding the latter, "W"'s PBM would remark in his final report of October 1944 that, of all the training courses, he considered the one in vehicle handling taken by all personnel to probably have been the most useful.

Shortly afterwards NOIC Juno put "S" Commando in charge of both Mike and Nan

Above right: A member of "W" and a Canadian army captain supervise the off-loading of vehicles from LCT #2434.

(Photo by Lieutenant "Bus" Arless, NAC PA 182954)

Below right: Another view of LCT #2484 shows a specialized bulldozer and a Sherman BAV in the water. Both of these vehicles were designed to push beached landing craft into deep water, even under enemy fire.

(Photo by Lieutenant "Bus" Arless, NAC PA 138182)

Beaches and scheduled "W" for a 29 July return to the United Kingdom. However, it changed its mind and decided to dispatch "P" instead. Over the next three weeks, and particularly following the capture of Caen and Cherbourg, activity on Juno Beaches gradually became routine. On 7 August 1944, "W"'s CO wrote as follows to SO(CO):

We have been doing not too badly so far - touch wood - and still remain quite busy. Several cases of diarrhoea have been tabled but not sufficient numbers to impair our efficiency...Have had a little shelling and what not but find the goddamn flies die worst nuisance. They are an absolute menace!

On 22 August 1944, after serving for almost seven weeks in the Juno Sector, "W" Commando returned to Cowes and HMS "Vectis" (Pines Camp). From a statistical stand-point, it had spent 80 per cent of its ten-month existence in training and 20 per cent in operations. According to a Canadian naval history report dated December 1944/January 1945:



The Officers were almost all pleased at the prospect of general service again with its more consistent routine, but the Ratings were universally disgruntled at being disbanded. They felt disappointment at not having been through the trial by fire of an assault landing for which they had been trained so arduously for so long.

Although the Admiralty suggested sending "W" to HMS "Armadillo" or HMS "Dundonald," the Canadian authorities gave orders for "W" as well as the three Canadian LCI(L) flotillas to disband by the end of August 1944.

Accordingly and before new appointments could be made or leave granted, "W" had first to assemble and prepare inventories of all arms, ammunition and stores, and then ensure that they were returned to their proper respective depots. On 30 August 1944 "W"s final signal announced that "paying off details had been completed.

Meanwhile, a number of the RN Beach Commandos would continue to play vital operational roles on the coasts of Europe and South-East Asia right up until the surrender of Germany and Japan. In December 1945, Mountbatten advised the Admiralty that he concurred with the recommendation in the Allied Commander-in-Chiefs report on Operation "Overlord" of changing the title of Naval Beach Commando to Naval Beach Company. Three months later the Admiralty announced the abolition of the title Naval Beach Commando and its replacement by Naval Beach Control Party. Finally, we note that following the 1949 reorganization of Combined Operations, the Royal Marines assumed the role which had been played in World War II by such units as RCN Beach Commando "W."

Notes

Most of the text for this article is based upon a 71-page manuscript, entitled "RCN Beach Commando "W," written ca. 1991 by E.G. Finley, a copy of which has been deposited in the Directorate of History & Heritage, Department of National Defence, Ottawa, Canada.

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(Photo by Lieutenant G. Milne, NAC PA 183005)

Lieutenant E.G. Finley.

and Loretta Storey. I would also like to give a special thanks to Eric Gault Finley, without his help, this article would not have gotten off of the ground. He has very generously allowed me to use not only the photographs and information that he has collected but has also enthusiastically proof read this article several times, which in itself must be a labour of love. Mr. Finley has asked me to include a note of thanks to Captain Eric A. Turner, Royal Army Medical Corps, who operated on him in Normandy in July 1944 and probably saved his life. Mr. Turner now lives in Birmingham and they both have since met each other in 1990.

Prior to joining RCN Beach Commando "W" in December 1943, Eric Gault Finley served as a watch-keeper in sea-going ships and a divisional officer at a land-based training centre. He was wounded in Normandy in July 1944. Demobbed early in 1945, he degrees at McGill (B.Com) and Columbia (M.A. & Ed.D.). He had a postwar career in teaching and educational research, retiring from the Federal public service in 1980.

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