Minesweepers first in on D-Day

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By Bill Hunt
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It was 59 years ago today that Belleville resident John Trafford stood on the bridge of the HMCS Mulgrave and watched American troops storm Omaha Beach on the coast of Nazi-occupied Europe.

Trafford, 82, was then a 22-year-old leading telegraphist on a flotilla of Canadian minesweepers that cleared the way for the landing craft and other assault craft that morning.

He was among the first Canadians to see the coast of Normandy on June 6, 1944 as part of the RCN 31st Fleet Minesweeping Flotilla.

The flotilla left England around 5:30 p.m. June 5 and passed through a rallying point on the English Channel code-named Piccadilly Circus, before heading for the coast of Normandy. Along with his ship were the Canadian minesweepers Caraquet, Corwichan, Wasaga, Milltown, Minas, Fort William, Blairmore, Malpeque and Bayfield. Trafford notes that Belleville resident Doug Crosbie was on HMCS Fort William that day.

The flotilla was under the command of the American cruiser U.S.S. Augusta. Trafford arrived off the coast of Normandy around 3 a.m. June 6 and his ship began sweeping the channel for mines.

"This was the spearhead of the invasion," he says. "They (the Germans) didn't know we were there until it was light."

By 5:30 a.m. the task was complete and the minesweepers pulled back to allow the landing craft room to move in.

Although it was dangerous work, Trafford had been doing it since joining the navy in 1939.

"I really didn't feel that much. We'd been doing convoy work for four years and I think I was more apprehensive doing convoy work because we didn't know what would happen."

In convoy work, "it could happen at any time of any day at any minute," while on D-Day he was part of an offensive operation and had some idea of what to expect.

Although he was nervous that day "I don't think it was an overwhelming fear that you were going to die ... I went to work the same as I did any day in a convoy ... It wasn't like you were going to battle for the first time, let's put it that way. I can understand the army guys — most of them had never been in battle before."

PHOTO SUBMITTED
Telegraphist John Trafford, in his Navy uniform in 1940.

The fear came later — by the second or third day of the invasion, he had a greater respect for mines.

Trafford recalls seeing the blasts of the 14-inch guns from the large American ships firing broadside onto the coast and, while the Mulgrave "got the odd splash" from enemy shell fire, there were no close calls for it.

The flotilla at Omaha cleared more mines that day than any other group of minesweepers involved in the D-Day invasion, says Trafford.

The relatively low number of casualties was not what the Allied commanders had expected. The brass had anticipated 70 percent casualties among the minesweepers because they were the first ships to go in, but fortunately the numbers didn't materialize.

It was a different story for the soldiers on Omaha Beach, where the Americans were pinned down and took the heaviest casualties of D-Day. When he had time, Trafford stood on the bridge of the Mulgrave and watched the show with a pair of binoculars.

"They (the soldiers) were having trouble. The landing craft were really having trouble," he recalls.

Most of the time however, Trafford was busy handling messages, as the Mulgrave was monitoring five radio frequencies that day. Under normal circumstances, his ship would have monitored two frequencies.

"It was maddening. You were taking messages back and forth to the bridge ... It was busy. We were very busy."

For a while there was the possibility that the invasion at Omaha would turn into an evacuation, but sometime around noon or 1 p.m. the American Rangers reached the top of Cape du Hoc and the troops that had been stuck on the beach began to move off it.

Trafford says the most amazing aspect of D-Day was the logistics of it. There were approximately 5,000 vessels involved in the invasion and the movement of all of them had to be co-ordinated in bad weather.

The HMCS Mulgrave continued to work along the French coast for the next five to six months before it struck a mine near Le Harve and, in danger of sinking, had to return to England.

After the war Trafford worked in the office equipment business before going to university. He then went to work for Corrections Canada and retired as a staff training co-ordinator.

Today, his big hobby is cycling.

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