ATHENAEUM PAPER

AN EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY (Continued)

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AN EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY (Continued)

Both in fiction and in autobiography first person narrating generally needs a pretext -- also known as a justification -- to begin.

The operations in the Mediterranean were described in an earlier paper so I will go no further into them here -- but when our allied forces were soundly established on the Italian mainland, our LCTs returned to North Africa and the Lake of Bizerte. Our LCT flotilla was dissolved, part of our group being ordered to India and the remainder to the British Isles, called the United Kingdom or UK.

I was assigned to the amphibious command based in Plymouth, on the Hamoaze Inlet on the west boundary of Devon, on the western side of the Plymouth Sound was Cornwall.

This was late in 1943 and the American amphibious naval forces in the United Kingdom were under the command of Commodore Korns based there at Hamoaze House in Plymouth where the inlet joins the English Channel. It was surprising to find palm trees on the north coast of the channel, bathed as it is by the Gulf Stream. It was said Sir Francis Drake was bowling on the Plymouth Hoe when the Spanish Armada was sighted coming down from the north.

It was from Plymouth that the Pilgrims sailed to New England shortly after 1600.

Living quarters were assigned us in a 17th century military structure set aside for H. M. Navy at Plymouth, a base second only to Portsmouth as the center of the Royal Navy.

A rather dank, large, basement room was shared with Lt.(Jg) Hubert Wilhoit and Ens. Paul Thompson, (I believe), Wilhoit, a lawyer from

eastern Kentucky, a few years older than I, later was on the appellate bench in the Appalachian area. A good guy, while Paul was a student violinist drafted out of music school, pleasant, young, but nearly every available spare moment he had was spent practicing Mendelssohn's violin concerto -- a great piece which wore well, but Paul was never really with us. Despite this exposure, I still love that concerto and fortunately he was good if not then yet great.

Landing ships and craft and naval personnel were pouring into the British Isles at a great rate in preparation for the assault on the French coast. Overall allied naval command was under Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey, whose headquarters were deep underground some hundred fifty miles east of Plymouth on the edge of cliffs along the British Channel. It was perhaps 8 or 10 miles from a similar underground headquarters of the ground forces under General D. D. Eisenhower.

My LCT command having been dissolved, Commodore Korns directed me to prepare training memoranda for use of the British Chart System for U. S. Naval forces coming into the United Kingdom. Every possible shelter for landing craft, every tiny harbor, cove and beach along the south coast of England, and even on each side of Bristol Channel, was being deluged with personnel and equipment from Lands End at the estreme western limit of England. We had improvised bases on every available site. Falmouth, Truro, Fowey, Dartmouth, Torquay, Exmouth, Lyme Regis, Weymouth, to name but a few.

All these facilities, no matter how insignificant, had nets protecting entrances, and approaches were heavily mined. The German miniature subs were constantly probing their defences. German then occupied the south side of the English Channel.

With the mine fields constantly fluctuating, our naval forces had to maintain and use the British naval charts, American forces being in nearly every small harbor, beach or inlet, weekly updates on the mine-fields were crucial in our day-to-day naval operations, and these charts were updated weekly.

American forces were posted on each side of the Bristol Channel, the north coast being in Wales, and the south in Cornwall, Wiltshire and other British shires. Having written those training memorandum, I was then assigned the duty of setting up chart depots and training the youthful U.S. quartermasters in the use and upkeep of the charts, and of signs and nomenclature in small chart depots placed at frequent intervals on the south coast of Cornwall, Devon and Dorset, and then also on both sides of the Bristol channel.

Previous training at the Naval Academy stood me in good stead. I was supplied a large ancient Hudson automobile which I drove all along the English coast and up into Wales. This was especially challenging, because the British had removed all road signs and markers which could have helped German invaders and there were no adequate road maps. Driving over narrow two-lane roads, often deep in hedgerows, I fumbled my way around from Milford Haven at the extreme western tip of Wales through the city of Bristol and out to Lands End, the western extreme of Cornwall. This was beautiful country, moist and green, but no through highways. One drove from one town or village to the next and looked for help. My southern accent was no great help with the average resident, but I learned to sound all vowels and to place terminal consonants and generally found my way -- but matters were complicated by blackouts and short days

in those higher latitudes. I also dealt with the British naval chart depots where the people in charge were endlessly cooperative, but very scantily equipped and supplied.

On two or three occasions, it was possible to get a bit of butter from our naval supply base -- butter had been prohibited in England since the war began -- and that butter did wonders to promote cooperation from some of the naval types. One gracious lady even managed to get me a half pint of milk, after I complained I did miss milk, not having tasted any for a couple of years. Needless to say, I hoarded my small soap and cigarette rations which were priceless as trade goods.

Fortunately, my experiences at Annapolis, and in the Mediterranean, had given me a wide acquaintance with the U.S. naval forces and this stood me in good stead.

Having completed this chart assignment, a few weeks before the projected landings in Normandy, Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey requested U.S. amphibious forces assign several experienced U.S. naval officers to stand watches with his headquarters forces and about a dozen of us young officers led by a Lt. Commander Robert P. Anderson, the rest of us now mostly Lt.(jg)s, were assigned to Admiral Ramsey's headquarters. Pairs of us stood watches at the war room in the underground which was 60 or 70 feet below the surface, reached by steps carved in the bedrock.

The war room was large, as I recall, probably 50 to 60 feet wide, perhaps 100 feet long and there was an immense gridded board or table surface, representing the British Channel. Everything, ships, craft, etc, on the channel was represented on this board. German E-boats were stationed across on the French coast and as an allied ship or craft moved up the channel, the German E-boats often would leave the French coast

to intercept, and allied motor torpedo boats and such other small forces would be dispatched to intercept these enemy forces. A balcony or mezzanine around this war room stood about 8 or 10 feet above the level of the war board. One could move around that Mezzanine and observe, while Royal Naval Women (WRENS) were plotting the forces on the gridded board, using long pushers such as used by croupiers at gambling tables.

When it appeared that something was developing, word would circulate and those of us with access would often gather to watch.

Also among those on duty at this underground headquarters were several attractive competent young officers with whom we associated. They manned English craft such as motor torpedo boats, etc. in these encounters. These operations were often under the cover of darkness.

The WRENS working the board were carefully selected, especially bright and competent. One, Lavinia Laselles, a strikingly handsome young woman, was the daughter of Sir Gerald Laselles, private secretary to the King and his first cousin. She had a beautiful strong singing voice. Another WREN had a wonderful title, Senior Plotting WREN -- this was Ann Greensill -- a remarkable and extremely effective woman. She had charge of one of the watches.

Warmly welcomed, we Americans shared their messes and lived in a Nissen hut on the edge of the cliff a few yards from the entrance to the steps leading down to the underground.

In this period buzz-bombs, jet-propelled, unmanned, bomb-carrying vehicles with heavy charges, were being launched from the French coast, mainly toward London. They did not move very fast and many passed over our hut. We took turns standing watch to alert our off-duty fellows to

hit slit-trenches just outside our hut, if an approaching buzz-bomb appeared to threaten. Early, we learned if you could hear the putt-putt, but couldn't see the exhaust from the rear of the bomb, that buzz-bomb was headed directly for our immediate area. The body of the bomb blocked the flare from us. These bombs were very numerous but not especially accurate. Many never reached London -- but when one of us standing watch heard one coming but didn't see the flame, it was his duty to run through our hut hollering "take cover" -- for which act you may have had two or three minutes to hit the trenches. One never hit our hut but I well remember one that went between our hut and ad adjoining supply building only to crash and explode a short distance beyond.

The plotting WRENS had been provided quarters in a fine old house not far from our quarters and our social life was active and very interesting. Their house had a lovely old garden,small and well-tended.

Eating in the British naval mess was another matter. The food was, to put it mildly, terrible, lots of potatoes or marrows cooked until you couldn't tell which -- stewed to a watery mass. Heavy dark bread. Often assorted pickled cucumbers, including numerous pickled bugs. Much tea and very little and quite poor meat, but we American officers were welcomed into their navy bar -- one scotch a day and then unlimited gin -- all other alcoholic beverages very scarce. Earlier we had found even the British landing craft would have a tiny bar with adequate gin, with rations of rum used daily for the lower ranks.

There was no division of junior or senior officers' messes as in U.S. navy establishments. We all ate together and I remember the Chief Operations Officer, Captain Andrews, who hailed from Winchester, a beautiful village not far away, and I often had the opportunity to eat sitting next to him.

The British mess declined American navy food and outside <u>everything</u> was rationed. Even though we had coupons, there was very little to buy, unless we managed a week-end leave or for a day or so went up to London some 70 miles north -- where one could, with diligence, find a few items of clothing.

We were supplied domestic services when we were first given our quarters, having come over from Plymouth. A very pretty young naval orderly came and inquired of us young officers -- "Gentlemen, at what time would you like to be knocked up in the morning?" You may imagine our surprise -- and our recognition of the language differences.

It was surprising that when the British were required to provide living quarters to the U.S. naval forces, they planned for about 10% of the water that U.S. naval forces normally consumed. It appeared that much of this usage was a difference in bathing habits.

Our unit was assigned one weapons carrier for our use. Chief Warrant Officer Jerry Anderson was our man-of-all-trades -- a talented, enterprizing operator. So he was offen dispatched to our naval supply base in Devon, near Exeter, some 150 miles west, to get what he could and that did help.

The officer then in charge of that supply base was a Mormon named J. Whitney Hanks, with whom I had served in North Africa. A strict Mormon, resourceful and effective, he was appalled at his job but very conscientious and creative.

Our British naval mess had no refrigeration; so we implored Whit to find us a refrigerator. He said he had no way to send one to our unit, but if we could pick one up he'd find one. So off went our handyman,

Jerry Anderson, with our trusty weapons carrier. When he got to Exeter, Whit reported there was not a single refrigerator available in the entire United Kingdom. All he had been able to find was a huge ice-making machine. In that machine water poured onto a cold revolving drum, the resulting ice being scraped off into a bin, so that ice-maker was what Jerry brought back. It had to be plumbed into a waterline but Captain Anderson, after presentation of the matter at a staff meeting, approved our setting up the ice-making machine in a storage hut near our Nissen hut. Marvellous.

Then we procured a hand-cranked ice-cream freezer and the American navy supply base had adequate supplies of ice-cream powder, something I had never heard of before. So, we began a series of ice-cream socials for our WREN friends who had been denied ice-cream since the war began in 1939. We served it generously in soup bowls with large spoons. To our great pleasure, the young officers from the motor torpedo boats also joined us, usually at the WREN's quarters. I particularly remember Peter Scott, who was the son of the explorer who was lost in the Arctic. After WW II he did a set of engravings of birds -- a fine and talented illustrator, an artist who died only a few years ago.

We offered the naval mess the use of ice from our machine, but they politely, but firmly, refused -- saying it would be very bad for military morale if forces in the field thought their leaders were indulged with such luxuries.

Once one of the young British officers invited me to be his guest at an official British naval affair held at a large hall at or near South ampton. I remember his gleaming white, heavily-starched dress shirt

patched many times. I dressed in my best uniform for a ceremonial British naval affair. In the hall there were many large mounted animal trophies handing high on the walls, heads hanging ten or twelve feet high all around the room, water buffalo, elephants, rhinos, etc. There was also a large sign advising: "In event of a barrage, these heads have been known to fall You have been warned."

Nelson's ancient flagship was tied up at a dock in the Southampton area and I did attend one celebration on board.

Bob Smith, my former commanding officer in LCT Flottila Eleven, had been sent to Liverpool and we arranged a week-end meeting in London. The Little Blitz was on and the blackouts were quite bewildering. By this time, my dress uniforms had become threadbare and I did manage to have a dress blue uniform made at Gieves in Bond Street, and even had shoes made by Peal. We had British clothing coupons, as well as some food coupons -- but the life of the English at this juncture was harshly spartan.

In London, Bob Smith and I shared an elegant double room at the Dorchester Hotel facing on Hyde Park -- quite elegant quarters with very heavy, lined, blinds at the windows to make sure no light escaped. Outside, all over the landscape were barrage balloons designed to force the German airforce to maintain altitude. Anti-aircraft barrages were heavy, noisy and the falling shrapnel was a hazard, but this was almost always at night -- and one wore a helmet if forced to go out during such raids.

Getting about, especially after dark, was difficult and the undergrounds, much deeper in the earth than our subways, were solidly

packed each night. People, including whole families, sleeping on the platforms.

Bombings had damaged the water mains severely and the authorities abandoned all attempts to re-bury the lines where they were shattered. Repair crews simply laid the replacement pipes along the gutters and this made walking at night hazardous, with the blackout and the use of torches or flashlights strictly forbidden.

Still, the theatres played and there were concerts and the people showed a remarkable ability, determination and willingness to cope. What that civilian population endured was impressive.

Situations such as these lead to rapid development of friendships. Our senior plotting WREN, Ann Grensill, had herself escaped from Belgium when the Germans flanked the Maginot Line. Her father had been in charge of all the British War Monuments on the Continent and his family was living in Brussels. He was called to immediate military duty and Ann, at 17, drove her mother and two younger sisters through the Belgian and French countryside during those days the Germans were passing the Maginot Line and driving their car got to the channel coast. Once at the coast, she was then able to secure passage across the channel to Britain.

Ann's grandmother had a lovely old house near Ryde, on the Isle of Wight, and when we younger American officers had free time we were welcome to go over to her home, which faced the mainland. It looked out at the Solent near Cowes, famous for its yatching races. Just 150 years ago this past August, the first Americas Cup Race had been held in that area.

One of Ann's sisters, also then in the service, was being married and one of my sisters, Lillian Ridley, who had dropped out of Agnes Scott College and was working at Wright Field in Dayton, was able to procure a little soap and some underwear for the bride. It is difficult for us to conceive the extreme privations the English suffered under Churchill and still maintain their spirit.

You may remember that it was said of Winston Churchill, after he gave a dramatic and effective expression of the British will -- their blood, toil, tears and sweat -- that he was said to have marshalled the English language and marched it off to war.

Since those days, we've kept in touch. Ann, in peace time, served as the Queen's Magistrate. She is now widowed and living in Torquay, a charming resort village on the south Devon coast, just east of Plymouth.

My wife, Joy, and I have visited there in recent years and Ann and her late husband, Tim, have a daughter now living in Darien, Connecticut, and we talked by telephone earlier this year.

Security was extremely tight around Admiral Ramsey's headquarters, since the time and place for a surprise landing could constitute a considerable advantage. During this period our group resolved never to speak about our activities in public or by phone for fear of being overheard.

In the course of my duties, I also had an association with U.S. Commander Richard Aldrich, who was in charge of our naval forces at Southampton. Once I encountered him in London where he was dining at the Savoy with his wife, the actress Gertrude Lawrence. A very pleasant chance meeting.

The landings in France were much more a British than an American operation -- by far the American navy's largest amphibious operation had been in the Mediterranean, moving from North Africa to Sicily and on to Italy.

But our amphibious forces continued operations, landing in France on D-Day. It is reported that after D-Day our joint forces put a million men with their equipment and supplies across the English channel in the first month. Having earlier taken part in two assaults on a defended coast, I confess I was very glad indeed not to be in that original assault on the French coast, a notoriously bloody one, but once having landed those forces in France, the amphibious forces' obligation to support and supply them was monumental. Planning had been thorough, immensely detailed and minutely organized. Not only did we have to land the fighting forces, but we had to follow up to supply their needs.

The Germans, always highly competent, well-organized and methodical, as they withdrew from a port or coastal defense, they left that abandoned area devastated. Falling back, they blew up all bridges and other facilities such as quays and wharfs, etc.

Such destruction made our amphibious craft especially useful, since we could land and discharge men, equipment, supplies almost anywhere. Our LCTs moved up the Seine toward Paris -- and you can imagine with all bridges destroyed and roads blasted, what burdens fell on our landing craft.

Each of these craft were assigned by that detailed and comprehensive plan to carry supplies, equipment, men when and where directed,

then to return immediately to the United Kingdom for their next loads -- all carefully synchronized and planned -- and as time passed, fewer and fewer of our craft returned for their next loads.

One of my old skippers, Gordon Williams, and I were then designated by Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey to go to Army headquarters in France, then in the process of being established in Paris, and find out what was happening to our craft which were not returning. There was no record of their being sunk or captured, but they simply were not coming back to pick up their loads.

I forget the precise date, but in August or September, the military situation was quite fluid, Gordon and I were dispatched with a jeep to do liaison work with the U.S. Army in France. The U.S. Navy itself was also then setting up its headquarters at St. Germain de pres on the outskirts of Paris. Gordon and I drove our jeep into an LST at Southampton, landed on the French coast and headed through the French countryside along the Seine to Paris.

We did not have to detail our mission specifically to the Army forces. Our discoveries were to be reported promptly and privately to our Admiral -- emphatically privately. Our orders were simply to cooperate with Army authorities and to report to Admiral Ramsey as to the whereabouts of our craft. In Paris we were assigned living quarters at a fine old hotel, the Royal Monceau on Avenue Hoche, about 3 blocks from the Arc de Triumphe. We were supplied an office on the Champs Elysee, a second floor office over the sales room for Chanel perfumers. Gordon arranged most of these matters while I, with our jeep, ranged about trying to locate our landing craft.

Our assignment was to find the craft, report by top-secret mail directly to Admiral Ramsey. The idea was, if he knew where the craft were, he would directly order the commanding officers at that spot to return the craft at once. We were directed not to report our findings by general communications systems as that would have blown our cover.

Fortunately, the U.S. naval officer in command at St. Germain des pres was a regular U.S. naval officer I had served under in the Mediterranean. This enabled me readily to gain access to his operations. I would call every day, pay my respects to the commander, wander to the operations office, speak to some of the younger English and American officers I knew and observe, very casually, on their board, where our craft were. I made no notes, no records, then back at our office on the Champs Elysee, Gordon and I would compile a report to be sent by top-secret mail to Admiral Ramsey at his headquarters near Southampton.

It appeared the local area commanders were countermanding our craft's orders to return, because those local commanders desperately needed our craft to ford the rivers where bridges were gone.

Meanwhile, Gordon and I were living luxuriously in the Royal Monceau with little electricity, no heat, hot water once a week, but a dining room manned by French chefs with access to American food supplies. I marvelled at the beautiful omlets these chefs produced, incomparable bread, and I investigated. The chefs were using those terrible powdered eggs, powdered milk and dehydrated potatoes, which in Navy Cook's hands came our like cellulose sponges. The head chef demonstrated how they reconstituted the eggs the night before with a bit of powdered milk,

then the next morning whipped them and made individual omlets. A revelation. Even our canned beans were good, but the Spam did defeat them.

The French were delighted to have us there and I remember well indeed when in late December the Germans broke out in Ardennes Forrest and with the Battle of the Bulge, seriously threatened to cut our lines to the Channel. The Seine itself was jammed with barges sunk at the wharfs and quays by the Germans, who had been ordered by Hitler to destroy Paris.

This battle of the bulge developed into the climactic confrontation of World War II. Two army divisions broke, others severely mauled, the Third U.S. Army lost 20,000 battle casualties and the First U.S. Army had 22,000. The final toll of U.S. casualties was 76,000, of these 8607 were dead, 47,139 wounded and 21,144 missing.

The German surge ended June 28th with German casualties of about 100,000 and 1,000 of their planes destroyed. At one point in this Ardennes campaign the Germans captured 8,000 U.S. troops.

To the relief of the French, the German orders to destroy Paris had been disobeyed. German General Dietrich von Choltitz, German Commander of Paris, disobeyed Hitler's order to destroy the city. While we had no heat, little light there was great spirit. These were tense times and I remember orchestral concerts in unheated auditoriums at Christmas time, where the pianist would sit at his piano, holding a hot water bottle until his piano was required.

The Folies Bergere was spirited and warmly welcoming. The pretty young French girls at the Chanel office took an interest in us young

naval officers and we lived that up while we learned how Admiral Ramsey could get our craft back and after that information was acquired, our mission was accomplished.

An old navy friend from the east coast, Peter Davis, was in Paris on duty and he had a slightly younger cousin who had been living in the city. Gordon and I even had tickets for the fall fashion showing of Maggie Rouff, one of the leading courturiers. Sitting on the front row we two naval officers may have been a bit conspicuous, but we were warmly received.

The French suffered much less severely than the British, and food and drink in Paris were much more generally available. The French conduct during this period had been confused. With their military defeat many French made the best of their situation, but few of them liked the German forces and Charles De Gaule had become the recognized head of the Free French. After one brief encounter in Algeria, a portion of their naval forces had been supportive of the allied cause. The Free French were elated to have been delivered from German occupation and that elation made our brief stay in Paris memorable, though severely uncomfortable in many ways.

Harry's Bar was again functioning and we learned that a favorite French drink, the" French 75" consisted of a shot of brandy with a champagne chaser, named for its high muzzle velocity.

While we were at the Royal Monceau in Paris, Samuel Eliot Morrison, the official naval historian of WW II stayed there briefly and it was most interesting to encounter him. A Harvard professor, his biography

of Columbus later won a Pulitzer and his immensely detailed history of the naval activities of WW II in 15 volumes remains unparalleled.

Well before the German surrender, our mission accomplished, Gordon and I returned to Plymouth and I received BuPers orders to report to a joint Army and Navy Marine school at Harvard preparatory for the landings in Japan, but that is another story.

From early youth I have been fascinated by the Trojan War and the Odyssey of Ulysses -- and in high school I had read Virgil's Aeneid as you may remember its beginning line is arma virumque cano , of men and arms I sing. I'll end this narrative with a favorite poem by a Greek poet of the last century, C. P. Cavafy. The title is simply ITHAKA, the name of that bleak Greek island on which Ulysses was born.

ITHAKA

Setting out on the voyage to Ithaka
You must pray that the way be long,
Full of adventures and experiences.
The Laistrygonians, and the Kyklopes,
Angry Poseidon,--don't be afraid of them;
You will never find such things on your way,
If only your thoughts be high, and a select
Emotion touch your spirit and your body.
The Laistrygonians, the Kyklopes,
Poseidon raging--you will never meet them,
Unless you carry them with you in your soul,
If your soul does not raise them up before you.

You must pray that the way be long;
Many be the summer mornings
When with what pleasure, with what delight
You enter harbours never seen before;
At Phoenician trading stations you must stop,
And must acquire good merchandize,
Mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
And sensuous perfumes of every kind;
As much as you can get of sensuous perfumes;
You must go to many cities of Egypt,
To learn and still to learn from those who know.

You must always have Ithaka in your mind,
Arrival there is your predestination.
But do not hurry the journey at all.
Better that it should last many years;
Be quite old when you anchor at the island,
Rich with all you have gained on the way,
Not expecting Ithaka to give you riches.
Ithaka has given you your lovely journey.
Without Ithaka you would not have set out.
Ithaka has no more to give you now.

Poor though you find it, Ithaka has not cheated you.
Wise as you have become, with all your experience,
You will have understood the meaning of an Ithaka.

(The original translation as in 1952 collection
(Grove Press) of Cavafy's poems.)