

D-DAY MEMORY, LESS WE FORGET

By Robert Williamson CD* Commander, RCNR, Ret'd

When my Hamilton Kaleidoscope Choir began practicing a musical tribute for the 80th Anniversary of D-Day for retirement homes and community concerts, the 1944 era ballads such as: "White Cliffs of Dover", "We'll Gather Lilacs in the Spring Again" and "I'll Be Seeing You", brought back boyhood memories of local veterans and the perceptions of their world changing D-Day experiences.

My uncle, Melville Webster, a British 6th Airborne veteran, spent his declining years in a Hamilton nursing home. But on D-Day his flimsy glider crash-landed in Normandy while bringing supplies and equipment to the paratroopers who had earlier jumped into the predawn darkness to protect the vital eastern flank of the invasion along the Orne River, illustrated here in this painting courtesy Battlefield-art-dot-com.



I had also recently read a Spectator obituary for an acquaintance, John Copland, one of those rare D-Day veterans who reached 100 years of age. He enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) in Hamilton. Eventually he became a Chief Petty Officer ERA mechanic and was assigned to the Minesweeper HMCS Thunder, one of 16 Canadian sweepers as shown here in this 1944 DND photo. For the invasion there were 10 flotillas of minesweepers, each flotilla composed of 10 ships. There were five landing beaches and each beach required two channels swept clear of mines. Thunder was assigned to the Royal Navy's 4th Flotilla responsible for sweeping a lane to Omaha Beach where American forces were landed.



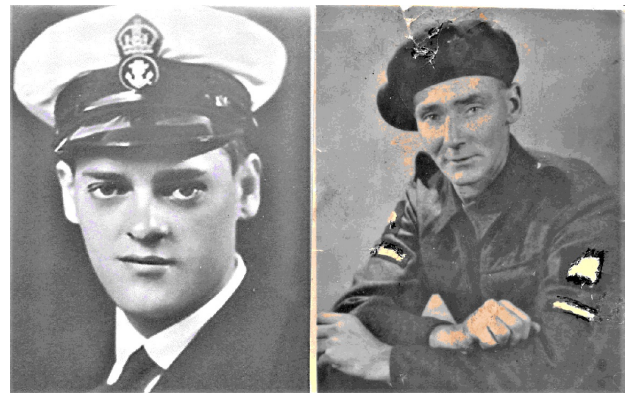
At 5:30 p.m. on June 5, as darkness fell, ten flotillas of sweepers headed south for the coast of Normandy. For most of the night, CPO Copland was on duty in the engine room and saw very little. However, the next morning, June 6, he came on deck and will forever remember the awe-inspiring sight of hundreds of ships, the air vibrating with bombardment thunder, the sky filled with droning aircraft bombing the enemy while transports, like the C-47 Dakota at Hamilton's Warplane Heritage Museum, dropped paratroopers and towed hundreds of silent gliders to their drop zones. The 6th Airborne sent in 256 gliders of the air landing brigade. One of them carried my uncle to Ranville in the Orne valley. Thus these two Hamilton men from their different vantage points had a unique perspective of how Hitler's Atlantic Wall was breached. Remarkably, after clearing hundreds of mines on a forty mile front, not one minesweeper was lost. On the other hand, few gliders were salvageable as a result of rough battlefield landings.



As a boy in 1944, I remember that my uncle sent a souvenir to me from his crash landing in Normandy. It was a pocket-sized piece of broken plexiglass from his glider windshield, engraved with the winged Pegasus symbol of his 6th Airborne Brigade.

On June 25, (D+19), HMCS Thunder, as part of the Royal Navy's 4th Flotilla, cleared mines around the Cotentin Peninsula, facilitating the bombardment that eventually opened the essential Port of Cherbourg. CPO Copland participated in this operation that was critical to out-flanking the enemy at the Falaise Gap, driving them out of Normandy and facilitating a mad rush by the Allies to the Rhine River in Holland.

With victory in France assured by September 1944, my uncle's airborne unit was recalled to participate in Operation Market Garden, well documented in a film and book entitled "A Bridge Too Far". Because of transport delays due to insufficient gliders he was unable to participate in the Arnhem misadventure, in Holland, a circumstance that may have saved his life.



John Copland (left) and Mel Webster are shown as they would have appeared on D-day 1944. Their stories, now told, make us aware of their service on that memorable day. Photo courtesy R. McKee, R. Williamson