

CHAPTER 17: MORE WAR STORIES AND D DAY

From late in 1943 I worked daily, except Sundays, as an electrician's apprentice for Tony F. Lummus, in South Street, Chichester. I had to rise at 6.30 am six days a week and come rain, sunshine, darkness in winter and snow, travel the seven miles to Chichester on my second hand Excelsior racing bicycle. I did this for the next four years until I was conscripted into The Royal Air Force at the age of eighteen. At the time the Lummus firm was heavily involved in work for the Government and the war effort. Many small and large pre-war local fishing ports and shipyards had been converted to build Landing Craft, Tank (LCT), Motor Torpedo Boats (MTB) and Air Sea Rescue Boats (ASRB). The Lummus firm installed electrical systems in these boats. Some of the shipyards were at Birdham, Itchenor, Dell Quay, Bosham, Gosport and Littlehampton. All of these operations were done in great secrecy and the work was so well disguised that the enemy never knew what was going on. Of course, Britain's fighter planes had by this time decimated the German air forces ability to fly over southern England. The LCT with its capacity for carrying a tank and a hundred men, particularly helped and contributed enormously to the giant invasion armada for the so called 'Operation Overlord' 'Neptune' and D Day: the latter being the 'day of commencement'; June 6th. 1944. See note below.

I did not work much on these boats except at Itchenor and some electrical pre-assembly work at the Lummus workshop in Theatre lane in Chichester. Chiefly, during the period 1944-45 I accompanied Frank Lummus to a secret engine re-building factory hidden on the outskirts of Fareham, Hampshire. Once again, I was sworn to secrecy, this time by my bosses. I was forbidden to talk to my parents, friends and co-workers about this establishment or its location. Frank Lummus, who was exempted from military service because of his important war work, and I, travelled by little used back roads every day in his Austin 10 saloon car; making sure we were not observed or followed. It was a good job for me, we left from Chichester soon after 8 am and arrived at Fareham about 9 am, allowing me a restful time travelling in the car; the same occurred on the return journey when we left at 4 pm and arrived back at base about 5. pm.

The factory serviced Hall and Scott and Packard giant inline-eight in number (8" diameter) cylinder engines; these were used on Motor Torpedo Boats (British and U.S. MTB's) and Air Sea Rescue Boats.(ASRB's). The resounding noise of two of these enormous engines on fuel test and two more on electric motor driven running in mode was deafening and

we had to wear ear plugs all the time. Lummus and I installed electric light and heat and test equipment wiring in a sound proof room, among many other electrical systems in the buildings.

Note: A subsidiary of Lummus called Lummus and Chase Foundry, in St. Pancras Street, Chichester, made custom exterior exhaust manifolds for Spitfires throughout the war. These were beaten out of sheet steel by hand to shape and the parts welded together.

Henry Lummus was afraid of heights and working on ladders, so I did most of the work and he directed. Thereby, I learned a great deal about electrical work very quickly because of his dependence upon me. He would disappear about Noon each day for lunch with the company executives, leaving me with a schedule of work to accomplish. His state of inebriation most days after liquid lunches, gave me quite a few driving frights on the way home after work.

In late May and early June 1944 while driving down to Fareham we noticed a lot of large concrete pads being laid alongside of the country roads. Then, on June 5th. 1944, D Day minus one, although we had, like every civilian, not known this great secret was so imminent, saw that there were now large American tanks sitting on the new concrete pads. In addition, in contrast to the day before when we passed through, the adjacent forests to this country road were filled with crowds of armoured vehicles and trucks and thousands of British and American troops with blackened faces and dressed for battle. We were totally amazed by the transformation of the usually quiet landscape. They were all clearly ready for embarkation. However, a few miles further on we were stopped at Leigh Park by a military police roadblock and despite our official Government identity passes were told to turn around and go back. I was allowed to go home early that day and the roads and side roads to Chichester from West Dean were filled with camouflaged troops and vehicles of all kinds. They certainly were not there when I cycled to work in the morning, obviously having moved closer to the coast from somewhere further inland.

The next day was D Day, the first day of operations 'Overlord and Neptune' to give the proper names. In accord with Government advice, I stayed home at the farm in company with most people who did not have essential work. No one got much sleep that night if they lived anywhere near the South coast of England. There was an almost unbroken roar of aero-planes of war all night long and then throughout the next day. During the day dozens of large gliders towed by struggling two engine single wing planes rumbled over our farm. I believe most of the haulers were the fabulously reliable MacDonald Douglas DC 3's also known in Britain as the Dakota

and by Americans as the C47 Skytrain and C53 Skytrooper. That unequalled flying work horse, still flying and working today (2009). The 'Horsa' gliders that they were towing were like giant-square elongated boxes with wings; heavily laden with soldiers and equipment. They were so heavy that they flew behind the towing plane at a lower level with the taut tow rope at an angle downwards to them. The planes were moving slow, about 80 miles per hour and only about 1000ft high. I couldn't help imagining the viewless soldiers sitting with extreme trepidation in rows and second, how much the gliders looked like giant coffins with wings. As we now know, the use of gliders like these, both at Arnhem and Cherbourg was an extremely risky undertaking especially at night and many soldiers were lost when the gliders crash landed into forests, rivers and buildings, for example. This plane was also the transport of choice for the many thousand of paratroopers who were deployed behind the enemy lines.

On D Day June 6th and after the sky was filled with overwhelming noise as well as gliders; it seemed like there were thousands of four and two engine bombers, creating a continuous rumble and vibrating our house and windows; all heading southwards to Cherbourg in France and returning

Before and after D Day the combined air forces of Britain and American relentlessly bombed and strafed the telephone lines and buildings on the Continent of Europe, to force the enemy to use wireless Morse code signaling. Thus all their radio messages could be intercepted with the Alpha and code 'Y' Section at Bletchley Park and the Central Signals Area, thereby the Allies knew their battle plans from the 'cracked' Enigma code Even by this time of the war, the Germans had still not realized that their prized encryptions were being read. More about Bletchley later.

However, one morning there was a great hiatus at our workshop several electricians were assembled and we went to the still smoldering crash scene of an American B24 'Liberator' four-engine heavy bomber. It had crashed in the afternoon of the day before, south of the The Hornet street in Chichester, in the area bounded by Whyke Lane on the south side. In coming down it had badly damaged buildings and smashed some roof tops in Whyke Lane and then fell directly on an occupied steam laundry. The engines as usual continued on by lateral inertia of weight force through a wall into the grounds of a near by school. There was extensive collateral damage to surrounding homes and many people were killed and injured in the surroundings and the laundry.

There was no aircrew on the plane; they had reportedly bailed out over the English Channel and pointed the damaged and doomed bomber out towards the Atlantic Ocean but the plane had somehow turned right and headed into the mainland.

The enormous problem was, there were three unexploded 1000 lb. bombs on board and they were sitting in the wreckage of the crash.

I remember the British Military Bomb Disposal Squad vehicles were present and a Bomb Squad Officer with peaked cap and red band around the side guided us through a defined way over the remains of the building, with admonition for deviation.

Jack Northeast was my Master Electrician Mate and he lived in Whyke Lane; his house was badly damaged by the plane's explosion but he still came in to work for this job. We electricians scrambled across the debris of the twisted metal and the now integrated mangled parts of the large aircraft and the laundry equipment, then had to disconnect the main electricity service that was badly damaged, very tricky and dangerous with rogue electric currents flowing around the remains of the aircraft and building. Most of the circuit breakers were stuck in the 'on' position; the high amperage Busbar lid was blown off and all the connections to the copper bars were exposed. We stood on rubber mats to avoid electrical discharges.

It is now the considered opinions of several people, including my own, that the 1000 lb. bombs did not explode; otherwise the surrounding damage would have been extensively devastating. It also seems most likely that two of the bombs were successfully disarmed the day before we went to the crash site but one remained live until the morning after, when we were present. We rendered the electrics safe and the zone was free from electric currents. Then the Bomb Disposal Squad could disarm the bomb. At the time I was only 15 year's old and I believe my bosses refrained from telling me details and the danger we were in.

My life after the initial excitement of listening to reports of the daily progress of the Battles in Normandy post D Day, became routine, tuning in nightly to the radio in order to keep up to date.

The V1 rocket bases were soon over run and extinguished by the Allied invasion forces and later the V2 bases met the same fate in March 1945. However, by that time over 1500 of these lethal ballistic missiles had fallen on London, plus a few on other cities, descending at four times the speed of sound, killing or maiming thousands of civilians. They had no strategic value and were used to strike terror in the populations. Hitler was working on chemical, biological and

nuclear war heads for these, so it was fortuitous that the Allied troops took care of this threat in good time.

Although we know now that tens of thousands of Allied soldiers, air and navy personnel were lost on D Day and particularly during the early stages of the invasion; it seemed to us, hearing the news reports, that advances across Northern France, even unto Paris, came about rapidly. The French people welcomed the Allied troops in every liberated town and village, with open arms of joy, and General de Gaulle, the French military leader throughout the war, was able to triumphantly enter Paris, acclaimed by the rapturous greetings of his countrymen.

There was an enormous battle called; The Battle of the Bulge, which took place in vile freezing cold and inclement winter conditions but the Allied soldiers, supported by The Royal Air Force and The United States Air Force, ultimately prevailed and won. Very soon after it seemed they were crossing the border into Germany and it was a race to reach Berlin before the Russians.

In this period of time, I still lived at Easthampnet, Tangmere, and almost daily saw the occasional Spitfire land and catch fire. The incessant day and night roar of a great variety of British and American warplanes filled the air over Southern England, whilst going and coming back from Europe. I continued to travel each work day to the secret engine re-building plant at Fareham. The British army and forward Royal Air Force personnel arrived at the gates of Bergen-Belsen; the infamous concentration camp. My cousin, Eric Jesty, was one of the RAF men who, was present. The reason he was there at this mind-shattering moment of time, was because he was with the forward airstrip building crew that was always just behind the war front line. He volunteered to assist in the unpleasant task of caring for the hapless survivors. We, the general public of Britain saw on the Pathe News at the local cinemas, the appalling spectacle that he first hand encountered. Many people walked out of the cinema, unable to stay and stomach the enormous scale and scenes of a horrific nature; diabolical multiple deaths, thousands of naked emaciated corpses piled in heaps and the debased human misery exposed. It was impossible to comprehend what heinous institution enabled human beings to carry out these atrocities without compunction and feelings of wrong-doing and remorse. The Russian army, with enormous losses of military personnel, entered Berlin first and fought house to house and street by street and proceeded to take revenge on all the people they encountered to avenge their own suffering.

Adolph Hitler with his wife the former Eva Braun committed suicide in his underground bunker and an attempt was made to burn their bodies. Too good a death for this extremely cruel tyrant of the 20th. Century; who was imbued with the relentless ambition to conquer most of the World and transposed his hates, cruelties and aggressions to his people and they followed unquestionably.

Then, suddenly, final war events moved fast and it was all over; on May 4th. 1945 German army officers surrendered to General Bernard Montgomery of the British army and he passed them on to US General Dwight Eisenhower, who was waiting at Versailles near Paris for the official surrender. Thereupon, just less than a year from the start of Operation Overlord and Neptune, the formal surrender of the German Government and its Military occurred at Midnight on May the 7th. 1945 and on May 8th. 1945, the next day, Victory in Europe was declared and VE Day was celebrated everywhere. Church bells rang out all over the place and thousands of people gathered in the centre of Chichester, The City brass band played under the market cross building throughout the day and the following night. The street lights came on again and the window coverings were taken down to let the lights shine out and there was dancing, embracing and even kissing strangers in the streets. All the pubs did well, particularly the Punch House in the centre of the city and the police turned a 'blind eye' to the flagrant disregard for the after hours drinking, normally finishing at 11 pm in those days. I believe these festivities went on until dawn but I caught the last bus home, because I had to be at work at 8am the following day.

From then on all military work ceased everywhere, including my firms' contracts at the secret factory for engine re-building and electrical repair work on MTB's and ASRB's. Our associate company stopped making Spitfire engine exhaust manifolds. For many days after the war was over, a relaxed mood of relief was tangible in everyone and feelings of jubilation and euphoria were noticeable everywhere among the population. However, the Allies were still fighting the Japanese in the Far East and it was not until August the 15th. 1945, after the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that Japan surrendered as well and Victory in Japan, VJ Day, was declared.

Acknowledgment: I am indebted to Ken Green, the Chichester and District Historian for his kind permission to re-print his excellent and comprehensive documentary booklet entitled: 'The Day The Liberator Crashed On Chichester'. Please see Supplement 6 at the end of these Memoirs.