

EXERCISE TIGER – DISASTER AND DECEPTION

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The History of Exercise Tiger is one that is riddled with difficulties for the historian. A definitive account is difficult to construct as the sources are problematic. So before looking at the story of Exercise Tiger I would like briefly to comment on how an historian pieces together an account of the past. What we know of our history, whether contained in a deeply researched academic tome or shown on prime-time television in an historical drama is based on evidential sources. Sources can be either primary or secondary. Primary sources include documents and writings contemporaneous with the events described, photographs, maps, artefacts or even buildings and other landscape features of the time. Secondary sources are principally books and articles written after an event or period and often drawing on primary and other secondary sources.

But all sources are problematic. Primary sources may have been written with a hidden or, possibly not so hidden, agenda. The phrase about warfare ‘History is written by the winner’ has much truth in it. Not only are many documents written with bias but also important documents which do not convey the right message may be suppressed or even destroyed. Primary sources which are very important in the study of Exercise Tiger, personal letters and interviews with those present, may also be based on uncertain recollections, biased, exaggerated or, in some cases, knowingly misleading. Secondary accounts may repeat errors in primary and other secondary sources, they are also, inevitably, full of the interpretation of other sources by the authors. In preparing this talk I have done my best to draw on as many primary sources as possible and on secondary sources, of which there are many, for interpretations on which there is significant agreement. Nonetheless interpretation is speculative and subjective and some of what I say must be taken as such.

In January 1943 the Allies had taken the decision that they would launch a massive invasion of Normandy in mid-1944 targeting beaches along the coast, one of which codenamed ‘Utah’ was deemed to have similar characteristics to Slapton, a sloping shore, a ridge of scrub and an inland lagoon. The beaches of the Slapton area had been used for occasional military training since 1938, but on 4 November 1943 notice was given to the County Council that much larger exercises were to take place involving the requisition of 30,000 acres of the South Hams which were to be evacuated by 20 December. The villages of Torcross, Slapton, Strete, Blackawton, East Allington, Sherford, Stokenham and Chillington embracing 750 families, including many farmers, were affected. Notices were posted in the villages of meetings which informed local inhabitants that household goods, agricultural equipment, animals and even, if possible, crops, had to be removed, all in six weeks. But the evacuation and its aftermath make another story which may be told here on another occasion. Suffice to say that the evacuation was completed and 30,000 American soldiers moved into the area.

A series of exercises was planned for the winter and spring of 1944 involving troops destined to land on Omaha Beach with the V Army Corps and Utah Beach with the VII Army Corps. Exercises from late December to early March codenamed 'Duck I, II and III' and 'Fox' were rehearsals for Omaha and those in late March and April codenamed 'Beaver' and 'Tiger' for Utah. The early exercises revealed that there were significant issues regarding co-ordination and communication between the different US units and between them and the Royal Navy which had the job of providing covering fire for the landings and protection for the vulnerable landing craft.

Exercise Tiger was planned for 22-30 April. It was to be the largest exercise of all, a full simulation of the planned Utah Beach landings involving Force 'U', 25,000 personnel and 2750 vehicles aboard convoys of troop ships and landing craft sailing a distance equivalent to the channel crossing. The Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D Eisenhower had become very aware that the American soldiers involved were very young and most of them had no battle experience. He decided that the Exercise Tiger would be conducted with live firing both from the onshore 'defenders' and the offshore naval vessels.

The first 5 days of the exercise concerned the marshalling and embarkation of personnel and equipment at Plymouth, Dartmouth, Brixham and Torquay. The military component comprised men of the 4th Infantry Brigade as well as the 1st Engineer Special Brigade and several support battalions. The exercise began in earnest in the small hours of 27 April when the troopships USSs Bayfield, Barnett and Joseph T Dickman and HMS Empire Gauntlet comprising Convoy T1A began to lower their boats at 04.27 to be filled with soldiers climbing down cargo nets. The assault was to be in several waves with the first landing at H Hour 07.30. But manoeuvring over 300 landing craft into position was a complex operation and some were behind schedule leading to one of the Assault Group Commanders requesting that H Hour be delayed by one hour, a request accepted by the exercise commander Rear-Admiral Don P Moon. The offshore Royal Navy ships, including the cruiser HMS Hawkins, had received notification of the new H Hour and were continuing to bombard the beaches as the first waves of LCIs (Landing Craft - Infantry), which had not received the new H Hour, landed on the beaches.

This is the first incident that has given rise to major controversy - were US personnel were killed by 'friendly fire' from the offshore naval vessels and the onshore defenders? There is no doubt that live firing could cause massive damage ashore as shown by photographs of the bombed Royal Sands Hotel, Slapton. There are 'eyewitness' accounts of soldiers being killed but none are authenticated. Nonetheless stories spread of hundreds of bodies being removed from the beach and taken by lorries to temporary mass graves near Blackawton and then after being disinterred, put on trucks and moved by rail from Kingsbridge Station to an unknown destination. Local people, such as the notorious Dorothy Seekings, claimed to have seen 'piles of bodies'. Seekings was caught up in the media spotlight and contradicted herself many times. The official line was that no fatalities had occurred. The high level of secrecy surrounding the exercise was justified by the desire not to demoralise other troops if accidents occurred and most importantly so that attention was not drawn to the exercise that might lead to leaks of information about Operation Overlord itself. Documentary evidence is very sparse leading to speculation that records were

destroyed or altered. One that has survived is a recently declassified radio log suggesting that there were '29 casualties', whether dead or injured is not clear. The episode is a good example of the difficulty of discovering facts about an event inevitably veiled in secrecy and also of the fallibility of eyewitness accounts. It exemplifies the problems faced by historians when trying to reconstruct the past.

The remaining waves of the assault, coded T2 and T3 landed without incident but a further 'follow-up' convoy coded T4 was still to arrive. Convoy T4 comprised 8 LSTs or Landing Ships (Tank). LSTs were leviathans 328 feet long, a beam of 50 feet and displacing 4000 tons when loaded. They were crewed by nine officers and 120 men and could carry a payload up to 1900 tons including small landing craft, tanks, DUKWs, artillery and miscellaneous equipment. At 09.50 five LSTs, 515 (command LST), 496, 511, 531 and 58, assembled in Plymouth Sound and set off toward Start Bay. At 11.00 they were joined by their escorts, the corvette HMS Azalea under the command of Lieutenant Commander George Geddes, and the destroyer HMS Scimitar. But almost immediately Scimitar was ordered to return to Plymouth as a result of damage sustained in a collision with an LST not related to Convoy T4. The duty officer at Plymouth and Geddes assumed, perhaps reasonably, that Rear-Admiral Moon knew of Scimitar's withdrawal and that he had called out a replacement. But the order had not come from his command group and HMS Azalea was on her own. Communication between the Royal Navy bases and ships and the US Navy, including Moon and the convoy commodore Commander Bernard Skahill was minimal or non-existent as they were on different radio frequencies. At 19.00 the convoy was joined by LSTs 499, 289 and 507 from Brixham and headed out into Lyme Bay towards Portland Bill, on a long circuitous route back to Slapton Sands equal to the distance to Normandy.

At 22.00, after reports of significant ship movement in Lyme Bay, nine S-100 class Schnellboote of the 5th and 9th Flottillen left their base at Cherbourg under the command of Korvettenkapitain Bernd Klug, evaded British patrol vessels and headed north-west. Schnellboote, literally 'fast boats', were known to the allies as E-boats with 'E' standing for 'enemy'. The German E-boats were formidable weapons, the fastest of their type in any navy at the time. The S-100s displaced 100 tons, were 107 feet long, had a beam of 16 feet and powered by three Daimler-Benz diesel engines developing 6000hp were capable of 43 knots. At just after 00.00 the E-boats detected the convoy though they could not tell what type of ships were involved. HMS Onslow, a destroyer patrolling off Portland, spotted an E-boat but it sped away.

By 00.00 the LSTs of T4 had reached the east of Lyme Bay and were beginning to turn for the home run to land on Slapton Sands. In convoy the eight LSTs with HMS Azalea ahead presented a very easy target. They were travelling at 5 knots or less, line astern over a distance of 3 miles. They were large and lightly armed and loaded to the gunnels with vehicles. American sailors often referred to LSTs as 'large stationary targets'. At 00.20 the convoy spotted flares but no action was taken. E-boats worked in pairs with one firing flares to silhouette a target which was fired upon by the other. Thirty minutes later torpedoes were fired at LSTs 499 and 289 missing LST 499 and scraping along the flat-bottomed hull of LST 289. At 01.30 LSTs 531 and 507 came under tracer fire, another means to line up torpedo targets. General Quarters were sounded on most LSTs but after 20 minutes all was quiet and the firing was thought to be part of the exercise. At 02.04 a torpedo struck LST 507 and fifteen minutes later two torpedoes struck LST 531 and it began to sink. By 02.30 personnel

on both LSTs were ordered to abandon ship and at the same time LST 289 was struck aft by a torpedo. LST 531 sank so quickly that many soldiers and sailors were trapped below. LST 507 sank at 03.15 after most of its personnel had jumped overboard. After the attacks on LSTs 507 and 531 Commander Skahill ordered the convoy to scatter and head for the coast of Portland. The E-boats disengaged at 02.40 and headed back to Cherbourg.

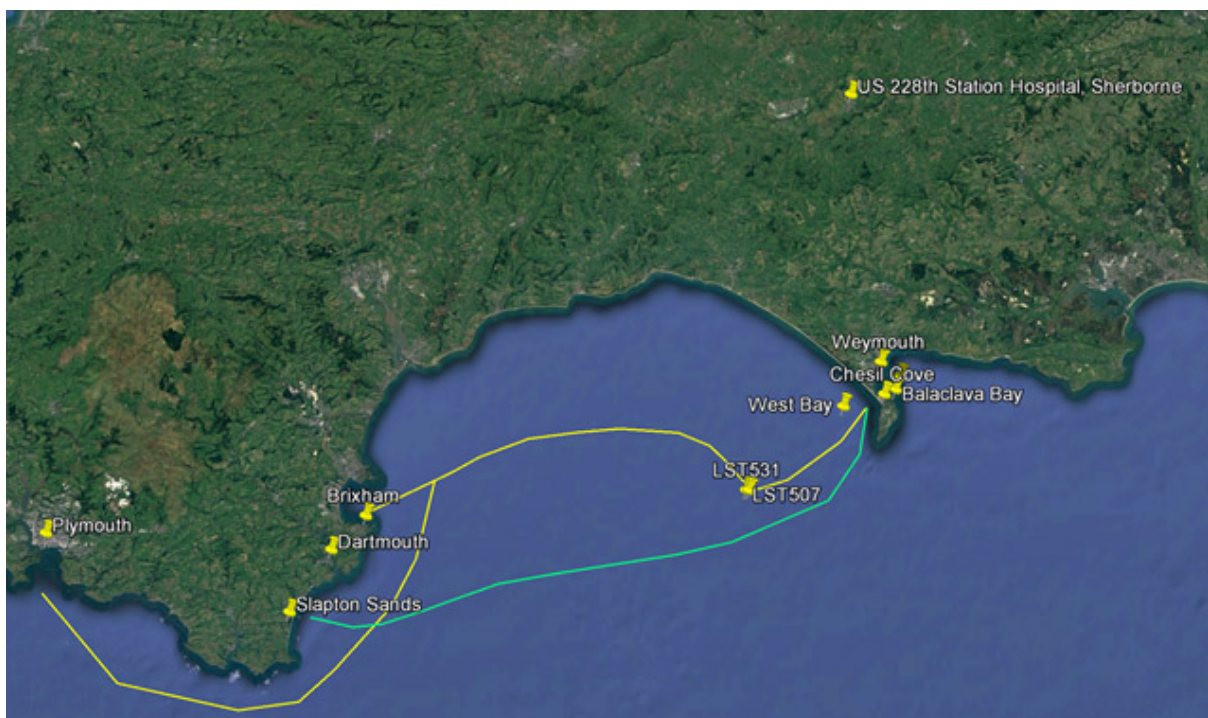
The real hero of the hour was Lieutenant John Doyle, skipper of the command LST 515. After an argument with Commander Skahill who wanted the LST to head for Portland, he turned his ship back towards the attack area and at about 04.30 launched three of his LCVPs (Landing Craft Vehicle and Personnel) to pick up survivors – he saved 132 many of whom would have died if they had had to wait for other rescue vessels. HMSs Onslow, Obedient and Brissenden and other smaller craft from Portland Base arrived around 05.00 as did HMS Saladin. At 19.30 the previous evening, the error concerning HMS Scimitar at Plymouth was realised but it was not until 01.30 that HMS Saladin was dispatched as a replacement to join T4. She was too late to join the action and managed only to offer a futile pursuit of the E-boats as they sped away.

HMS Azalea escorted LSTs 499, 58, 511 and 496 to anchorages in Chesil Cove, part of West Bay west of Fortuneswell on Portland to unload their wounded, and then oversaw the slow return of LST 289 to Dartmouth where, assisted by a French tug, she arrived at 14.30. At 10.30, the four LSTs joined by LST 515, after it had debarked the rescued men, headed west and landed their men and vehicles on Slapton Sands before retiring to moorings at Carrick Roads, Falmouth.

Once all the survivors had been recovered, they were returned to Portland, Plymouth and Portsmouth. Those requiring medical treatment, plus the injured from the LSTs which were not sunk, were sent to the US 228th Station Hospital at Haydon Park, Sherborne, Dorset. Others were returned to their units. Medical staff at the hospital at Sherborne were confined to the grounds and forbidden to talk to the men on pain of court martial.

There followed the task of recovering the bodies floating in the water of which there were 'hundreds' according to some of the pick-up boat crews. The bodies were landed at Balaclava Bay, a remote part of the Portland Naval Base. At 00.30 on 29 April, personnel from the 605th Graves Registration Company arrived at the 50th Field Hospital Weymouth from their base in Oxfordshire and were told to commence processing 'about 300 bodies' of army personnel as they arrived from the recovery ships. After processing the bodies were loaded onto a convoy of at least 45 trucks from the 146th and 147th QM Truck Companies, about 12 or 13 to each truck giving a total between 550-600. The assembled convoy crews were then addressed warning them that any breach of secrecy would lead to a court martial. The convoy then moved from Weymouth to Brookwood Cemetery in Surrey. The bodies of naval personnel were moved to the 158th General Hospital Odstock near Salisbury from where they too were sent to Brookwood. At Brookwood the bodies were dressed and buried in temporary graves. They were subsequently exhumed with some being repatriated and others reburied at the American Cemetery in Cambridge.

Based on the foregoing details of the movement of Convoy T4 it is important to emphasise that the oft-heard view that the Exercise Tiger tragedy happened 'off Slapton Sands' is not true. A map published by the BBC as recently as May 2014 shows the engagement happening just off Torcross in start Bay whereas it actually took place 40 miles to the east off Portland Bill. This map, prepared for Wendy Lawrance's book 'Exercise Tiger published in 2013, is also incorrect as it does not show the LSTs moving towards Portland. I have prepared this map which shows that the engagement happened off the coast of Dorset and subsequent activity focussed on West Bay, Chesil Cove and Portland. (Outward course in yellow, return in blue). The exact position of the wrecks is known, confirmed by photographs, films, personal accounts and dive records of experienced divers. The recent 'professional' maps show how inaccuracies or incomplete information can lead to mythologies which eventually are regarded as fact.



For similar reasons it is difficult to piece together a full and accurate picture of the attack on Convoy T4. The documentary evidence of ships' logs and reports, American, British and German is often inconsistent. Eyewitness accounts were often given 30-40 years after the events and again are contradictory. It is not surprising as between 02.00 and 02.30 there was confusion and panic on the LSTs of T4. With 9 E-boats circling the convoy, defensive fire was often erratic and LSTs are known to have inadvertently fired their guns at each other. Radio communication was inefficient as US and British wavelengths had still not been co-ordinated. What was certain is that hundreds of soldiers and sailors were dead, some from the explosions and fires on the LSTs but most from drowning in the cold waters of Lyme Bay. Many factors caused the casualty figures to be higher than they might otherwise have been. Because of the continued perceived E-boat threat, other ships in the area, apart from LST 515, and MTBs from Portland did not approach the attack zone until 05.00. Some men were in the water for over three hours.

Jumping from the deck of an LST was like jumping from the height of a 2-storey house – about 40 feet. Some soldiers were in full kit with packs and even weapons and many went unconscious when they hit the water which was below 10°C. Some died of injuries caused by blast or fire on board and others of hypothermia, a few even struggling out of their heavy top coats to try to swim which increased that danger. Some died in the burning fuel oil surrounding the LSTs. Those wearing M1 helmets, with a small metal peak risked the additional danger of a broken neck as the water on impact snapped their heads back. But perhaps the greatest cause of death was the incorrect placing of their life preservers. Sailors had 'Mae West' jackets but the mostly rookie soldiers were issued with M1926 preservers but were not trained in their use. They should be worn under the arms but many bodies were found with them attached to the waist. When they hit the water, the preservers tipped their bodies forward putting their heads under and their feet in the air. Dazed and numbingly cold, they drowned quickly.

The attack on Convoy T4 has given rise to the second major controversy – what was the true number of soldiers and sailors killed? Because of conflicting estimates this has given rise to the further question – was there a cover-up or wilful deception or just confusion in the fog of war? According to a report written by Rear-Admiral Moon on 29 April the number of dead was 749. The second widely-quoted figure of 639, the figure used on the Exercise Tiger memorial in the Arlington National Cemetery, Washington, is based on the official reports of the Commander of LST 531, the Executive Officer of LST 507 and data from the surviving LST 289. There are other documented estimates, many official ones much lower, such as that from Eisenhower to his Chiefs of Staff of 300-400. Documentation is incomplete - some reports and logs may have been altered or lost or destroyed. The subject is fertile ground for conspiracy theorists who suggest that threats or bribes were made to secure consistently lower casualty figures in reports or that the dates of the deaths of many lost in Exercise Tiger were amended to that of the Normandy landings. The truth may never be known.

The allocation of blame for the tragedy is equally problematic. Several high-ranking commanders were moved to new commands, some out of the European theatre and there is circumstantial evidence that some were scapegoated to protect more senior officers. The commander of Force 'U', Rear-Admiral Moon, and senior officers above him, were certainly to blame for not ensuring that common radio frequencies were used. He was also the commander who agreed to the change of H Hour on 27 April. The burden of his culpability may have led to his suicide. He shot himself with his own revolver on board USS Bayfield on 5 August 1944. For taking HMS Scimitar out of the action and not replacing it, the Royal Navy took the blame. US Commander Skahill and British Lieutenant Commander Geddes of HMS Azalea both accepted that decisions they took – or rather didn't take - during the attack had exacerbated the situation.

The 75th Anniversary of Exercise Tiger will be commemorated on Sunday 28 April 2019 at 14.30 at the Sherman Tank Memorial at Torcross. This was put in place in 1984 through the efforts of the late Ken Small who did so much to bring the details of the tragedy to the attention of a wider public, not least the relatives of those killed, some of whom will undoubtedly be in attendance.

I have not dwelt on the 649 men who lost their lives but they are really what the story of Exercise Tiger is about, men like Emery Marcus Jr - Ship's Cook Third Class who perished on LST531. I will leave you with one final figure to reflect upon. The number of American servicemen killed at the actual invasion of Utah Beach in Normandy on 6 June 1944 was 197. We will remember them all.

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Videos

World War II Americas Secret D Day Disaster - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbfO6Hutb-k>

US National Archive Footage of Exercise Tiger - <https://www.exercisetiger.org.uk/us-national-archive-footage/>