



# U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

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## U.S. Coast Guard Historic Documents

# EXCERPTS FROM WWII DIARY OF CLIFFORD W. LEWIS, MoMM 1/C, UNITED STATES COAST GUARD

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### Editor's note:

The following are excerpts of a diary kept by Motor Machinist's Mate, First Class, Clifford W. Lewis, USCG, a crewman on board the Coast Guard-manned LCI(L)-94 of Flotilla 10, a Coast Guard amphibious assault unit that landed Allied troops during the invasions of Sicily, Salerno and Normandy and then in the Pacific Theatre. Here are excerpts of his diary describing what it was like before, during, and after the bloody assault at Normandy, France on 6 June, 1944.

RADM Paul Pluta, USCG, provided the Historian's Office with a copy of the following first-hand account of the action at Normandy. RADM Pluta had received these excerpts from MoMM 1/c Lewis' widow, Mrs. Ella J. Lewis.

We gratefully acknowledge their efforts to preserve the history of the United States Coast Guard.

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### 28, MAY [1944]:

At 0115 hrs. we were awakened by a bomb exploding close by. More explosions followed immediately which shook the ship. I was dressed and half-way up the ladder when the alarm sounded. Jerry had sneaked in close behind our own planes returning from raids on France, thus fooling the radar. When I emerged on deck and began getting my gun ready, the sky was filled with tracers and searchlights. Ships out-board of us got underway, but we remained at the dock. We weren't allowed to fire for fear of revealing our position. The ack-ack batteries in Portland were firing right over our heads and many shells exploded about us on the ship and dock. The noise was deafening and shrapnel careening about furiously. Buncik, MoMM3/C, who was stationed in the steering room had his head protruding from the hatch, when a 20mm slug or large piece of shrapnel pierced his helmet and cut a crease in his head. Our Pharmacist Mate gave him prompt attention and he was soon taken to a hospital for treatment. The night fighters soon were in action and the raiders chased off. A JU-88 was caught in the lights and came in, in a wide arc losing altitude rapidly. He was soon lost to sight, but no doubt he went down. A 20mm slug



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dropped thru the top deck and into the officers shower. No one was hurt however. The "All Clear" sounded at 0245, but warning was given to be on the look out for delayed action & butterfly bombs. Took an hour for my nerves to calm down so I could get to sleep. About 8 men in the flotilla were wounded. Had an alert at 1830. No action however.

## **29, MAY [1944]:**

0200 General Quarters sounded. Searchlights were probing the skies when I reached my gun. Radar operated batteries were firing at unseen targets and shells were exploding high in the darkened sky. Obviously Jerry didn't have any gifts for Weymouth, as nothing was dropped. All clear at 0245.

## **30, MAY [1944]:**

About 11 assault transports moored in harbor including U.S.S. [Samuel] *Chase*, [Joseph T]. *Dickman*, [Charles] *Carrol* & *Bayfield*. LCVP's in and out all day with ammo' & army supplies. British small boats were also picking up U.S. material.

## **31, MAY [1944]:**

Muster after colors. Mr. Mead gave us orders as to: no one to leave or board ship without an escort, no liberty, no conversing with base personnel or personnel of other ships. Strictest security from here on in. We were issued more gas clothing, also a cartridge belt and water canteens.

## **1, JUNE [1944]:**

Under 0700. Anchored in harbor. At colors a letter from Adm. Kirk was read pertaining to the invasion of France which is very near. 1000 hrs. tied up at dock in Weymouth again.

## **2, JUNE [1944]:**

Received print of crew and officers also a letter from Gen. Eisenhower.

## **3, JUNE [1944]:**

Troops are on board. We have 29th Division infantry, M.P.'s (traffic directors) a medic. Navy LCI next to us has First Division men. Many rumors floating around as to place & time. Pool gotten together as to D-Day. (10 shillings)



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## 4, JUNE [1944]:

Still the same. Ship is still secure.

## 5, JUNE [1944]:

Still waiting patiently although we know much already as to where we are to land, etc. At about 1700 we got underway. Skipper called us all into the crews quarters and had a long diagram or photograph of the beach on the mess table. All pill boxes, machine guns, mines, entanglements & other obstacles. Our beach is to be Red Dog, close to Easy Green. He said we could expect plenty of mines & that sub's & E-Boats would be active. New weapons were expected and 1950 enemy planes were available for use against us. He wished us the best of luck and then Mr. Mead checked over all our names for correct serial numbers & beneficiaries.

## 6, JUNE (D-DAY) 1944:

Coming on watch at 0400, we wore our full gear: impregnated suit, socks, gloves & shoes, life jackets, helmets, cartridge belts, with canteens of water and sheath knife. Gas masks, eye shields & vesicants. At 0715 we were called to General Quarters. While at gun I noticed hundreds of ships & crafts all about us. Spitfire's & P-48's were constantly flying back and forth over the area. We gradually left the main body of ship's behind us as we proceeded toward shore. A few LCVP's were returning and some LCT's were returning loaded evidently not getting a chance to beach. Smoke hovered over the beach and a number of ships could be seen to be burning furiously. Tracer shells began skipping out over the water towards us. They exploded very close & shrapnel clattered against the ship. At 0745 we were called to man our beaching stations. I made a dash for the engine room hatch and could feel and hear shrapnel & machine gun bullets careening by. I took my place at the throttles beside Sorensen. Hass stood by the clutches. We crunched on the beach at 0747 amid loud explosions which made the ship shudder. We disembarked our troops and started out when the Skipper noticed we had fouled an LCVP with a line and started back in to assist them. At that moment 3 shells burst into the pilot house and exploded killing 3 of my shipmates and wounding two including an officer.

Couldn't do any more for the LCVP so we cut the line and started off the beach again after the pilot house was cleared and hand steering put into operation. We had been on the beach 50 minutes and were now high-tailing it out minus the port ramp which had to be cut away. A *Life* photographer came aboard our ship from the beach and was soaking wet. He came into the Engine room to get dry. I was relieved and went top side to cool off and assist. The temp had beer 120° in the E.R. and it made it twice



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as hot with all the clothes we had to wear on. Went topside on the boat deck just aft of the pilot house. The Pharm. Mates were working over a couple of shapeless hulks lying in wire baskets and covered with blankets. It was a horrible sight with blood & flesh splattered over everything. DeNunzio had both legs blown off & part of his stomach, but was still living. I helped the doc give him plasma, but it was hopeless. He died 15 min. later. Buncik was decapitated and occupied only half a stretcher. Burton was still intact but was killed by the concussion. Anthony had shrapnel in the feet & legs and was in great pain. He was given morphine and him and Mr. Mead, who was shocked and had shrapnel in his back, were put aboard the C.G. Transport *Chase*. The bodies were later put aboard an LST and were later buried on the beach. Most of our lighting & power from the pilot house had been shot away and we went about for some time with great difficulty. The [LCI(L)] 85 was near a transport with troops still aboard and was listing badly. She finally got her troops off before she sunk.

We were called alongside a transport and took on Navy relief crews for LCM's. We had the ship pretty well cleaned up by now. We laid a couple miles off the beach and LCM's came alongside to change crews. After that morning no more craft beached until that evening. The battleships *Texas* & *Arkansas* and 3 cruisers including the *Augusta* and 14 destroyers incessantly shelled the beach. Many craft were careening crazily about, some burning, some with huge holes ripped in their sides. Of the 9 LCI's that beached on Red Dog 4 were still usable. Night time found Jerry over us. Bombs were dropped & some mines.

**[NOTE: \*\* the photographer who came onboard into the engine room was Rob Capral. Only 6 or 7 pictures survived due to a processing error in England of all his pictures taken during the first assault of Dog Red Beach invasion according to the Superintendent at St. Laurent Cemetery as told to Cliff's wife 4/24/92]**

## **7, JUNE [1944]:**

Laid around as mother ship for LCM's. Warships keep up shelling and beaches were quieting down. Armored equipment was being put ashore; now mostly on Rhinos.

## **8, 9 & 10, JUNE [1944]:**

An average of 5 raids a night. Much flak was sent up and planes were hit. Bombs & shrapnel fell. Went out 0200 hrs. to look for ammunition barges and numerous mines were known to be in the vicinity. First real raid wasn't until 0330. Dive bombers attacked and two bombs screamed and exploded near a petrol barge anchored only 50 yards off our port quarter. Raids continued until broad daylight or after 6. Shrapnel & 50 cal. slugs were picked up on deck.



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## 12, JUNE [1944]:

Not many air alerts in early hours of morning. Our bombers continually flying back & forth. Exploding bombs & demolitions heard most of the time. Night of June 11th we were called to rescue of an LST which struck a mine just outside the transport area. By the time we arrived all survivors were picked up by other LCI's & 83 footers. In the afternoon of June 12th about six of us went ashore in a Higgins boat. The beach was a turmoil of activity and was strewn with twisted wreckage of landing craft and vehicles. The dust was very thick. We looked over the numerous pill boxes & gun emplacements which were made of thick concrete and dug into the side of the hills which dominated the beaches. Pill boxes left intact were being used as command posts & comm' centers. We walked to the top of the hill being careful not to fall in somebody's foxhole and turned to look out over the vast panorama of ships. Ships of all shapes, sizes and descriptions as far as the eye could see. We had a Coast Guard photographer with us taking colored movies and he was well pleased with the material at hand. On top of the hill poppies grew. Everywhere could be seen the pretty red flowers and at once I recalled the poem we had always read in school on Memorial Day; "In Flanders Field The Poppies Grow." German prisoners were digging graves for our many dead nearby and I thought of my three shipmates who were laid to rest there.

Inside a large fenced in enclosure were many German prisoners. They were sitting about on the ground in a semi circle as an army Sgt. read off their names. Most of them were Czechs, Poles, French & Russians and most were either real young or old. Another enclosure contained officers and as I watched they frisked 8 new ones being brought in. A truck came up with 6 French civilian snipers under heavy guard. We walked on down a small dusty road and into the nearby village of Les Moulins. Only a few houses and a church which had been hit by shells and mortars. We walked into the church yard where an old bent over French was replacing the disturbed tombs and monuments. We talked to the caretaker until the smell of embalming fluid got too much for us. We stopped at a small cafe where an old man with his arm in a sling and a young boy were clearing up the debris. We caught a ride in a jeep, but were stopped by an M.P. who said that Naval personnel were restricted from going beyond the beach and that our blue helmets & clothing were a perfect target for snipers who were still active in the area.

We took the long road back to the beach and were constantly warned of land mines. Once again on the beach we made our way to where our sister ships the 91, 92 & 93 lay broken, twisted & charred by fire. Seeing them made us realize even more how lucky we were. Tanks, trucks & equipment were constantly coming ashore and bulldozers were grinding here and there assisting wherever needed.



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Our time was nearly up so we started back to where we were supposed to meet our boat. Our boat was late and we had to wade some distance into the surf to reach it. There was only two air raids that night, but a person is so tense expecting raids any minute, that sleep is almost out of the question.

## **END; DATED 26, JULY [1944]:**

Went ashore in evening with Qullien, Cuss and Davis. Rode LCVP and transferred to a duck. Hit Dog Red Beach. Walked up road toward St. Laurent. Visit grave yard. Saw Buncik, DeNunzio and Burton's graves. No's. A-4-71, A-9-174, 6-1-12. It's fixed up nice and the little white crosses are lined up neatly In 2 directions. A flag pole, a mast from some ship is in the center and flowers are planted around it. (some Colonel paid the French \$5 to bring the flowers.) Many more graves being dug. The graveyard is about a mile from the beach and overlooks a pleasant green valley.

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## **NOTE:**

Cliff could not know when he recorded the numbers of his shipmates grave sites that this was a temporary cemetery paramount in his thinking was always the desire to revisit those graves he did not live to realize that dream, but on April 24, 1992 as I stood by his shipmates graves I said my quiet prayers and told them that they did not know me, we had never met, but I had carried their names in my heart for almost half a century. I'd like to think that somehow Cliff knew that I was there. To ALL his shipmates living I say THANK YOU and to those now at their Eternal Rest, Peace, sleep well for you fought the good fight and you have finished the course. May God walk with each of us always, with heart felt gratitude.....Ella Jane Curtis Lewis