

NEVIL SHUTE and "EXERCISE TROUSERS"
by John Anderson

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The shooting down of a Junkers Ju188 aircraft is central to Shute's novel "Requiem for a Wren" and is based on a real event that occurred in 1944. John Stanley in his book [1] "The Exbury Junkers - A world war II mystery" gives a detailed account of the events surrounding the shooting down of the Junkers and refers to Shute's account that he came across the aftermath of the Junkers crash shortly after it happened and just after he had disembarked from a Tank Landing Craft (LCT) with some Canadians earlier the same morning. That morning was Tuesday 18th April 1944. So what was Shute doing with these Canadians on an L.C.T. prior to landing? The work that took him down to Exbury and the Beaulieu river at that time was the Swallow project, the testing of a pilotless rocket-propelled aircraft. At that stage of the project the Department of Miscellaneous Weapons Development, where Shute worked, were conducting a series of trial flights of the Swallow [2] which was launched from the deck of a L.C.T. at the entrance to the Beaulieu river. It seemed unlikely that the Canadians were involved with Swallow since that was purely a British affair. It was more likely that Shute and the Canadians were returning from another exercise of some sort.

John Stanley quotes the combat report of the Typhoon pilots who fired at the Junkers indicating that they were returning from providing air cover for Exercise "Smash". That exercise was a rehearsal for an invasion landing that took place off Studland in Dorset and was observed by the Prime minister, Winston Churchill and others that same day. Moreover there were no Canadian troops on that exercise.

Shute described the exercise in an unpublished manuscript [3] entitled Second Front III, one of six such articles that he wrote at the time about the preparations for "Overlord", the invasion of France. Because he was writing about events at that time he could not, for security reasons, give details of places, dates or people. However he does give enough clues to be able to piece together what happened and where. He describes taking part in an invasion exercise on an LCT that was loaded with Sherman tanks and "Priest" guns which were 105mm guns mounted on a tank chassis. They sailed all night in a great fleet and at dawn came to the assembly point where the Infantry Landing ships were disembarking troops for the assault. His LCT went in to bombard the coast in a rehearsal for softening up enemy defences and it was a piece of coast that Shute knew well. In peacetime he had anchored his yacht here to bathe and he had travelled down there to see the actor Clive Brook act out his part when one of his books was being made into a film. The book that was being filmed was "Lonely Road"; the main actor was Clive Brook and the beach was Slapton Sands in Devon.

The LCT fired as it closed in to the beach and Shute watched, through field glasses, the shells bursting inland. Slapton Sands and surrounding villages had been completely evacuated from December 1943 [4] so that it could be turned into a practice area for beach assaults and all forms of

rehearsal exercises. There is no doubt that the gunners on the LCT were firing live rounds for Shute describes the shells causing damage to a house set on a hillside, landing in the drawing room, destroying the coach house and laying waste to a walled garden with fruit trees. His LCT finally beached so that the guns and tanks it carried could disembark to carry on their assault on land. The assault landing craft were also putting the infantry ashore to fire from the sandhills. The men and vehicles were, as he put it, "*going through their lines on the beachhead as other actors in a petty play had before them*". Some vehicles and tanks got stuck on the shingle of the beach and had to be towed out, but ninety five percent had got ashore alright and had gone on to complete the exercise successfully.

Once the exercise was over and manoeuvres completed the LCT re-embarked the Canadians, formed up in a convoy and set course for home. Shute was full of admiration for these gunners who lived on board the LCT for several days during the voyage to and from Slapton. An LCT is little more than an open barge with a bridge at the stern. The gunners lived, cooked their meals, washed, shaved and slept alongside their vehicles out in the open. "*They had reduced the art of living to the simple essentials without losing very much; under all circumstances they knew what to do, and they did it well and cheerfully*".

So what was this exercise that Shute took part in? Bearing in mind that he landed back near Exbury, at Lepe Hard, on 18th April it had to be one that took place some days before then, possibly between the 12th and 16th April. Research shows that many exercises took place at Slapton and it was in fairly continuous use for training purposes from January to May 1944. Inevitably Exercise "Tiger" figures prominently, with many references to it, because of the disaster that befell the tank landing ships when the convoy was attacked by German E boats. Some seven hundred American troops lost their lives in that episode. However "Tiger" took place after 18th April, and no Canadian troops were involved. Exercise "Fabius" was a full scale rehearsal for Montgomery's 21st Army Group, which included Canadians, but this was even later, in May. Of all the training exercises investigated, from Exercise "Duck" in January through to "Beaver" none seemed to involve Canadian troops or did not fit the dates. Quite by chance I came across a reference to Exercise "Trousers" - an improbable name for an invasion exercise, but then so is "Duck". Not only did this exercise take place on Slapton Sands but it was the rehearsal for the Third Canadian Infantry Division and is recorded as taking place on 12th April. So "Trousers" fits the bill in terms of location, date and personnel.

The planning documents for Exercise "Trousers" [5] show that it was indeed a full-scale dress rehearsal for the D-Day landings, involving nearly 20,000 personnel, many landing ships and over 100 Landing craft. Troops of the 3rd Canadian Infantry embarked from ports in the south of England and the Royal Canadian artillery, with whom Shute sailed, embarked in LCTs from "Southampton hards" i.e. in the Solent area. H hour, the time of the landing, was set for 7:52 on 12th April with bombardment from Naval ships starting at H-60, an hour before the landing.

Another reference [6] gives a description of "Trousers" *After months of perfecting the mechanics of a seaborne assault, the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division was ready, by the spring of 1944, to practice under realistic battlefield*

conditions. Accordingly on 12th April 1944 a naval task force approached the southern coast of England. Several miles from shore dozens of landing craft pulled up alongside equipment and troop laden ships. The men of the 3rd Division climbed into the heaving craft which, once full, resumed their approach. As the craft hit the beaches of Slapton Sands the fully outfitted Canadian troops disembarked and ran towards the causeways that led inland. Offshore the artillery of the 3rd Division which had been lashed to the decks of some landing craft, fired at coastal targets.

This exercise was the first rehearsal based on the actual plan for the Normandy invasion. It was also the first time that the Canadians were able to practise the landing as a unified formation. Watching the exercise from points inland were several members of the Allied brass including General Bernard Montgomery, who would command all of the invasion ground forces and General Miles Dempsey, the commander of the 2nd British army to which the 3rd Canadian Division would be subordinated. As they peered through their binoculars the observers liked what they saw. Many of the most vexing problems, such as the inability to bring sufficient fire support to bear on coastal defences, had been encountered and corrected in earlier exercises. To everyone's relief Trousers went off without a hitch and was characterised by a high level of professionalism at all levels of command and among all participating units. Just as important the Canadian troops who landed at Slapton Sands appeared confident, spirited, almost itching for a good brawl.

So they left that "assaulted and devastated coast" as Shute describes it, and sailed back to where they had come from. In Shute's case, this was the Beaulieu river and Lepe Hard where he left the LCT on that morning of 18th April, to encounter the wreck of the Junkers a few miles inland.

Writing of the damage caused by the shelling at Slapton he recalls older sites where the grass had grown to soften the outlines of a past conflict and that

".. it will do the same with this harsh damage of the last few years till it grows picturesque and merges into history. The trees will grow new leaves again, the country houses will be rebuilt with more baths and more lavatories, and nothing will be left but fairy rings to mark the shell holes in the fields." Visiting Slapton more than sixty years after the guns fell silent I saw no fairy rings, but the houses have been rebuilt, the trees have grown; a Sherman Tank now stands as a memorial to those who died on Exercise Tiger. This beautiful part of the Devon coast stood once more tranquil in the summer sunshine.

Postscript.

The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division was part of Force J which landed on Juno Beach on 6th June. They were stationed in the Southampton and New Forest areas of southern England. When Shute got his assignment on 1st June to go as a correspondent with the invasion force, he wrote [7] that he was disappointed not to go with Force J since he had worked with this force (i.e. the Canadians) upon exercises and he had applied for permission to go with them for the assault in an LCT. He was assigned to Force L, a follow up force, which sailed from the River Thames. This force reached the beaches some nine hours after the initial assault. He had to accept this assignment

and consoled himself with the fact that he would be much safer with this follow up force.

Perhaps he kept track of the progress of the Canadians who had so impressed him as they fought on the left flank of the invasion and, following the subsequent break-out, into France, Belgium, Holland and through to the German surrender in May 1945.

References

[1] John Stanley "The Exbury Junkers - A World War II Mystery", Woodfield Publishing 2004.

[2] ADM 277/11 Technical History - Gliders, National Archives.

[3] Nevil Shute, Second Front III, unpublished article

[4] Robin Rose-Price and Jean Parnell "The Land we left behind", Orchard Publications, 2004

[5] WO 194/2317 Exercise "Trousers"-3rd Canadian Infantry Division, National Archives.

[6] Howard Margolian " Conduct unbecoming: the story of the murder of Canadian prisoners" Toronto University Press 1998

[7] Nevil Shute "Journey into Normandy" unpublished article.

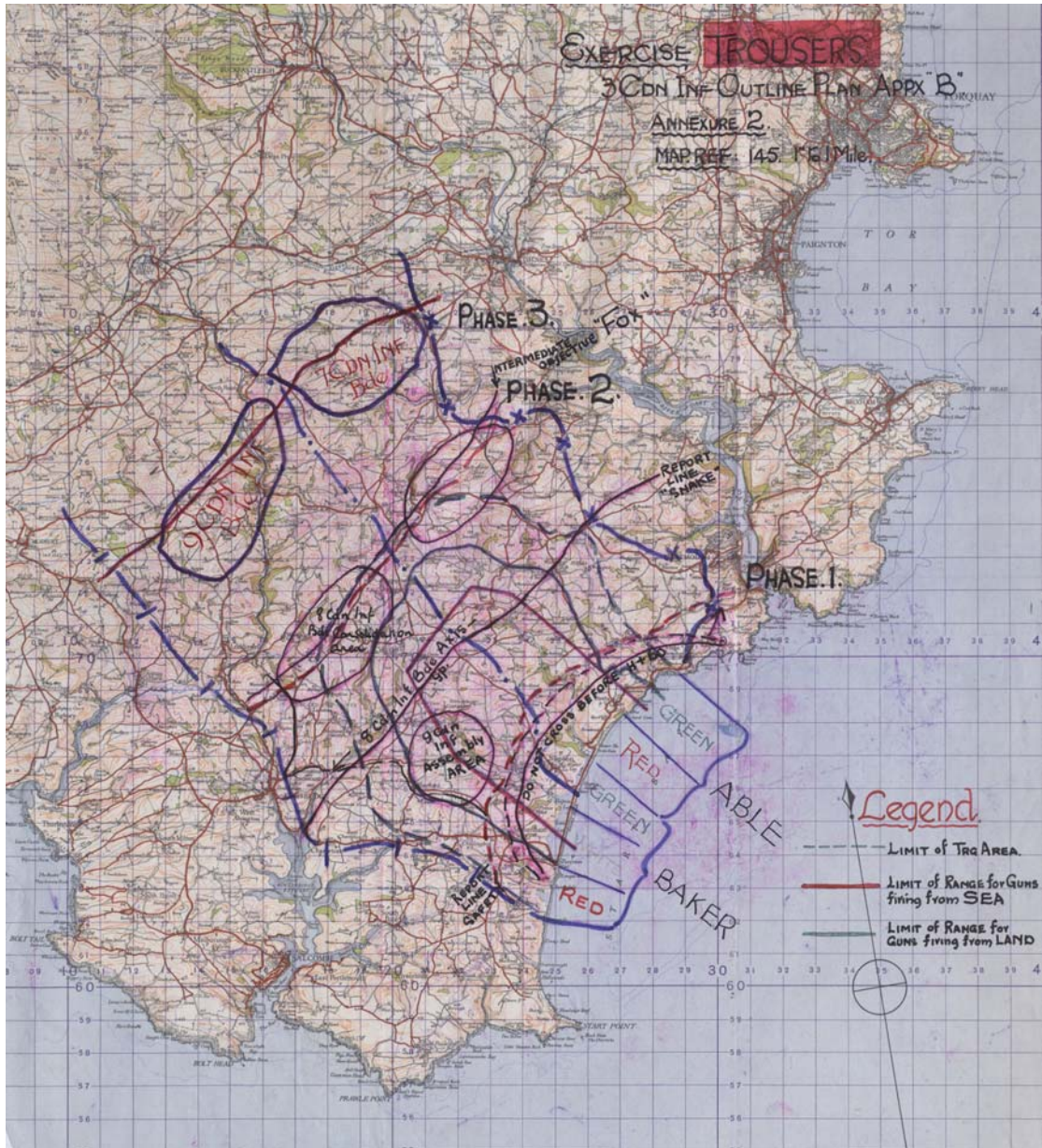


An LCT mark V loaded with Sherman tanks.
Shute sailed to Slapton Sands aboard this type of vessel

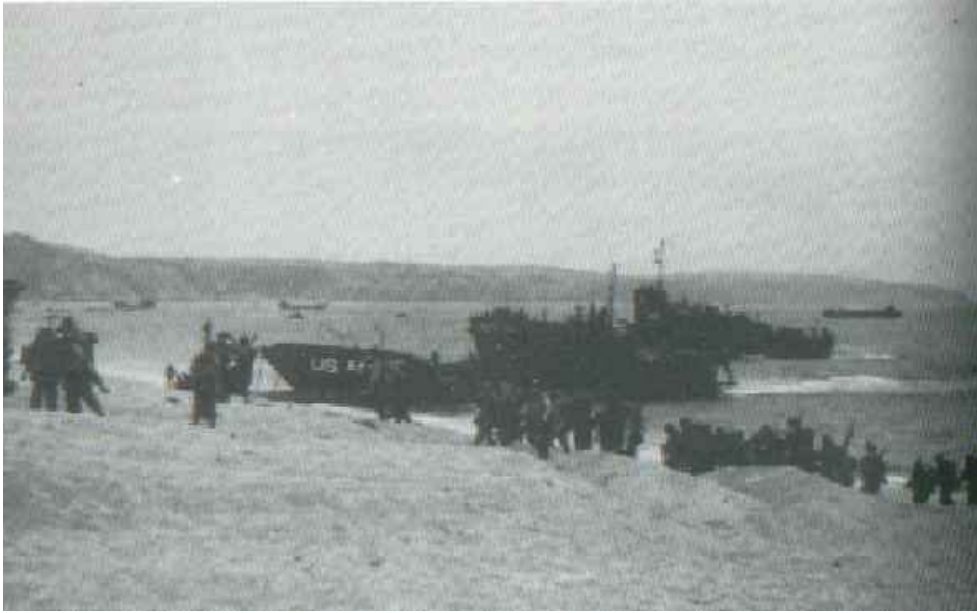


Top Brass observing Exercise "Trousers" on 12th April 1944

(2nd from Left) Admiral Philip Vian, Commander of Naval Force J,
(2nd from Right) General Bernard Montgomery, 21st Army Group
(Right) General Miles Dempsey, 2nd British Army to which the 3rd Canadian
Infantry Division was attached.



Plan for Exercise "Trousers" showing landing sectors and objectives



U.S. Troops disembarking on Slapton Sands



Slapton Beach as it is today more than 60 years after the assault



This house seems to fit Shute's description of the one that was shelled. A small spacious English house standing on a hillside with a conservatory, a walled garden below the house and a wood beside it. It overlooks Slapton Sands at the northern end



Map showing the route and distance from Lepe Hard to Slapton Sands and back