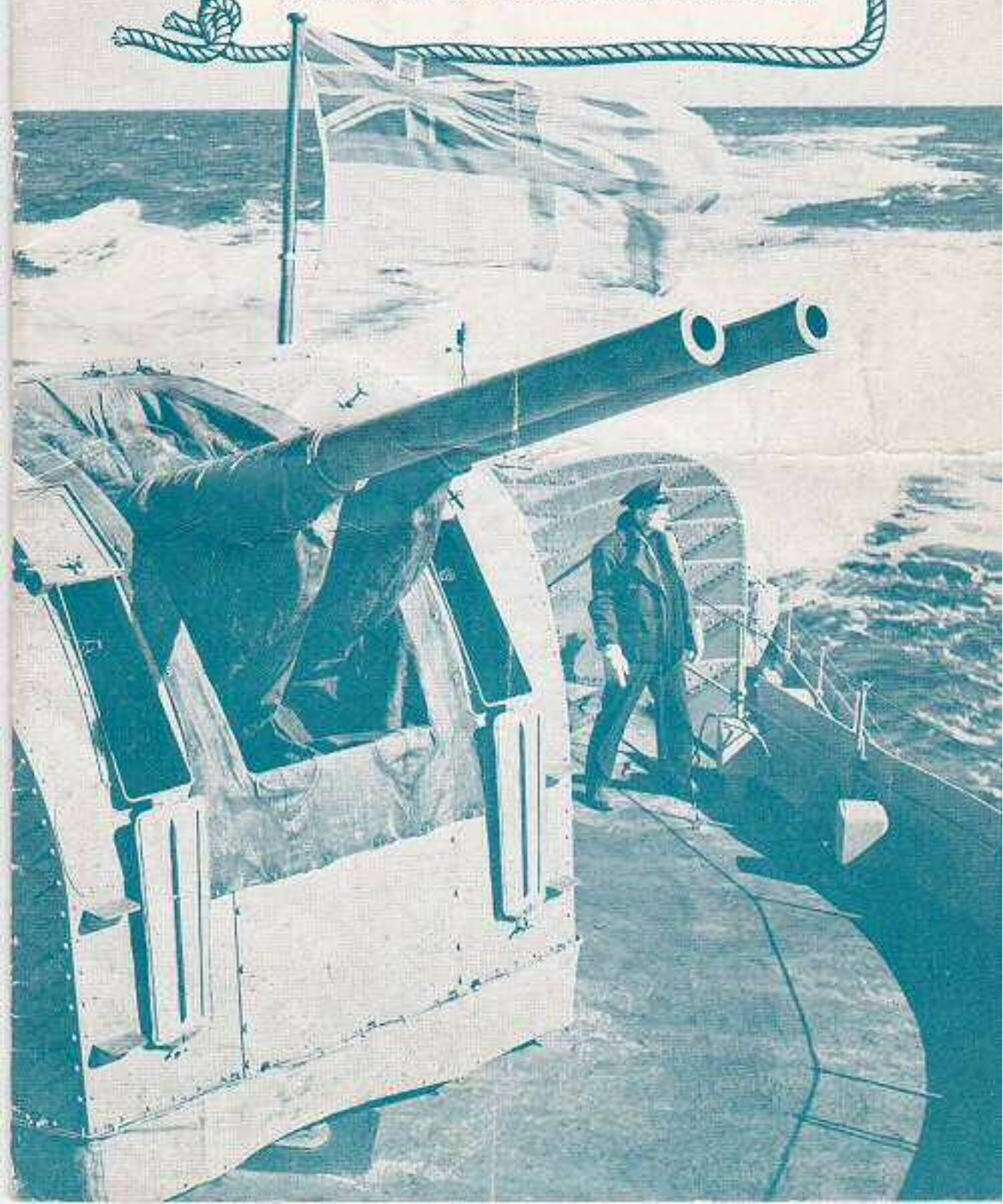


"D" DAY ON A CANADIAN DESTROYER

A TALK BROADCAST ON THE CBC TRANS-CANADA NETWORK

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By *LEONARD W. BROCKINGTON, K.C. LL.D.*



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FROM THE AFTERNOON of Friday, the second day of June, to the evening of Thursday, the 8th day of June, it was my good fortune to live with two hundred and forty light-hearted and cool-headed young Canadians on board His Majesty's Canadian Destroyer Sioux.

That ship has as its emblem the head of an Indian chieftain, and as its motto in the Sioux language — "We laugh with joy—the enemy is near." When I left it on the third night of the invasion 3,000 yards off the shores of Normandy, it was as clean as a good Scotswoman's kitchen. Its men stood ready for action in the first state of preparedness. Its disciplined sailors were still bending to their work.

The Sioux is commanded by Lieutenant Commander Eric Boak of Victoria, British Columbia, twenty-seven years old. The average age of its officers and crew is under twenty-four. They come from every province in Canada—a hundred of them perhaps from cities and hamlets over a thousand miles from the sea. Never has any great implement of war been more firmly in the grip of inspired young men.

To their friends I bring in their name and at their request, cheerful greeting. To their families and sweethearts I bear a message of love. To their country I carry the assurance that she is always in their grateful recollection and every day on their lips and in their hearts.

The ship which with veteran skill they sailed into waters which they had never seen, formed part of what is now known as the Armada of Liberation which on D-Day and the day before it, moved on its dread majestic way to the beaches that face the sea between Havre and Cherbourg. The Sioux was one of the first ships in.

I have no tale of personal adventure to tell you—no stories of grim sea battles fought and won. But there is a story of skill and forethought, devotion, resolution, preparedness, courage and overwhelming might unequalled in the annals of warfare.

May I share a few unskilled memories with you? At eleven o'clock in the morning of Friday, the second day of June, a large company of newspaper correspondents, photographers and broadcasters was summoned to a room in the Admiralty at London. We were addressed by three forthright men—two British and one American. We were told in simple, direct language that the day for which the liberator and the tyrant, the oppressor and the oppressed were all waiting was close at hand. Four years of preparation and planning that began with the retreat from Dunkirk and would end with the fall of Berlin had come to a climax. The invasion fleet was about to sail to the coast of Normandy. The warships and the larger ships, including infantry landing ships (of which the smallest was 2,000 tons) were 75 per cent British. The greater part of the smaller craft was American. The overall percentage of the 4,000 ships employed would be sixty per cent British and forty per cent American. The bombarding forces would bring to bear on the enemy six hundred guns ranging from sixteen inch to four inch.

At the actual time of the assault, such was the unexampled fire power that two thousand tons of high explosive shells would fall in ten minutes. We were told to stress the part to be played by the merchant navy. Their

operation would take a peculiar form of courage—traditionally peculiar, to the indomitable merchantmen who "Jog along, By bay and cape, an endless throng, As endless as a seaman's song."

We were told the names of the admirals and captains and of the great ships that we would see—ships that men would long remember—the Nevada, the Arkansas, the Texas, the Tuskaloosa, the Augusta, the Quincy, the Warspite, the Nelson, the Ramilies, the Glasgow, the Belfast—yes, and His Majesty's Canadian ships Algonquin and Sioux.

We were told of mystery ships we must not talk about, of new types of planes which we must not identify.

"Good luck to you all," said the chief spokesman. "I only wish I were coming with you. Before you go, I would like to tell you," he continued, "what a British admiral said the other day. I'll let you know his name but I don't think he'd like it made public.

"What Philip of Spain tried to do and failed; what Napoleon wanted to do and could not; what Hitler never had the courage to attempt, we are about to do, and with God's grace we shall succeed."

"Now," he added, "you will be taken by bus and car to your ports and by launches to your ships. I have made arrangements for some refreshments on the road. I suggest that you have no further communication with any member of the British public except for the purpose of finding your way to the men's washroom."

And so we left on our road to Southampton and Portsmouth and the other harbours over against the shores of Normandy.

When we arrived at our port we separated into the speedboats assigned to take us to our ships. The sight that met our eyes in the Solent and the great waters of Southampton, Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight can never be forgotten. Thousands of ships of all shapes and sizes and uses—British, American, Canadian, Polish, French, Norwegian, Dutch — battleships, cruisers, destroyers, landing craft, frigates, monitors, corvettes, freighters carrying strange cargoes, tankers, mystery ships hidden by acres of tarpaulin, all rode serenely at anchor unthreatened by the enemy that once used to sing that he was sailing against England.

Do you remember Hitler's boast to Mr. Churchill — "Keep your shirt on! I'm coming." The sleeves of that shirt are now rolled up.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon we reached the Sioux. That night we went out on anti-submarine patrol and returned in the morning to our anchorage.

We remained at anchor in our home waters during Saturday and Sunday. Hundreds more ships kept coming to join us. We saw the little coveys of M.T.B.'s racing back through the white foam from their brave journeys to the French coast. And always overhead the Spitfires and the Typhoons. But always the wonder that no German planes dared to attack the serried ranks of ships that the enemy must have known were waiting for the favouring winds and tides to carry them to the lee of his Atlantic wall. It was, had we but known it, a prelude to the realization of the enemy's impotence at sea and in the air which astounded us all when the day of destiny came.

I have not the time to tell you all I would like of the days of waiting for the order to sail. Of what men said, of the arguments—whether skiing in the Sun Valley of Quebec was better than fishing in Shawnigan Lake in B.C., of the miraculous

arrival on the very eve of letters and parcels from home, of the engine room which the chief called an engineer's dream; of the singsong on the night before departure where the only songs on the sound film were about Pennsylvania and Indiana and California because no Canadian musician seems to think it worthwhile to write tuneful songs about the country which fills the heart of every Canadian overseas; of the picture show where there wasn't even a flash of Canada but only a flamboyant Hollywood film about the Flying Tigers of Burma which everybody had seen umpteen times.

I would like to speak of the coming of the padres on the day before we sailed; of the Catholic mass; of the service on the quarter deck shared by the Baptist and Anglican padres, where we prayed for the fleet and our loved ones at home, and sang "Eternal Father Strong to Save," and "Praise the Lord ye Heavens Adore Him" to the droning accompaniment of Spitfires and Hurricanes overhead, and with ships great and small around us, all preparing for their pilgrimage.

I would like to tell you of the occasional wistfulness that passed over young faces when the owners thought you weren't looking at them — of the men who showed me pictures of their wives and children — of the young lieutenant from Quebec who said that D-Day was his wedding anniversary, and of the newly married lads who were expecting news of the birth of their first child and wondered whether it would be a boy, and whether he would be born on Liberation Day; of the fun they made of some of us; of the young English radio engineer whom they called the microphone kid, whose mother, they told him, must have run a switchboard; of Grisewood the cook and what they called his greasy grill; of Brown the steward who had gone down on the Fraser and the Margaree and had bobbed up with a cheerful grin to follow his captain to the Sioux. I have just one personal reminiscence. They rigged me up with a sheepskin coat, a tin hat, an anti-flash mask and gloves and a Mae West. Like the rest of them I

was never out of my clothes for the six nights I was aboard, although I slept and their duty wouldn't let them.

"What the enemy will do to you!" they said, "when they pick you up!" I finally had to tell them what the enemy would do to me. "He will take my picture," I said, "and put me on every newsreel and photo service. Underneath he will write — 'If you want to know the depths to which the British Empire has sunk, look at this typical Canadian sailor.'"

Before I ask you to start with me on our journey, there are two conversations that I wish to refer to.

The attacking force of which we formed part, consisted of two cruisers and eleven destroyers. The destroyer section was under the command of one known as Captain D — the captain of the British Destroyer Kempenfelt. He came on board on Saturday morning. He was six foot seven in height and had been for fourteen years the captain of a submarine. He had assisted in the planning of the landings at Casablanca, Sicily and Anzio. "I thought they were all second fronts," he said. "I hope this one is."

I asked him what he knew of Kempenfelt (after whom his destroyer was called) apart from the verse in the poem "The Loss of the Royal George" in which brave Kempenfelt went down with twice four hundred men. "All I know," he said, "is one sentence of Kempenfelt's which I have emblazoned on my cabin wall. 'If it can be done, do it at once—if it is impossible, it may take a little time.'"

"There," said a friend of mine, "spoke the very spirit of the invasion."

On Saturday evening our captain invited me into his cabin.

This operation, the captain began, cannot possibly fail. It is the greatest organization that this world has ever

seen. If the Germans had done one quarter of it, British and American papers would have been headlining their achievements.

He showed me his instructions — printed documents two inches thick. They dealt only with the operation of which we were a part — one little Canadian destroyer responsible for the bombardment of two hundred yards of coast. If you multiply these instructions to cover many multitudes of operations you will have some idea of the skill and thought which British and American brains had applied to this great enterprise.

"We shall have," he said, "an air superiority of five to one. It will be so great that my instructions are that except on the night of D-Day when we shall be comparatively unprotected except by our own anti-aircraft, rockets and guns, I am not to shoot at any airplane because it will not be the enemy's. If they attack or I see their markings that, of course, will be different." Could any sentences be more eloquent of Allied power and of German inferiority?

The fleet, he said, would move in ten channels. We were to proceed down channel eight, preceded by mine-sweepers. H-hour would be one half hour after the first light. There would be fighter patrol by night and terrific air bombardment in the twelve hours preceding D-Day. As a matter of fact, one thousand bombers by night and another one thousand in the early morning battered the coast.

At H-minus forty direct bombardment was to start by destroyers and other ships which I cannot mention. We were to carry on that bombardment for forty minutes until H-hour, at which time the first craft to touch down would be amphibious tanks which would be set on the beach.

They were to be followed by further tanks, then assault troops and assault boats. Paratroops would have landed during the night at prearranged objectives.

There would be two Hunt class destroyers ahead of us — one thousand yards nearer the coast. They would go after the pill boxes. Our beach was known as J-beach — being part of the foreshore between Caen and Bayeux. We were giving support to the third Canadian division.

He produced his maps showing almost every square yard some miles inland and photographs showing every building on our small strip of coast, church, hotel, the little houses and the gasometer.

I remember that church tower. When I returned to London, Admiral Nelles showed me a photograph of it with a hole through it. When he was on the beaches, our soldiers had shot down from that tower four German women snipers who had killed many of their comrades.

The captain went on to tell me that D-Day would probably be Monday, June 5, and that we would be starting the following Sunday morning — weather permitting. As you will remember, weather did not permit, and even on D-Day considerable risks — not, however, all to our disadvantage — were taken in going in with the wind and tide not altogether favourable.

"If," he said, "we cannot go within the next three days, this operation will be postponed for a couple of weeks."

Some day perhaps I may tell you more about this captain and his men.

I like to think of him as a typical young Canadian fit in mind and body, trained to the last ounce of flesh and the last gram of brain — merry of heart and serious of purpose, and like all his men, prepared to give up everything to be present at the shaping of human destiny, but looking upon even D-Day itself as a day's march nearer home on the crusade to make all men free.

At 11 o'clock on the Monday morning the captain spoke on the ship's radio to all mess decks and told them the day was at hand. Whatever thoughts were in men's minds as we set out to shepherd our sheep on that great morning, I know that no man wished to be elsewhere.

At ten minutes past twelve on Monday morning we left Sea View in the Isle of Wight, making for rendezvous Z. Led by the Vigilant we proceeded up channel eight with the Vigilant and the minesweepers. We passed through all the Gradations of watchfulness from cruising stations to defence stations to action stations. Individually we acted as escort for the minesweeping flotilla. Our group consisted of eight minesweepers, four dam layers, three mine-sweeping motor launches and four other minesweepers of the B.Y.M. S. class. We formed up directly astern the minesweepers and started off for the coast of France. During the first part of the trip sweeping was not necessary as we were in English waters. Early that night as we approached enemy waters, the sweepers formed up on a diagonal line and put out their sweeps. They were followed by dam layers laying buoys marked by distinctive flags and lights to show where the channel was.

It was a sight of strange beauty to see the phosphorescent waves and our street-lights bobbing on the little buoys and the grey night clouds hanging low. Above them we could hear a never-ending stream of planes. Perhaps for the enemy they zoomed and roared, but for us they murmured and purred because they were our own.

The minesweepers had been given instructions that since the force which was to use the channel about 400 yards wide which they were sweeping would be made up of many small vessels with few navigational aids, they should under no circumstances deviate from their course. Their motto was straight ahead!

The duty of the fleet destroyers was to protect the minesweepers from any surface or underwater attack and to see that they were not hampered in any way from carrying out their task.

We knew that for a month British and American bombers had pounded the coast to which we were proceeding. We knew how that night and the following morning the most highly concentrated air attack would be continued.

We had our first sight of anti-aircraft flashes and fires burning south of west about twenty miles from the coast.

At about midnight our sound apparatus recorded the first under-water explosion, presumably a mine. During our journey we recorded nine such explosions in our channel.

At eleven minutes past twelve we made a strategic turn of 180 degrees back to England with the object of confusing the enemy's listening devices as we knew that from the time of our departure he had been able to record our approach.

At seven minutes past one we turned back again towards France. At three minutes past four we were a little ahead of our schedule and found ourselves too close to the coast. We turned back again and at 4.45 resumed our journey to France in order not to arrive at our rendezvous before our time.

We saw the coast shattered from end to end by the pattern bombing of hundreds of Flying Fortresses.

At 5.30 it was daylight and what a sight met our gaze. A great semi-circle of hundreds of ships lay off the enemy's coast.

At 5.31 the first cruisers—the Sheffield and the Belfast—opened fire. We were then about 12,000 yards off

Beny sur le mer. There was no opposition from any shore batteries, in the air, or from the sea.

At 5.43 the Sioux took its first preliminary bearings on the target and started to move in.

At 5.45 the shore batteries started to answer.

At six o'clock we were in bombardment position two miles from the shore.

At 6.20 the Kempenfelt opened fire.

At 6.40 the ship anchored and at 7.10 with a target of 10,700 yards the captain ordered our gunners to engage the enemy. At 7.34 we were still bombarding and had obliterated our direct target.

At 7.38 we received a new target and at 7.48 we completed our direct bombardment. From then on throughout the day there was constant activity and fitful firing on sea and on land, but not much for the disappointed Sioux.

Monitors with sixteen inch guns, cruisers with six and eight inch guns continued their indirect bombardment. Our shorter range would only imperil our own men.

Thunder answered thunder, tanks were ashore; guns went ashore; men went ashore; fires broke out; the coast was enveloped in smoke which cleared away and returned in changing phases.

By five minutes past eight everybody was standing around watching the planes overhead. As those of us who were able to do so breakfasted on bacon and beans, we listened to the B.B.C. announcing the landing.

By 7.57 the first landing force hit the beaches. At 10 minutes after eight the first landing craft started to return. At 8.30 enemy shells dropped close to our port quarter. That was the last I saw of enemy action from the land against the fleet.

By quarter to ten there was what the clever little paymaster described as a regular ferry service of landing craft. Royal Marines, clad as divers in rubber suits had walked on the bottom of the sea, exploding mines and removing obstacles. Ships were sunk to make a breakwater. About half past eleven the Algonquin and the Sioux closed in for the protection of a long line of landing barges carrying men that we knew were Canadians.

I never expect my heart to throb at a more thrilling sight of men going gaily to the unknown than of those Canadian soldiers on those landing barges. I saw dozens of ratings gazing with fascinated eyes and saying "Look — our boys."

We fired no more shots that day. Towards evening with a singular beauty of sea and sky, there suddenly appeared in the heavens the greatest spectacle that any of us had ever looked upon. We stood like the first star-gazers looking at the first comet.

Hundreds of R.A.F. and R.C.A.F. planes — black and white — shining in the sunshine, came from the English coast towing great gliders packed with parachute troops. They proceeded beyond the beaches and we could see the airborne troops in yellow, red and green and blue parachutes landing upon the inland meadows. A Polish airman — a survivor on the landing ship on which I returned to England, told me that as they dropped, the fields of Normandy looked like a great garden full of flowering shrubs.

I saw three planes shot down — one on the beaches — one in the meadow-land and one into the sea. The plane

that went into the sea was coming towards the destroyer flotilla. All the crew could have bailed out in safety, but they knew that if they had done so their plane would probably have hit one of our destroyers and caused the death of their comrades in arms. They chose the nobler way. The plane dived into the sea in flames with all its crew, about one hundred yards from our starboard bow. It was but an incident and passed away in a flash almost unnoticed. But men talked about it and thought about it long afterwards.

When the great fleet of planes had returned I sat on the deck wondering about a little tanker that was turned upside down, looking at the sea dappled in green and blue beneath the descending sun and watching some wild ducks flying, noticing some cans of food, floating by, some spars of wood, and occasionally some gruesome relics that showed us that for some men the day had gone more hardly than it had for us.

When night fell the red warning came for enemy aircraft overhead. I remember that the captain had told us that we would not have much air support on the night of D-Day. A few bombs and flares were dropped and then the whole flak of the fleet let off its guns and its rockets.

For half an hour amid a din unbelievable, that shattered one's ear drums, all the illumination that you have ever seen at Toronto exhibitions and Calgary stampedes lit the heavens that watched over the bay.

The last gun ceased firing and peace descended on our little section of sea. That night we were the guardian ship and set out again on anti-submarine patrol.

I have no time tonight to tell you of the days that followed nor of my return journey to England on board a landing craft ship with survivors of moving accidents by sea and

air. I went back to land with memories that will never die until the last darkness comes — memories of the greatest organization that this world has ever seen — of sea and air might so invincible that it could not even be challenged — of brave men on beaches and in the air — of many ships great and small and especially of one ship full of gay fun-loving young hearts that had the honour of Canada in their safe keeping.

On the evening of D-Day, between the time of the gliders and sunset I talked with the chief engineer. He spoke of his wife and family in Victoria and his garden and his hopes for Canada after the war. We talked too of the Britain where we were both born and how, as the years passed by, that little island would be sacred to many races who would remember the great flotilla that set out from its shores on the fifth day of June.

We thought, both of us, that we had seen the morning break not only on the coast of France but for all mankind.

"Chief," I said, "many fleets of ships have crossed these waters to bring destruction to innocent people and slavery to the free. This armada is different. It is the first that ever set out to bring freedom to all men."

"Yes, sir," he said, "and that's what makes everybody feel good — and every Canadian glad to be here."

