

AUSTRALIAN ARMY AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC: 1942-45

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: NORMANDY 1944¹

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**Introduction by Colonel Peter Leahy,
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Mr Gullett served as an infantry sergeant in the 2nd/6th Battalion at the battle of Bardia in 1941. He was awarded his Military Cross as a junior officer in New Guinea in 1943 and was later a company commander attached to a British battalion for the Normandy invasion. After the war, he continued to serve Australia with distinction, first as a federal liberal politician and then as Australia's Ambassador to Greece. Mr Gullett also boasts a dubious honour; he is one of the few Australians who can claim to have been shot at and wounded by Italians, Japanese and Germans alike. And, sir, we will thank you if you do not show us your scars. While today's conference is clearly focused on the Australian Army's amphibious operations in the South-West Pacific, we have asked Mr Gullett to speak to us about his personal experiences as a company commander with the British forces at Normandy. Normandy, as the biggest amphibious operation ever attempted, will provide us with some lessons for the future of amphibious operations in Australia.

Mr Gullett

General Grey, ladies and gentlemen. First of all, if anyone cannot hear me please hold up their hand. There was a time when I was a Sergeant Major and I could easily make myself heard in this little theatre. But with this machinery you're never quite certain.

In the course of a long life and a varied one, I suppose I might have attended more conferences, briefings, speeches, meetings and so on than anybody else here. But I do not think I have ever attended a conference like this, where I have heard so much of interest and value clearly expressed. I think we are all in indebted to General Grey for organising this and letting us hear all these people who are authoritative on the subject and express themselves so well. They have informed us who made the decisions, why they were made and in what circumstances they were made. Decisions which sent Australians of 50 years ago all around the world, wherever there was armed conflict. I found these accounts quite fascinating. But I must tell you, frankly, that this is the end of them. Because as a soldier, I had the good fortune to serve in many theatres of war, but far from being a decision maker or a policy maker, I was not even privy to what such decisions and policies were. Some of the speakers have touched on various high level mistakes made during the war, and have referred to the disasters of Greece and Crete. I do not think they were disasters, if only because they delayed the German army from attacking Russia. However, taking part in those campaigns we had no criticism whatever to offer about either the decision to send us there or how it turned out.

As I said, I was not a decision maker in any sense, but like St Paul's centurion, I was a captain of hundreds, and hundreds of infantry at that, or a hundred at a time mostly. You did not have to be a specialist in anything to join the infantry. We were just very ordinary people. But, I must say from the start, that right throughout history no military armed engagement, large or small, no battle, no campaign, no war is decided until the infantry of the attacking forces occupy first the positions of their enemy and then their lines of communication, their ports and finally their factories and mines. Only the infantry can do that in any war, and this D-Day which I have been asked to talk about, was the first blow in Europe which told the Germans clearly that pretty soon we would be occupying their homeland.

D-Day: how did I ever come to be there? Well, allow me to explain. It was a long war, the six year war Gavin Long calls it, and by 1943 the British were running short of officers. Not generals, not field marshals, not even brigadiers, but middle ranking officers—field officers they say—of experience. The British government asked the Canadians to make some of their men available because, though they had not seen a great deal of the war, they were well selected, good types of people, and they gave them some hundreds—I think four hundred. Then they asked the Australian Government if we could provide a similar number—about four hundred. Well General Blamey—whom I did not make a habit of seeing during the war by the way, though I did meet him a number of times after—he said:

I said to them, it's all very well for the Canadians, but we've had two, three and four divisions engaged in campaigns for years now and I simply could not possibly spare anything like 100 officers, but I'll send you a handful.

And so he sent fifteen and I was lucky to be one. I will say now something about myself. The previous talkers have been absolutely factual and historical but I am going to express a few views, and they are only views about the morale and state of the nation and the outlook of men, particularly of my own generation.

Most of the Australians that were sent were under 30 years of age, but getting on towards that mark. We all had previous experience of war and most of us were rather more sophisticated soldiers, that is to say more militarily educated than most and so we were sent to appropriate planning appointments when we got to England. One of them who is here today, for example, was GI of the 51st Highland Division, which is of course one of the most famous divisions to land there. The others filled a variety of staff positions.

The British, in my experience, were very reasonable with us and they asked me what I should do. I said that there was only one thing I could do and that I understood, and that was commanding soldiers—infantrymen—and that was what I wanted to do. So I was sent to the 8th Battalion, the Royal Scots—the first regiment of foot. This was then the oldest regiment of 'the line' in the British Army. They are referred to occasionally as Pontius Pilot's bodyguard because the legion that Pilot had in Jerusalem at the time of the Crucifixion was drawn largely from northern England and the Picts and Scots. But they did not like being called this because in fact their origin was as mercenaries with the French Kings in the 10th century. But anyhow, they were the oldest regiment of 'the line' in the British Army and possessed many proud traditions.

It was a warlike age; 50 years ago is a hell of a long time. For us in 1939, the Boer War was closer than the Second World War is to us today. So it is worth my while trying to say something about our general attitudes of my generation. My own family, for example, was probably typical for the period. I was the third generation of my family, born in Australia, to go abroad and fight in foreign wars, and that was by no means exceptional. We also had compulsory military training for everybody when I was a boy. You see, the Australian officer corps from which we were chosen consisted mainly of men from backgrounds like myself. While we were not all professionals, we were not entirely amateurs either. As I said, war was our background and the longer it went on the more the army engaged our loyalties and almost seemed home to us.

The first time I was wounded I came back to the same battalion. I had been commissioned while I was in hospital. At parade, the following morning after my return the Sergeant Major, who was a splendid Scotsman—first war chap too—gave me a nice salute and said 'Good morning, sir'. Then he said, 'Home again Jo'. And he meant that, for it was indeed home. Over the years it had become home and it was an essential part of our lives.

We arrived in Great Britain and I was sent to the Royal Scots, which was then commanded by a Colonel Delacombe, who later became Governor of Victoria. (This was particularly good fortune for me as, after the war, he used to ask us down to the Melbourne Cup.) We were also wounded on the same day at Normandy and I would visit him in England. I was very happy with this battalion but they did not have a role in D-Day. So, when we were visited by

General O'Connor, the Corps Commander, and he asked me how I was getting along, I said 'Very well, thank you sir, but I would like to be with a battalion that is landing on D-Day'. He laughed. He said, 'Very reasonable at your age'. So almost immediately I was sent to the 7th Battalion, Green Howards. They were encamped outside Portsmouth and the men were mostly North country miners. They had already done a campaign or two in the Western Desert, and they knew about the business of war.

I will say a word about them because they were not exactly looking forward to the campaign. Like myself, they were becoming to regard war as their life. They knew they were going to get knocked about in France and nobody looked forward to that. But a miner's life is not an easy one and they have got to rely on their mates. It is a pretty good background for soldiering in my opinion. As a matter of fact, they were all quite small men. We were weighed in our 'fighting order' so that they could calculate the weights for the landing craft and I was the second heaviest man in the company. Now I am very far from large, but of course, I was accustomed to carrying big weights in New Guinea, and I was not at all delicate. But it is still remarkable to think that out of 140 men, only the Sergeant Major was as heavy as I was.

A bit more about the British troops. All the officers in that battalion—it was a militia, or reserve, battalion—were professional regular soldiers, except myself. Fortunately, as I had other campaigns and ribbons, they all took it for granted that I was a professional soldier and I was not so foolish as to disabuse them.

First of all the briefing. We had very elaborate briefings on sand tables; beautiful big sand tables. And they were quite extensive. They went up to ten or fifteen miles inland from the coast of France, but there were no names; nothing was named and no maps were issued. We had no positive notion of where we were going to land. It was all part of a giant plan of deception. The British not only set up bogus Corps and Army Headquarters in Britain, and faked the radio communication between them to give an impression that they were landing somewhere other than Normandy, but they even went to the length of spreading false information among the Free French. The British commanders had assumed that at least some of the Free French would be captured by the Germans and, torture being what it is, the Germans would hear the story the British wanted them to hear. It was a master deception plan.

We got into these landing ships on the 4th of June and they were just big enough to carry a battalion and all its arms. Then round the boat deck there were these landing crafts that would take us from ship to shore. We were fairly crowded in the little ship, but it was not uncomfortable. There was no question of us wandering around or having a drink. You were there and you stayed there. The morning of the 5th of June saw very rough weather and, while we did not know much about what was going on—soldiers are extremely philosophical about decisions they do not have to make—we knew that it would be unlikely that we would sail on that day. But the weather improved and we did sail that night. Before first light we were off the coast of France. That was D-Day.

Once we were on these ships, by the way, we were issued with our maps. Now we could relate them to our sand tables and discovered for the first time where we were landing.

Obviously we woke up fairly early; we could not do otherwise because the noise was like nothing I have ever heard, even though I have been exposed to some fairly solid bombings and barrages before. The Royal Navy of course was behind us and were firing their shells and the scream of these things through the air over our heads had to be heard to be believed. At the same time, the sun had not yet risen and was below the horizon, but it glinted on the wings and the fuselage of the aircraft also flying overhead. And they were there in the hundreds, flying quite low it seemed, and they made a hell of a lot of noise too. Then they were bombing and machine gunning the coast. There was a certain amount of fire coming from the Normandy coast in our direction also, although not very much. Well pretty soon after that we were put in the little landing craft. They held about thirty, or roughly a platoon, and we set off towards the shore. The shore we could see very plainly as it got light. But furthermore, it was a blaze of explosions and bombs and shells and other unpleasantness. As our little

landing craft got closer to the shore we did not have to go through very much fire. I did notice that a few landing craft were hit, one or two were in trouble and were rescued by others, the survivors being collected. And in our own craft two men were wounded by bullets from the shore—of course that made no difference to anything.

As we got close to the shore we were joined by tanks. These tanks were fitted to land in two ways: some of them carried in tank landing craft and they rolled off into quite deep water and they had been fitted with giant scrim around their sides, sort of very large life jackets. They floated and propelled themselves towards the land. Others in the tank landing craft went right up until the landing craft grounded and then the bow dropped and the tanks rolled out into three, four or five feet of water. They were all, of course, waterproofed and the waterproofing was lined with an explosive fuse cord so as they got near the shore the tank commander blew all this waterproofing off and swung his gun around. Thankfully this meant that we had close tank support from the moment we landed, and of course this was very enheartening indeed.

When we landed I did not even get my feet wet because our little craft went right up to the shore. Already there was a wave or two ahead of us, not far but they were rounding up German prisoners. I should have said the beach was rather flat. It had a lot of concrete pillboxes manned by Russians whom the Nazi had conned into defending the West Wall against the allies.

After we started to move off the beach, we came across extensive minefields. Thankfully we also were supported by several flail tanks. These tanks were a fair sized tank with a revolving axle out in front to which are attached chains. As it turns, the chains beat the ground to a distance of about ten feet from the tank with the intention of detonating any antitank or anti-personnel mines. And they were effective. It must have been a horrible job. Imagine a damn great mine going off ten feet in front of your tank, time after time and quite a lot of them of course, it did not do them any good at all. But we were able to follow them through these mine fields and as a consequence we did not have any casualties.

Once off the beach we aligned our maps to the briefings we had received back in England and identified our objectives, or did so as best we could. We had not gone very far before the forward platoon sent into my Company Headquarters a number of prisoners. Leading these prisoners was a German sergeant major who was a good looking type of soldier with an iron cross. Behind him was a young German officer. The NCO came up quite closely to me—I must say I speak German—and examining my 'Australia' flashes said, 'Liebe Gott. Ein Australien!!' I replied 'Yes, that's right Sar' Major. Where did you get your iron cross? Were you with Rommel in the desert?' He said, 'Yes I was. I was at Tobruk and I was at El Alamein'. Well it is an odd thing, but in a second you know when you are going to get on with someone. But he looked at me and said, reflectively, 'Australie!' He was wearing a very nice gold watch and he took it off and handed it to me. Now this was not exactly a compliment to his knowledge of Australian soldiers and I could not help laughing about it. 'Well', I said, 'you can put your watch in your boot. We infantry soldiers don't rob each other'. He thanked me and we were getting along quite well when the German lieutenant came up to me. Now he was a tallish young man, a typical product of Hitler's propaganda. He came up to me and said, 'Heil Hitler'. And I said, 'Herr Leutnant, Heil Hitler is a little out of date from now on. You will try again. You will come up to me, you will salute in the proper manner and say good morning Herr Major'. He was thinking it over when the Sergeant Major said to him, 'He's Australian you know sir, they'll do anything'. So this fellow thought it over very quickly. He was a good soldier by his Nazi standards. Then he decided he would greet me correctly but he rather over did it. He said 'Good morning Sir! I report most obediently'. Which showed me, who knew a bit about the German Army, that he was from a military family and was still using old fashioned Prussian Guard expressions. Anyhow, we had no more trouble with him.

We pressed on, on foot, for a few miles. As I say, we were not told the names of the places we were passing through but the maps were very good. Eventually we came to a pretty decent sort of road, and our tanks were waiting there for us. We piled onto these tanks and then we drove at a fairly good rate for about five miles into France. To make five or six miles penetration on D-Day was quite something. We stopped at a town called Crevilly. There we

left the tanks and marched through the town. It was a town about as big as Yass, with a good main street. The people there were literally mad with joy as only French people can be. The old mayor was there in all his glorious ribbons. They dug up a band from somewhere, and all the pretty girls ran up and gave us glasses of wine. It was a splendid interlude.

After Crevilly, we pushed on another mile or two under the control of battalion headquarters. The country, I should say, is very pleasant—slightly hilly, orchards, little fields, hedges—not really ideal tank country and better country to defend than advance through. Anyway, we were getting along quite nicely when we ran into three Tiger tanks. They had devastating machine guns. I mean, their machine guns fired very fast indeed, and they held us up. Then some of our Shermans arrived—five of them. They quickly engaged the Tigers and one even hit a Tiger square on the turret. It must have been very unpleasant to have been inside that Tiger. But he did it no harm at all. Soon Tigers opened up and three of the Shermans were disabled very quickly.

Luckily we had with us a Naval Gunfire Support Officer who had been attached to my company since landing. He was one of those delightfully casual English characters. He came up to me and said, 'You know. I think I could shift those tanks'. I said, 'Well, it would be a great help'. In a matter of less than half minute a very big shell burst well behind the tanks. He said later that he did that deliberately as he did not want any 'drop shorts' landing among my men—very decent of him I thought. But the next shot only landed a couple of hundred yards behind the tanks. Well, the German tank commanders are not fools and they could see the form so they shoved off and we were able to advance again.

I would like to say a bit about this deception plan again. I said it was completely successful. Lately, I read a book by a splendid German Army armoured commander, Colonel, the Baron, Hans von Luck of the 21st Panzer Division. He was an experienced officer and had served with Rommel. He was Rommel's assault commander and he had under him a division or two by this time. Von Luck was, of course, a totally professional, regular soldier. They had not been anything else for generations. He says in his book that the Allies' deception plan was the vital factor in favour of the allies, and above all it deceived Hitler. Hitler insisted on holding three armoured divisions in reserve. Von Luck implored Rommel and his successors to persuade Hitler at every cost to release those armoured divisions. And he said, with great experience of war before and after, that if those divisions had been released he would certainly have been able to have smashed at least one Allied landing on D-Day, plus one. Because, you see, the weather was bad. It was not easy to get enough tanks or anything else ashore and further, the bad weather stopped exploitation by our air power, which was totally dominant.

The other bit of luck I consider the invasion had, was in Rommel being badly wounded. He was not, in historical terms, a great strategic commander, but he was a hell of a good battle commander. And his plans for the defence of Normandy, as von Luck reveals, were very thorough. I for one was very grateful that Rommel was not against us.

I would like to say something about our arms. I said how much better the German tanks were than either the British or the American models, and they were. The other thing that I thought was less forgivable was that the German machine guns were so much better than ours and, will you believe it, we were still carrying that infantile antitank rifle which would hardly stop a tractor and wears you out carrying it. Generally speaking, the German weapons were inexcusably better than ours. We were even carrying these silly pistols. I mean, that is about the least effective weapon of war that has ever been devised, in my judgment. Personally, as a matter of interest, I always carried a rifle as well.

Even in the roughest campaigns there was always a laugh here and there. My Colonel, Colonel Delecombe, he and I always got on well and we used to talk a bit about this and that. He would ask me how things were in New Guinea and Greece, and I asked him how things were in Norway, which was his first campaign. He had a lisp, and he said, 'Oh. Not too bad at all. I was billeted with a Norwegian family, thoroughly decent people. But of course, Jo, as soon as I was told we were going to Norway I took my wod, my fishing wod. A very nice wod,

a hardy wod, with my initials on it. Well', he said, 'we were with this decent Norwegian family for a few days and then we had to advance. I gave the fishing wod to the owner of the house and told him to look after it. We did advance and we got wather the worst of it and we had to fall back. Well naturally I went to pick up my wod and the house-owner said, "I'm afraid the Germans have been here and have taken your rod", I said they couldn't possibly do that, it has my initials on it. Nevertheless Jo, they had taken it'. He was horrified. He said, 'We got on the destroyer a few days after and I said to Bwigadier Money, you know sir, we'll have bloody trouble with these damn Germans, they are persons of no pwinciple whatever'. Now the hell with Belgium and Dachau and that sort of thing, but wod pinchers were another matter.

Thank you very much for listening so attentively, and I think this conference, apart from my own contribution, has been a most useful thing and I have enjoyed it. Thank you.

Endnotes

1. This is a transcript from an address given by HBS Gullett at the Australian Army History Conference, 15 November 1994.