

LCI 489 Stories - By Chuck Phillips

LCI Stories: LCI 489.

The Engineering Officer's Point of View

Contributed by Chuck Phillips

On June 6, 1944, I was Lt (jg) U.S.N.R. Engineering Officer aboard LCI (L) 489.

On December 22, 1943 we removed our sisal lines where we were moored alongside LCI(L)488 and 487 on the south side of pier "S" Lambert's Point and got underway to the Naval fuel dock.

After fueling we returned to Lambert's Point and moored alongside LCI(L)488 and 490. On December 24, 1943 we began making column formation in this order: LCI(L)490, 487, 488, and 489.

On December 25, 1943, the second column began formation beside our column with UGS28 occupying position six in the second column. During the journey to England, we participated in firing drills and changed courses slightly when enemy aircraft or submarines were suspected to be at close range. At times, it was impossible to see the other LCIs in formation because of the fog.

The first land sighted was Horta Harbor, Azores, on January 5, 1944. We refueled at Horta Harbor and a few days later commenced to form columns with the other LCIs and got underway.

For several weeks we were moored alongside LCI(L)488 at Falmouth England. On January 28, we moved to Dartmouth Devon England and moored alongside LCI(L) 487 and 488. We were assigned by CNO conf. Serial 0476123 of 13 October 1943 to Com EleventhPhib Force, Flotilla Ten, Group 28, Division 55. Flotilla Ten was a Coast Guard Flotilla, however, there were some Navy LCIs like ours attached. Flotilla Ten saw some of the bloodiest action of D-day.

Our commanding officer was Harry H. Montgomery, Lt. U.S.N.R. Harry was a star halfback at North Carolina State and was a natural leader. Charles McMillan, Ensign U.S.N.R. was our Executive Officer. Ens. William C. McCone U.S.N.R. was our Communications Officer, and I was the Engineering Officer. We carried 28 crew members and four officers. Our previous commanding officer was Benjamin Van Blake, a seasoned officer who worked diligently to prepare us as much as possible for what was to come.

Portions of our crew came from the Lower East Side of New York, thoroughly undisciplined in regard to Navy protocol. None of us had ever been to sea before, much less combat. The last day of our training at Little Creek, Virginia, we were to pass in review in front of all the brass to one of John Philip Sousa's favorite marches. We were a rag-tag group---out of step, etc. But let me tell you, when the chips were

down, our crew performed magnificently. I think it is fairly typical that when the U.S. serviceman is confronted with a situation not found in a book, he is very innovative and creative and this describes our 28 enlisted men.

We had the capacity to transport around 200 soldiers. Our Landing Craft was about 160 feet long, flat bottom, drawing two and a half feet of water forward and three and a half aft.

Beginning January 31, 1944 through mid March we engaged in beaching exercises, formation drills, firing exercises, gas mask drills, general drills and special sea details. We moored at Weymouth Bay, England between exercises. From March 2 through March 11, 1944 our transport group included LCI(L)s 487, 488, 489, 490, 491, 492, 494, 495, 497, 83, 87, 89, 90, 91, 92, 94, 319, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 93, 84, and 95 under Commander M.H. Imlay, USCG in LCI(L)87. Sortie, convoy, rendezvous, and beaching were accomplished in accordance with the basic plan. On March 11, 1944, we engaged in Secret Fox Operation as a unit in the Transport Group of Task Force 125, Eleventh Amphibious Force, Twelfth Fleet. Landing was made on Beach Able Red, Slapton Sands, England, D-day in thirteenth wave as scheduled. One officer and one hundred fifty men of Company "A", 37th Engineer Battalion was landed. Also under orders from Imlay we beached in the company of LCI(L)s 488, 487, 496, 494, 491 on Weymouth Beach on May 10th, 1944 and beached in the company of LCI(L)s 493, and 491 on May 15th, 1944.. The drills often went off without a hitch. Allen, being the junior man, was always ordered ashore with the lifeline rope. Once we landed short of the beach and Allen started ashore with the rope and anchor. Usually he could touch bottom, but this one time, the water was several feet over his head. Determined to get to shore as ordered, he held onto the anchor, the weight holding him underwater. The commanding officer was yelling orders to put out a canoe to get him when he surfaced. Allen was grinning ear to ear, finally able to touch bottom with rope and anchor still in hand! He never failed to get the rope and anchor ashore.

March 18, we were moored at Brixham Harbor, England and took on 20 cases of K-S field rations. On March 28th, we began preparation for getting underway for firing drills by orders (#19-44) of the Commander of LCI(L) Flotilla Ten. We passed the harbor and took sixth position in column formation with LCI(L)s 83, 85, 487, 458, and 84. Near the end of March we returned to our home base at Dartmouth, England and conducted general drills and firing drills. On April 11, Commander Imlay and staff boarded LCI(L)489 for a formal inspection. We mustered crew on the gun deck and Imlay inspected our personnel. During April and May we practiced mooring, casting off lines, forming columns, maneuvering down the Dart River, and coming alongside LCVPs, along with general drills, firing drills and gas mask drills, and beaching drills at Blackpool Sands, Paignton and Slapton Sands Beach.

On May 3rd, 1944, I accepted and executed the oath of officer for advancement in rank to Lt.(jg).

On May 17th, 1944, Pharmacist Mate Burton Hockel (6203666) U.S.N.R. reported for temporary duty. On May 18th, Hospital Apprentice H.A. Kadel (8198152) U.S.N.R. reported for temporary duty. On small ships such as ours, pharmacist mates took the place of physicians. Our regular pharmacist mate was James Argo. All these men received special emergency trauma training in preparation for D-day.

On June 2, 1944, we were moored alongside LCI(L)94 and 490 at the Great Western Railroad, southside, Weymouth England. At 1800, an Officer and 189 men of the U.S. 1st Division Army came aboard with equipment. These included Company E, F and H, HQ Control 2nd Battalion, and 15 men of the medical detachment of the 18th Infantry.

On Monday June 5th around 4:30 p.m., we started our main engines and made preparations for getting underway. We were carrying 189 men and 15 of U.S. Army 1st Division Headquarters Group and 18th R.C.T. Sortie. By 5 p.m., we cast off all lines and started down the harbor underway pursuant to orders of Commander Assault Force O, Western Naval Task Force to participate in Neptune Operation Overlord. We were LCI(L)489, a unit in Task organization 124.5.3, Assault Force "O" commanded by Rear Admiral Hall, U.S.N.

Our cook, Mike Yakimo, used everything we had in the refrigerator to prepare the finest meal he could for the troops we carried. Mike was a great cook and wanted to do something special for the soldiers. I don't recall that they were too hungry, understandably. Sometime that night, I, in my Mae West, went down to the troops with some soup Yakimo had prepared for them thinking the soup might be something their seasick stomachs could handle. These guys were seasoned soldiers, they looked at me all bundled up in my Mae West as if something might be wrong with me, but they didn't say anything derogatory. What I remember is that they had a quiet determination. They were calm; there was no hysteria. They were stripped down lying on the bunks resting-contemplating, no Mae West's, but holding their rifles knowing what they had to do the next morning and preparing themselves mentally to do it. As I left them, I couldn't help thinking about the wives, children, and parents back home who might never see their husbands, fathers or sons again. I didn't even realize the full extent of the danger they--we all--would be facing.

We maintained formation as the eighth ship of three columns, stbd. column. At 3 in the morning on June 6, 1944 we arrived at rendezvous area and commenced circling with LCI(L)490 as guide. We were LCI(L)489, a unit in Task organization 124.5.3, Assault Force "O" commanded by Rear Admiral Hall, U.S.N. Our assignment was to land on Easy Red, Omaha Beach at H hour plus sixteen minutes. We were fairly close to that target, as we arrived around 6:30 a.m. The beaches were mined approximately 150 yards out in the water. The mines were affixed to telephone poles driven into the sand approximately fifteen yards apart. There were mines atop each pole with a wire connected to adjacent poles. So, theoretically, even if you missed the pole you would pull the wire and detonate the mines. Earlier that morning, around 2 a.m. a Navy demolition team went under the cover of darkness to

clear lanes for subsequent craft to reach the beach. It is my recollection that they did a pretty good job but at a very high cost, the cost of their own lives. It was a shock to see these men in the early morning hours, draped over these obstacles, mutilated. Though they had cleared several channels, we could not find the markers. As we worked our way to the beach, we hit one of these obstacles and began to list to starboard. The obstacle had kept us from getting up on the beach as we had practiced so many times. We had perfected a specific drill to change a variety of valves and pipes for a situation such as this. The crew performed magnificently, untangling the mess and patching up the holes. While the ship was being patched up, the commander of the troops elected to go ashore using a rope so the soldiers could wade through the water holding onto the rope. Machine gun fire and mortar started coming from all directions. The air became so full of smoke and fire that it was difficult to see. Some of the troops were hit by gunfire going down the ramp, others lost their hold on the lifeline rope and disappeared into the water. The wounded were brought back up the ramps to be treated by the pharmacist mates.

Because of heavy cloud cover, Air Force bombers who had come in before H-hour had been unsuccessful in destroying the German defenses. Their bombs landed inland and missed the beaches. Huge concrete bunkers and smaller pillboxes held artillery. An enemy gun was strafing the beach from a bunker just above the landing area. The captain ordered the ramps back up. We began to back off. I don't know if any of the soldiers who disembarked survived at that first attempt to land, except the ones we were able to pull from the ramps. Other LCIs around us were not as lucky. Some of them were destroyed beyond repair and never got off the beach. Seems I recall a Coast Guard LCI 91 or 92 burning on the beach all day. I still don't know how we survived. We had experienced our first site of Bloody Omaha. Around 7:30 a.m., we were steaming as before, shaken and proceeded to AP76 to report.

At around 9:30 we stood at beaching stations again. During this attempt to land, one of those sharp poles punctured our LCI. I carefully pulled the pole out of the water and up onto the LCI to examine the mine. Wires were hanging loose. I was still trying to figure out what to do when I lost hold of the pole and it slipped back into the water. As I watched in horror, thinking that we were all about to be blown up, the wires untangled themselves from the ship, the pole slid silently away and we were free of the obstacle. Minutes later, I found myself shaking, realizing the danger we had been in. Again, our well-practiced drills saved us. Repairs were made and we backed away out of direct fire. I do not know how many troops disembarked that time because I was too focused on the mined obstacle. I do remember seeing soldiers lying face down, side by side on the beach, pinned down under intense crossfire on the beach. As we pulled away, my eyes were fixed on the bottoms of their boots, toes down, partially in the water, lined up side by side.

Each time we raised the ramps, we didn't move too far away from the beach, just enough to get out of the range of the German 88mm. We sailed along the coast awaiting orders to beach again. Once mortar fire hit just yards in front of us, just barely missing us, then mortar exploded just aft of us. The

next one hit where we would have been if we hadn't been moving. Any one of those would have destroyed the LCI. Throughout this time we hoisted wounded from smaller Coast Guard rescue boats to be treated by one of our three pharmacist mates.

Around 10 a.m. we commenced cruising at various courses and speeds awaiting orders to beach. This time, orders came to begin unloading troops onto smaller LCVPs. We did this, continuing to cruise at various courses and speeds until after noon. Moving seemed to be the key. Many of the LCIs that beached that morning never came off the beach again. By this time the water was full of destroyers, LCIs, LCVPs and various other vessels. The water was so thick with them that you could almost walk across them without getting your feet wet.

Around 1 p.m., we let go stern anchor. We landed on the beach, Omaha Easy Red, 65 fathoms of cable out 194 degrees with heading ramps out. The soldiers began to disembark. Immediately Salvatore Aidala, Pvt. 327791498 received a gunshot wound penetrating the left side of his abdomen. Stanlys Stypulkowski, Pvt. 6979980 received shrapnel in right shoulder. Allen ran down the ramps and retrieved these wounded men one at a time, under intense direct fire, placing his own life in danger. "Doc" Argo and the other medical men treated them. Again, because we were under intense direct fire, we were ordered to back off. Only around 40 troops were put ashore. Again stakes and underwater obstructions holed the bottom compartments and repairs were made.

We cruised at various courses and speeds awaiting orders to beach again. Several hours passed before we were told to beach again. During this time, we proceeded to unload troops into smaller boats. Finally that afternoon we finished unloading our troops.

Late on the afternoon of June 6, 1944, we were ordered to report to AP 76 U.S.S. Anne Arundel, where we took on additional troops. We spent the next few hours transferring casualties and wounded to hospital ships. That evening we got underway to the LCI(L) beaching area. Sometime very late that night we beached with the remaining LCIs seven miles south of Omaha Beach and waited until morning.

On the morning of June 7th we were called to assist in evacuating troops from the AP72 Susan B. Anthony when she hit a mine. We pulled alongside AP72 Anthony and astern of K578, and commenced evacuating troops. Around 9:30, we pulled away from AP72 with 51 Army troops aboard from the 315th Engineering Battalion. We proceeded to the new transport area at various courses and speeds. Before noon we dropped bow anchor with 45 fathoms of cable out in 12 fathoms of water in transport area off Omaha Beach, France awaiting orders.

That afternoon we proceeded to U.S.S Ancon to get orders. Ancon (AGC-4) ordered us to report to U.S.S. Bayfield (APA 33) in Utah Beach transport group to put ashore troops. On June 7th we transported troops to Utah and Omaha Beach all day long.

Very early on June 8th, we were ordered to get underway and pick up ammunition barge. That afternoon, LCI(L)488 and our LCI came alongside the barge and began the slow process of towing the barge to the beach. Around 3 p.m. we cast off anchor and beached. That afternoon we looked for LCT 645 pursuant to orders from LCI(L)492. We delivered orders to LCT 645 and led the LCT 645 to the S.S. John Steel.

On June 9th , I remember a German air raid. We opened fire with 5, 20mm on a German plane.

On June 10-11, 1944 we were ordered by LCI 86 to anchor in ten fathoms of water _ mile from western Omaha Beach with Splintered Church Tower and Dismantled French Battle ship as bearings. We were part of a breakwater of sorts.

On June 12, 1944, we received orders from HMS Ceres to get in formation--

1800 at Point King in company with 22 English LCTs and LCI(L)487.

After D-day, we began the task of making 37 trips across the channel carrying troops and supplies. Other than inclement weather and the lack of navigational buoys, and our lack of any navigational instruments, by dead reckoning, we steered in the general direction of Norway and, compensating for the 30 foot tides in the channel, we later steered towards Africa. We never missed a direct landing.