

Extract from “Operation Chariot”

Book 1 of the “Forgotten Soldiers” series.

The Campbeltown shuddered as it grounded on the mud for the second time. Ernie Miller wondered if they would actually make it to the objective, or whether they would become stranded, left by the ebbing tide as a target for the German artillery to use for target practice.

But the boat pushed itself free once more and continued its careful approach along the Loire estuary.

It had been decided to hug the northern bank. This was where the river deposited the silt it had carried down from the mountains of central France, six hundred miles away, all the way to the Bay of Biscay. It created broad mud flats which the port authorities had to dredge in order to maintain a navigable channel. But that channel was protected by artillery and anti-submarine nets, whereas the northern flats weren't, so they were risking this unorthodox approach.

The launches and MTBs would have no problems, of course. Their shallow draft allowed them to float across the mud as though it wasn't there. The other two destroyers weren't even making the approach. They remained at the mouth of the estuary, ready to intercept any German craft that might be making an approach, at the same time as covering the escape route.

The journey hadn't quite been uneventful. After passing Ushant the flotilla had encountered a U-Boat as it cruised on the surface, charging its batteries before it had to dive beneath the waves when dawn arrived. The two escorting destroyers had engaged it, before they all changed course to head away from the coast, setting a false trail. Once over the horizon, they turned back towards the coast once more. It was hoped that the E-Boats known to be in St Nazaire would be dispatched to try to intercept the flotilla, which they would believe to be further out in the bay.

Miller felt the vibrations from the ship's engines increase, which meant they were on their final approach to the port. It also meant they were clear of the mud flats, which meant no more risk of running aground.

“Pass the word.” Miller whispered to the man crouching next to him beside the destroyer's forward gun. “Get your kit on and stand by. Oh, and keep the noise down.”

Noise presented the greatest risk of detection at night. The engines of the boats were muffled by the surrounding hulls and was further reduced by being below the waterline. But a rifle carelessly dropped onto the metal decking would be heard two hundred yards away. A carelessly discharge bullet, known as an ND for negligent discharge, would put the whole coastline on alert. They were far enough from shore for small noise to go undetected this far out, but it was possible that a guard boat might be out patrolling the harbour entrance. If they lost the element of surprise then the whole operation would be jeopardised.

Miller scanned the sea ahead of him, looking for some sign of their destination, but there was nothing to see, just blackness against a black background. All that could be seen was the

occasional wisp of white froth as a larger waves broke the otherwise calm surface of the estuary.

Which was odd, because he should be able to see the beams of searchlights scanning the sky and streams of anti-aircraft tracer shells ascending, searching out the soft underbellies of bombers. Where was the RAF? Where was the air raid that was supposed to provide a distraction and send the port's defenders to their air raid shelters?

As if in answer, an explosion lit the horizon away to the port side of the ship.

That was wrong, Ernie knew. The raid was supposed to be on some industrial units close to the town, but the town was directly in front of them. That explosion was miles from where it should be.

More explosions flickered and a sound like distant thunder drifted to them on the night air. The defenders of the town, far from hiding in their shelters, were probably looking at the same flashes of light, grateful that it wasn't them that was being targeted.

A searchlight did flare into life, but it wasn't aimed skywards. Its beam scanned the sea in front of the port. Its probing light passed some way in front of the lead craft. Darkness descended as though the light had never existed.

A random act, Ernie concluded. Probably part of the defensive routine. Were they looking for ships coming into the port, or for boats trying to make an unauthorised exit? Probably the latter, Ernie concluded. Many French citizens had stolen boats and used them to escape across the Channel to join their compatriots in the fight against Hitler. No doubt the Germans were cautious.

Another searchlight sprang into life, this one sited on the far bank of the estuary. It was a long way away, so presented no risk.

But it suggested that there were searchlights along the whole route they were taking and, eventually, one would pick out an approaching craft and they would lose the element of surprise which they so desperately needed if they were to succeed in reaching the harbour unmolested.

The vibrations beneath Ernie's feet increased again, powering the old destroyer forward at even greater speed. He could now make out the silhouettes of buildings against the paler clouds in the sky behind the town. Not long now, he thought.

Another searchlight split the night sky, This one hitting Ernie directly in the eye, causing him to curse and throw his arm up in front of his face. Pinned in its beam, the Campbeltown had no way of escaping.

Other operators must have seen the ship, because more searchlight beams sprang out, casting back and forwards across the water. One picked out a motor launch and held it in its bright glare.

A flash from in front of them announced the firing of a gun, the sound arriving a second later. A great gout of water gushed skywards as the shell landed close to the illuminated launch. The craft's Cox'n reacted, turning the launch towards the fall of shot to throw the gunner off his aim. The searchlight lost its grip on the craft but picked up a second one which had been cruising close by.

A second gun opened fire, then a third and a fourth. Quick firing anti-aircraft guns joined in, firing steady streams of tracer shells towards the flotilla. There was shouting from the sailors manning the 12 pounder gun and Ernie saw the movement of the barrel as it was

lowered to take aim on the port area. The barrel turned slightly, lining up on the source of one of the streams of tracer.

The gun crew must feel terribly exposed, thought Ernie, not having the benefit of an armoured turret to protect them against counter fire. The flimsy metal fairings might stop machine gun bullets but wouldn't stand a chance against anything larger.

"Cover your ears!" Ernie shouted a warning, just as the gun crashed out. The shock of the noise deafened Ernie for a moment.

In the distance a ball of fire erupted as the shell exploded, but the stream of tracer continued uninterrupted. Again the 12 pounder crashed out and this time the tracer stopped.

But only from that gun. The whole of the horizon in front of the flotilla seemed to sparkle with the discharge of weapons as the Germans manned their defences and prepared to defend the port area. They could have no idea what the ships of the small fleet intended to do, but whatever it was, the Germans were now wide awake and ready for them.

"Shit!" Ernie said as the 12 pounder crashed out once more. Behind them the Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns mounted on the MTBs joined in the assault, sending their own streams of tracer rounds towards the port.

A ball of fire erupted to port of the Campbelltown's bow as a launch was hit. Burning debris flew skywards before arcing down to scatter across the water. The launch was a burning hulk and as the echoes of the explosion died, Ernie could hear the screams of the injured. In the beam of a searchlight, he could see men jumping over the side and into the river. Whether they were sailors or commandos, he couldn't tell, but they would have to take their chances. The boats couldn't stop to pick up survivors. To attempt to do so would be suicidal. Besides, the mission came first.

The mission always came first for the commandos.

His men cowered behind the flimsy bulwarks of the destroyer's side, fearful of incoming fire. If he let them stay like that then they might falter when the time came to go ashore. Action, that was the best defence against fear.

"Return fire." Ernie yelled, trying to make himself heard above the noise of explosions and rapid gunfire. "Aim for the searchlights." The men were unlikely to hit anything at this range, but there was always the possibility.

In response to his order, rifle shots cracked out, muzzle flashes briefly lighting up the faces of the commandos. More joined in and soon the crackle of musketry was almost continuous.

The nearest shore batteries were close now and it was almost impossible for them to miss their targets. The destroyer lurched like a bucking horse and there was a deafening crash as something struck their own vessel, but the ship ploughed on.

The launches weren't doing so well. Ernie could see that two more were burning and by the light of their flames, he saw another static in the water, being raked by gunfire.

Ahead he saw the looming silhouettes of structures. Whether they were buildings or quaysides he couldn't be sure. But the ship was ploughing towards them at top speed.

A whooping sound from behind him warned Ernie that they were about to make impact with the dry dock gates.

"Cease fire!" he shouted, doubting he would be able to make himself heard above the roar of artillery. "Brace for impact!" he could only hope that his men heeded the warning of the destroyer's siren as it sounded once more.

Dark walls appeared above Ernie's head on either side of the hull as the Campbeltown entered the embrace of the drydock walls. Ernie pushed himself hard against the mounting of the 12 pounder gun.

With the scream of rending metal, the bow of the Campbeltown reared skywards, throwing men around the deck as though they were toy soldiers, not real ones. But the sheer weight of the ship and the power of its twin propellers drove it forward still. But eventually the bulk of the dockyard gates won the battle between the rock and a hard place and the ship juddered to a halt.

But gravity still had work to do, and the sound of tortured metal rent the air as the ship slid backwards, carried down by its own weight.

Oh my God, no. Thought Ernie. If the ship doesn't stay put, there would be no way of getting off other than to jump into the dock. But he needn't have worried. The jagged metal of the hull caught on the shattered dock gates and held the ship in a deadly embrace, like two lovers clinging to each other.

The ship's siren whooped out again, giving the signal to the commandos to get ashore before the enemy had time to react to what had happened and flood along the sides of the dry dock to intercept the intruders.

His stunned men started to pick themselves up off the deck where they had been scattered.

"Come on, move yourselves, you lazy bunch of bastards." Ernie yelled at the top of his voice. "Get over the side and start killing fucking Jerries, like His Majesty pays you to."

A team of men were wrestling to get a scramble net over the port rail and Ernie swung his Tommy gun out of the way and went to lend a hand. He saw the Sergeant who was meant to be in charge lying in the scuppers, blood trickling from a head wound. No time to deal with that. If the Jerries got machine guns into place, they would be able to rake the shattered bow of the ship and kill his men before they even set foot on French soil.

"One, two, three heave." He commanded and the uncoordinated men responded to his command and the net teetered on the rail before dropping over the side.

Further to his right, Ernie saw two men lowering a scaling ladder over the side, providing another means of getting off the boat. The launches all carried them, so they could scale the vertical walls of the quaysides from their low decks. Medieval siege warfare met the 20th century.

"There you go men. First man to find a pub buys the beers." Men surged past him, peering over the side to see where they were, before shifting their positions so that they descended onto the shattered dock gates and not into the water on one side or the other. The navy had done their calculations well and the ship had come to rest almost exactly where it was supposed to.

A voice carried up from the dockside to Ernie's ears, the unmistakable voice of Sergeant Tanner. Not a word, not even a syllable wasted as he gave his orders. Good. Tanner was a steady NCO and had been on the Vaagso raid in Norway, the previous December. Then a new voice added itself.

"George Three Don, on me. Come on chaps." Lt Alsop; a new boy, never been in combat but it seemed he was leading from the front like a good commando officer should.

To Ernie's right there came the crackle of rifle fire and he turned to see the twinkle of muzzle flashes on the far side of the old harbour entrance. Good, some of the launches must

have made it that far, because the firing was directed across the open spaces towards the inner harbour. It made Ernie feel more comfortable to know that their left flank would be covered, even if it was by a weakened force.

Time for him to get down to the dockside so that he could lead George Two Don force in their assault, assuming that George Three Able had cleared their end of the dry dock, between it and the old harbour entrance.

He grabbed the destroyer's wooden railing and heaved himself over the side, his feet looking for the horizontal ropes that formed the scramble net. He found one, then another and let them take his weight as he switched his grip to the vertical ropes. Aware of the crack of small arms fire around him, some of it slamming into the destroyer's hull with metallic dings, he hurried to get lower and make himself less exposed.

Reaching the shattered dry dock gate, he let go the ropes and found a piece of bent metal to hold onto. There was a gap of several feet where the gate had been pushed inwards and he forced himself to leap the chasm. As he landed a hand reached out of the darkness and grabbed his battledress sleeve.

"Steady on cock." A voice came from the darkness.

"Thank you Montgomery." He answered back as he hurried along the top of the gate to where it met the dry dock wall. Men were milling around all over the place, with Corporals shouting, trying to get their sections into some sort of order. Despite Sgt Tanner's best efforts, chaos was still the order of the day.

Ernie took in a huge lungful of air and then let out a parade ground shout. "George Three Ack stand fast! George Three Don move to the left and form up on Mr Alsop. George Two Don move to the right and form line abreast, ready to advance. Anyone else ... you're in the wrong fucking place so get the fuck out of my combat area!"

The dark shapes of commandos hurried to obey, not wishing to attract the wrath of the Troop Sergeant Major.

But while the commandos had been disembarking, the enemy had time to organise a defence and machine guns started to spit their venom along the exposed areas of dock.

The quayside was littered with nautical detritus; coiled steel cables, lengths of chain with gigantic links, what looked like a ship's propellor but was difficult to make out clearly in the darkness. It all provided cover and the commandos hurried to make use of it, diving into its protection before taking aim to return fire at the twinkling muzzle flashes.

Ernie rushed forward, seeking out the men he commanded. He picked out the bulk of Corporal Ainsworth and angled towards him, throwing himself down on the other side of the mooring bollard behind which Ainsworth had taken refuge.

"Is your section complete?" Ernie shouted above the crackle of rifle fire.

"One man missing; Trotter."

"OK, take your section and work your way along the edge of the dock and try to get flanking fire into that MG post. I'll find the other section and we'll make a head on approach."

"Got it, Sa'r Major." Ainsworth replied, as though he had been asked to go to the shop for a bottle of milk.

"Have you seen Corporal Mitchell?" Ernie asked. The two men were inseparable when not on operations. It seemed unfeasible that Ainsworth wouldn't know where his best friend was.

Sure enough, the corporal pointed to the left. “Over by that building.” He shouted.

A flimsy looking structure that had been identified as some sort of dockside office, stood about thirty yards away. Ernie picked himself up and sprinted towards it. He found half a dozen men crouched in its lee, one of their number peering around the corner, trying to see what lay in front of them.

“Corporal Mitchell!” Ernie barked.

“Here.” The figure withdrew his head and turned to see who had called his name.

Ernie turned slightly and crashed into the side of the building, making it shudder. “Are all your section accounted for?”

“Me plus six. Dingle turned his ankle getting off the boat. I’ve told him to stay behind because he’s more of a ...”

Ernie interrupted. “OK, there’s enough to do the job. Ainsworth’s section are going to try to get some flanking fire on the Jerry position while we go for the front door. Where’s your Bren team?”

“Here, Troop.” A voice came from behind him.

Ernie sought him out in the darkness. “You and your loader work your way out on the left and give some cover fire from that side. Just do your best to keep the Jerry’s heads down.”

Ernie peered into the flickering light being cast by exploding grenades and bright muzzle flashes. Where was Ainsworth? It would be suicidal to try a head on assault without his section providing a distraction. There, rifles being fired from where the edge of the dry dock must lie. It was doing its job, the German MG had turned its attention in their direction and tracer rounds arced through the night, seeking out the soft bodies of the commandos. Ainsworth’s Bren gun team also opened fire. Good, that would give the Jerries food for thought.

“OK lads, fix bayonets. We’re going in.” Ernie called.

Metal scraped on metal as the long spikes were drawn from their scabbards. Clicks could be heard as they were locked onto the muzzles of Lee Enfield rifles. “On my command.” Ernie called, gathering his breath. This was where the brave were found, a little corner of his brain said. When normal men seek safety, the heroes charge the guns. His men might not be the Light Brigade, but that MG could easily turn this dockside into the Valley of Death.

“Charge!” Ernie screamed at the top of his voice, pushing himself upright and around the side of the hut at the same time.

He had no idea if Corporal Mitchell’s section was following him, but he had faith in the men he led. They wouldn’t let him go out there on his own. The problem now was to keep them moving. If just one of them sought cover, the attack would falter as others followed suit.

The anti-aircraft gun position was about a hundred yards from them. Heavily laden as he was, in a straight line Ernie could cover the ground in under thirty seconds. But the dockside was an obstacle course of hidden obstructions. He felt his boot strike something immovable on the ground, a jarring pain shooting through his foot, but he kept going. He carried his Tommy gun in both hands, a finger close to the trigger but not actually on it, but he made no effort to use it. He didn’t have a clear target and didn’t believe in spraying the weapon around like a fire hose.

The Bren gun to his left was firing in steady regular rhythms of three and four round bursts, just as it should. To his right, Ainsworth's section was keeping up a steady rate of fire, their own Bren echoing the chatter of the one on the left.

A cry of pain sounded from behind Ernie and someone stumbled into him before falling to the ground. The casualty hadn't been caused by the German MG, which was still focusing its attention on Ainsworth's men. That meant that the Germans had riflemen in the position as well. Was it just the anti-aircraft gunners firing in self-defence? Or had the Germans got reinforcements forward? Ernie hoped not, it could scupper their chances of taking the position.

But the casualty had to wait. This was no time to stop the attack while they treated a wounded man.

The distance to the objective had shrunk, perhaps no more than thirty yards remained. Time to suppress those rifles ready for the final assault. He let go of his Tommy gun and let it hang on its strap, while he fumbled a hand grenade from the loop of his webbing.

He wrestled the pin out with his left hand and stretched his right arm back, ready to throw. "Grenade!" he shouted the warning before jerking his arm forward and letting the small bomb fly from his hand. He didn't see the missile arc across the gap between him and the enemy position, but he saw the bright flash as it exploded, silhouetting a German helmet. Screams carried to him. "Come on men." Ernie shouted. "Give it to 'em."

He raised his Tommy gun and started firing, letting the barrel traverse from left to right. As the firing pin fell onto the chamber for the final time, the magazine having emptied itself, bodies rushed past him in the darkness, leaping the low barrier of sandbags, rifles firing and bayonets stabbing. Ernie slowed himself to a walk, changing the empty magazine for full one, before scanning left and right looking for fresh targets, but there were none.

"Position clear." Corporal Mitchell's voice reported.

"Corporal Ainsworth, on me." Ernie called into the darkness on the right. Corporal Mitchell was calling his Bren gun crew in as well.

"OK, get these dead Jerries out of the way and start organising the defence." It was one thing to take an enemy position, Ernie knew, but another thing entirely to hold onto it. To evict the raiding force, the Germans would have to come this way and this small group of men was all that stood between them and the commandos' escape route.

That ends this sneak preview.

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