

# Navy Beach Jumpers, remembering the 1940's

by CRM Robert Rainie, BJU1 & 9, 1943-45



Early in 1943 I was assigned to the NOB at Little Creek working radio watches. I also did radio direction calibrations for LSTs, swinging them slowly around and taking radio and visual readings. Very dull after three years on ships. A notice appeared on the bulletin aboard for volunteers to transfer to a classified and dangerous operation. A few days later I was interviewed by Doug Fairbanks and Harold Burris-Meyer. I didn't know why Burris-Meyer asked me about experience with sound. I was a reservist in college studying Electrical Engineering before entering active duty. One of my last courses had been Properties of Sound. I found out later that Burris-Meyer was a college professor in theater construction and sound systems.

A few days later seven of us were loaded into a truck and went "next door" to Camp Bradford. One of the seven was a chief who immediately disappeared, probably after he saw our new quarters. That left six of us enlisted men.

We were moved into four-man tents (this was probably March). We scrounged tar paper from construction sites to burn in the stoves. It was cold!

We attended classes in the proposed equipment and operations. Also classes with a psychiatrist who talked about stimulus and response. If a man sees or hears something his mind will complete the picture. If we fed him a little bit, he would perceive what he wanted him to.

Our earlier experiments included a dummy landing craft that we maneuvered to a landing, then waded ashore. Fairbanks wore a "siren suit" like the one Winston Churchill was photographed in during the war. We also had miniature (dummy) parachutists. Elmer Stoops was our parachute rigger. We were using LCP as boats. Gunnery training consisted of firing a few rounds from a Thompson.

We walked to the finger piers, not a great hike. Maybe a mile or so. Equipment arrived including "portable" sound amplifiers that took six men to lift. Also two Presto disc recorders using glass discs (like 78 rpm records) with lead acetate bases. Amplifiers and wire recorders were from the Armour Research Institute in Chicago. We had no sound effects with the equipment. I created the effects by recording boat engines, boson's whistles, tank engines from a nearby Army training site. Also anchor chain sounds by pulling a chain over the edge of an old bucket that had been used to mix concrete. Great anchor sound!

The wire on the recorders was seven thousandths of an inch thick. When it broke we tied the ends in a square knot, then pulled the knot tight over a burning match and trimmed off the ends.

We did sound propagation tests and found that--without wind effect--the best distance was 2000 feet from the enemy troops. Our later raids in the Mediterranean put us at this distance from shore batteries. During the invasion of Sicily I was aboard a crash boat on a clear moonless night. A six-inch gun had us on radar and was firing shells just over our heads. If they had dropped the trajectory a bit we would have been shark bait. To make it worse, two searchlights came out, one opposite my boat. At first the light searched in the surf, looking for landing craft. Then it began to sweep farther out. It was clear to me that if the light came up much more we would be sitting in its beam, so I loaded a Garand and shot it out.

One day we were hustled into trucks, followed a motorcycle escort with sirens, and raced to Newport News to board a ship for Oran, Algeria, in North Africa. Aboard the fleet of ships were 12 "crash boats" as we called them. Named Aircraft Rescue Boats (ARBs), some of the people at first called them "Arabs". We boarded the boats and traveled from Oran to Bizerte, Tunisia, making stops at Bougie, Bone and Algiers to take on gasoline that had been placed there for us.

## Invasions of Sicily and Italy

The convoy that took Beach Jumper Unit 1 to North Africa also carried ARB (Aircraft Rescue Boat) Squadron 1. Twelve boats made by Miami Shipbuilding, obviously modifications of pleasure craft. The cabin windows were covered over and the boats were manned from the open bridge. Each boat had gun tubs on each side of the bridge. Each tub had twin 50's. Ten boats were powered by twin Hall Scott engines. The other two boats had twin Packards that were too powerful. The only time either skipper shoved the throttles full ahead was when a boat took a small hit from a German 88 near the island of Procida. (A PT boat had three Packards).

The enlisted people of Unit 1 rode the boats from Oran to Bizerte with stops for fuel at Bougie, Bone and Algiers. The BJ outfit was stationed in Ferryville, a village with an unused French ammunition dump. In the French facility were a main building, Quonset huts, and tents for the enlisted people. Each 4-man tent was on a wood platform under which lived "wharf" rats the size of cats. This facility was on the far wide of Bizerte's huge harbor, more like a lake. The entrance had been jammed by the Germans with sunken ships, but an S-shaped channel had been blasted out by the U.S. The road around the harbor was bad. When it rained we had to pull our trucks out of mudholes.

We staged for the invasion of Italy at the little island of Pantelleria, between Africa and Sicily. The night we were to move out the weather was so bad our little boats couldn't handle it. We went the next night. Two PT boats with radar led our flotilla and spaced us out from the enemy beaches. We pulled our deception under large-caliber fire at virtually point-blank range but none of the boats were hit. The raid was successful and kept enemy troops away from the real landing sites.

After the invasion Unit 1 was used for a variety of jobs. One was to enter mined harbors in order to contact fishermen who knew where the mine fields were located. The first time I was on this job our crash boat set off acoustic mines. We were doing about 30 knots, and the mines exploded two or three hundred feet behind the boat. The mechanism in the mines would not fire until sound reached its maximum and began to decrease. By then we were past the mine. The boat took a jolt but suffered no damage. We entered many harbors, setting off these mines, and got used to it. The contact, or horned, mines were anchored too deep for us to hit.

My crash boat went into Palermo harbor a few days after the invasion. The harbor and adjacent buildings had been thoroughly bombed, but the main city was untouched. It seems that the people panicked and went into the hills. Two other BJs and I went into downtown Palermo. It was a fairly large city and it was empty. We roamed the streets, rattled doors. Nothing. The only unusual sight was a dead horse in an intersection. In the harbor itself we could tell that the population had not returned by the odor of bodies in the rubble. Later in the afternoon Patton's skirmish troops walked down the road past our boat. We waved to let them know the Navy had been there first. Actually, three BJs had "captured" Palermo.

Another small city we visited, through the minefield, was Marsala. This little place had been bombed along with its docks. Fifty American paratroopers had dropped in the night of the invasion with rations for one week. We pulled in two weeks later. and fed some of them. Fred Eber and I were on the other side of the little town when we saw movement on the road. Soon we were greeting a stream of Italian Army troops coming into Marsala. With our first contact, after they found out we were Americans, the Italians started telling us about their uncle in Chicago, etc. The two of us, even with the paratroopers, could not handle the influx of Italian soldiers, so we mutually ignored each other.

Another job was the spy run. We dropped three Italian businessmen at a small dock and picked up three other Italian businessmen.

The most hair-raising of the post-invasion jobs was a radar survey of the Italian coastline. Two crash boats loaded gasoline drums on deck and left Palermo. The first night we were recalled but the second night the job was on. Each boat carried a contingent of GIs with radar receivers. We went from Palermo up the Italian coastline to Naples, went into the harbor in the middle of the night, then scurried all the way to Bizerte. An unbelievable run for little boats. The radar people were probably OSS.

In the invasion of the Italian mainland at Salerno, BJ Unit 1 was accompanied by two British MGBs (Motor Gunboats) and one British torpedo boat. As we headed for the Bay of Gaeta, North of Naples (Salerno was South of Naples) we encountered two large white vessels on a collision course. We maneuvered around them. The Brits wanted to attack the Italian flak lighters, but the BJ CO, in command, refused. The job was too important. I was on a PT leading the operation. When we closed on the beach another PT ran up and down between us and the beach laying a smoke screen. Two weeks after this raid, back in Ferryville, we were visited by a Navy intelligence officer (ONI) who told us that we had kept a German paratroop division from Salerno the night of the invasion. The division had received orders to head South for Salerno, but when we hit them those orders were cancelled, and they were told to stay and repel an apparent invasion at Gaeta. This operation was a classic of BJ deception.

We took over the Isle of Capri. The enlisted people lived in a hotel, the Albergo Belvedere, at Marina Grande, the main harbor. We were there for a few months and made runs from Capri. For about three weeks we hosted John Steinbeck, the author, who had been assigned as a war correspondent. After the war, I saw copies of his dispatches. He wrote in a literary style, and falsified facts to create greater interest. But we liked him, and he loved Italian wine.

We raided islands including Ventotene where once again radar deception fooled the Germans. We captured about 90 of them at a radar station because they thought they were surrounded by large ships (not 63-foot boats). One night my boat went to Procida, a little island near the mainland, and near the German 88s. I talked with an Italian GI in their weapons

warehouse who told me that Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, had been there the previous night. He was , at that time, running from his own people. Too bad. That would have been another classic operation.

We were finally sent back to Ferryville, then to the U.S. for a breather until the next operation.

### **Invasion of Southern France**

We shipped from the U.S. back to North Africa, then to Calvi, Corsica. This is a walled city on the northwest coast of the island. Again, tents. In a grassy field. The night before the invasion of Southern France some of us installed extra radios in two PT boats. I was in the 553; the other was the 555. We were not with the crash boats. Our job was radio deception. We poured out all kinds of commands and other information by voice during the invasion. Some time well before dawn the USS Endicott got word that two German corvettes were attacking some of our small vessels, crash boats and British boats, including the one Fairbanks was in. The destroyer and the two PTs raced at flank speed to the site and took on the corvettes. Both PTs made torpedo runs against heavy fire, but the corvettes evaded the fish. The Endicott had overheated its 5-inch guns during a shore bombardment and, at first, only one would fire. Shortly after dawn, the destroyer finally sank both ships. I spent from 9:00 AM til noon on the bow of 553 with a heaving line pulling in German survivors. They finally outnumbered us three to one, but we had the guns. We put them aboard the destroyer. On the way back to Corsica we picked up German life rafts because they contained cognac.

Captain Johnson, then commanding the BJs, put the group in for a presidential unit citation, citing (again) the point-blank nature of the deceptive raid.

We traveled from Corsica to Bizerte in an LST, scheduled to return to Ferryville before getting a ship to the U.S. But we were not offloaded. Instead we got gamma globulin shots because Ferryville had been struck with pneumonic plague. Probably those damn rats that lived under our tents!

After the BJ Unit 1 people returned from the invasion of Southern France in 1944 the unit was broken up and people were assigned to other newer units. I was located in Unit 9. In February 1945 some of us left San Francisco for Hawaii, then to Ulithi where I was assigned to escort a group of Unit 8 and 9 people, via a four-stacker, to Okinawa. We arrived just after the invasion on April 1. After the war I read that we had been sent there for a Combined Operations (British) raid on either Singapore or Hong Kong. Here are the people I escorted: Lucia and Jackson were from Unit 1.

Lucia, A. J.	CRM	Unit 8	Hall, S. D.	RM3/c	Unit 8
Jackson, D. E.	CRT	9	McCall, L. E.	RM3/c	8
Allen, R. L.	RM3/c	9	Norris, R. L.	RM3/c	8
Arnold, J. H.	RM2/c	9	Smith, V. L.	RM2/c	8
Brashear, C.	RT1/c	9	Trott, H. E.	RM2/c	8
Howard, J.	RM3/c	9	Vetter, W. M.	RT3/c	8
Johnson, R. G.	RM1/c	9	Kerwinske, R. L.	RM3/c	8
Kramer, M. F.	RM3/c	9	Gacek, C. B.	S1/c	9
Kriske, N. M.	RT3/c	9	Campbell, R. N.	SOM2/c	8
LaMusga, R. A.	RM3/c	9			
Luehrs, D. L.	RM3/c	9			
Stewart, L.	RM2/c	9			
Vorndran, C. A.	RM2/c	9			
Zuehlke, R. M.	RT2/c	9			
Doyle, B. D.	RT1/c	8			
Evans, J. S.	RM3/c	8			
Farko, S. C.	RM2/c	8			
Garcia, S., Jr.	RM3/c	8			

We were transported to the USS Eldorado, flagship of Admiral Richmond Kelly Turner, commanding the invasion of Okinawa. No doubt the ship was happy to receive so many radiomen. We were absorbed into the ship's company in our ratings. I wound up as supervisor of the midwatch in Main Radio. We were still in the ship after the invasion of Okinawa ended and the fleet went to Manila where the war ended.

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