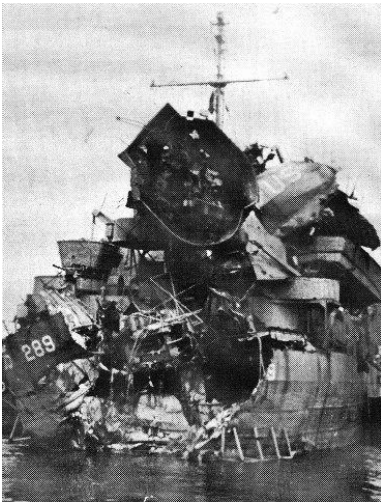


The Invasion of Europe before the Invasion

By Bob Pocklington

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April 28, 1944, a few weeks before we invaded France, our American troops were involved in a tragic “accident” that caused the death of 749 sailors and soldiers. It happened during a practice invasion of ‘Utah Beach’ code name “Operation Tiger.” The tragedy was covered up 30 years, until 1974 when the truth began to leak out. The British government had forced residents of six villages to vacate their homes and take everything with them including livestock and crops. This part of England is known as Torcross, directly across the channel from Normandy, only about twenty miles from where we were stationed in Totnes. The practice invasion involved 30,000 troops, Combat Engineers, and a tank battalion. During daylight hours assault forces of the 4th Infantry Division had gone ashore on Slapton Sands, a stretch of beach along the south coast of England that closely resembled a beach on the French coast of Normandy. This “invasion” included actually bombing the villages; all conditions were as real as possible.



Shortly after midnight eight LSTs left Start Bay and headed towards Slapton Sands with engineers and chemical and quartermaster troops on board along with tanks and jeeps, when suddenly nine German torpedo boats appeared out of the darkness and attacked the convoy. They had picked up radio traffic across the channel and investigated. German torpedoes hit three of the LSTs. One lost its stern but eventually limped into port. Another burst into flames, the fire fed by gasoline in the vehicles on board. A third keeled over and sank within minutes. There was no time for launching lifeboats. Trapped below decks, hundreds of soldiers and sailors went down with the ship. Others leapt into the sea but many drowned, weighted down by water-logged clothing and in some cases pitched forward into the water because they were wearing life belts around their waists rather than under their armpits. Others succumbed to hypothermia in the cold water. When the waters of the English Channel at last ceased to wash bloated bodies ashore, the toll of the dead and missing stood at 198 sailors and 551 soldiers, a total of 749, the most costly training incident involving U.S. forces during World War II. One large piece of equipment had gone overboard that later helped uncover the well-kept secret.

A few weeks before more of us had taken part in another practice, Operation Fox, without incident. But as bad as it was not a word escaped about Operation Tiger. All bodies were found and identified except those that were trapped inside the ships. All were quickly “processed” and interred. Later they would be moved to cemeteries. Months after the June 6 invasion the families were told their sons were “missing in action” and most of those parents passed away before the truth was discovered. Both American and British Governments remained silent and avoided any inquiry. It is possible the Germans would have recognized that Slapton Sands’ beaches were very similar to those beaches at Normandy.

The Slapton area was devastated by the “invasion” and few residents returned to what was left of their villages. Only the sandbagged churches were intact. It turned out that looters completed the removal of anything of worth...before the beaches were closed to all traffic. Many years later, down at the end of the beach where the cliffs begin, a high quality restaurant was constructed by a gentleman named Ken Small. He had a hobby...following any serious storm on the channel Ken would walk for miles along the surf moving his metal detector back and forth looking for anything the storm gods has washed ashore. What he found one day was a mystery but eventually revealed much about the incident thirty years before. I’ll tell you about that next.