

Royal Canadian Navy Beach Commando “W”

Page 1 of 4

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Commando – a small, specialized military unit intended for hazardous duties; (from the South African Dutch word for a mounted troop responsible for hit and run raids during the Boer War;) also, in popular use, a member of such a unit.

As a result of heavy casualties sustained by Royal Navy Beach Parties during the 1942 Dieppe raid (Operation Jubilee), Britain set up a specialist training centre for future Beach Parties at the Royal Navy Combined Operations base in northwest Scotland, HMS Armadillo. The facility was at Ardentiny on the Clyde estuary west of Glasgow. Also approved at the time was a suggestion made by Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Chief of Combined Operations, that such units be renamed “Beach Commandos”.

The principal tasks of the Beach Commandos involved disembarking troops and vehicles from assault and follow-up landing craft, organizing and supervising suitable beach areas, and loading serviceable returning vessels with wounded and/or prisoners. In the event of a withdrawal, they were tasked with organizing the loading of landing craft from the beach.

For the 1944 Normandy amphibious invasion (Operation Neptune), it was planned that each 85-member Beach Commando, together with 30 Royal Navy Beach Signals personnel, would join with a 443-man Army Beach Company to form a Beach Group. In theory a Beach Group

was responsible for landing a three-battalion assault brigade.

To provide adequately for its various planned amphibious landings, Combined Operations decided that 20 Beach Commando units would be required, two each for the three Army assault divisions and one per assault brigade, with an equal number in reserve. For identification, each of the twenty Commandos was assigned a different alphabetical letter. By late 1942, when Royal Navy Commando “M” became the first to be formed and trained at HMS Armadillo, about a dozen others had already been organized.

At the beginning of 1943, Canada’s senior naval representative in Britain informed his superiors about these Combined Operations developments and, even though some 500 Canadian naval personnel on Royal Navy loan were then serving in landing craft, he recommended providing an additional one hundred seamen to form an all-Canadian Beach Commando. In September, the Canadian War Cabinet Committee authorized the Royal Canadian Navy to form a Beach Commando and a Beach Signals Section, with training in Britain to be completed by the spring of 1944.



RCN Beach Commando – Able Seaman Armand Therien, badged with the Commando and Combined Ops insignia, wears the distinctive D-Day Mark III helmet and Assault Jerkin. His sub-machine gun is a 9 mm Lanchester, a weapon particular to the Navy in WW II.

There followed the selection and assignment of personnel for RCN Beach Commando "W", the last of the twenty such Beach Commando units required by Combined Ops. The Commando was to consist of three sub-units, each with 25 ratings and three officers.

Canadian selectees were required to meet the following physical and medical criteria:

1. Under 35 years of age;
2. Mental stability, with no family history of mental disease or disorder;
3. No history of chronic illness – bronchitis, asthma, rheumatism, arthritis or heart;
4. Standard visual acuity and hearing; and
5. Free from venereal disease.

Most of the required Canadian commando billets were filled by Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve personnel, and by early December, 1943, the majority had arrived at HMS Armadillo in Scotland to undergo basic Beach Commando training. The training lasted 14 weeks, ending in mid-February 1944. In conjunction with the Commando training, several of the unit's officers were sent to HMS Dundonald near Troon, Scotland, on the Firth of Clyde, for a Beach Organization course, while three others went on Exercise "Roundabout" to view the unloading of stores onto a beachhead.

On February 16, 1944, some 80 "W" Commando members moved to HMS Mastodon on the 250-acre Rothschild estate at Exbury on the Solent, near Southampton, and were formally attached to Force J (Naval Assault Force for Overlord) with instructions to work under GJ3 (Operations). However, since Force J had already received its entitlement of three Commandos ("L", "P", and "S"), the Canadian unit was in effect deemed spare. Training continued, however, and in the life of "W" Commando, was to include manoeuvre under live fire and through mine fields, night landings, tank operation, motorcycle riding, sniper firing, chemical warfare (gas), flame-throwing, mine and booby-trap detection and disarmament, the use of explosives against pill-boxes, and aircraft recognition.

Toward the end of March, 1944, "W" Commando learned that its Exbury accommodation was required for flotilla crews and staff of large infantry landing craft (LCI (L)). About the same time, the Senior Canadian Naval Officer, London, was advised that "W" was definitely the spare Commando in Force J and as such would not take part in any main assault. Within two weeks this changed, and in

mid-May Force J was told to hold "W" in immediate reserve. While on stand-by there was continued training, with "W" taking vehicle handling courses run by the Canadian Army. For some two weeks, the bulk of the Commando bivouacked under canvas.



RCN Commando "W" training at HMS Armadillo in Scotland in 1943

At the end of May, "W" Commando was transported to HMS Vectis at Pines Camp near Seaview, Isle of Wight. Within a week Force J's three RN Beach Commandos had landed on Juno beach on D-Day, and subsequently all "W" personnel began to wonder whether they would ever be called upon to carry out their mission.

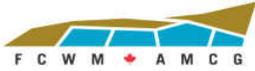
The first major encouraging sign occurred on June 13, 1944, when RN Beach Signals Section Number 1 officially joined "W" Commando. But even after being brought up to full operational strength, it still looked like "W" would not see action, an impression reinforced at the end of June when a signal from HMS Vectis sanctioned nine days leave for the unit. Then, on July 4, less than 48 hours into their leave, "W"

received orders to proceed to Juno Sector in a Canadian landing craft "for a period of experience in beach duties".

At its departure from Cowes, Isle of Wight, on the afternoon of July 7, 1944, LCI (L) 298 of the RCN's 260th Flotilla had aboard seven officers and 52 ratings from Commando "W" for the trip to Normandy. The remaining personnel of the Commando, mainly those who failed to return from leave on time, would not join their unit for several days. The following morning, July 8, "W" Commando's advance party disembarked on Juno's Mike (M) beach near Courseulles and officially relieved RN Beach Commando "P" which, having suffered casualties during and after the D-Day assault, returned to the United Kingdom for regrouping and rest.

Throughout the first week, "W" managed to carry out its tasks well enough to prompt the local Army Beach Group commander to request that "P" Commando not replace it. Despite this request, on July 18, 1944, "P" was reassigned to Mike beach and "W" took over from "S" Commando on Nan (N) beach near Bernières. During the ensuing four weeks at what was mainly a stores disembarkation area, "W" helped immeasurably in creating daily records for tons of stores and off-loaded military vehicles. Regarding the latter, "W" Commando's Principal Beach Master would remark in his final report of October, 1944, that of all the training courses, the one in vehicle handling taken by all personnel had probably been the most useful.

Shortly afterwards, the senior naval officer in Juno Sector put "S" Commando in charge of both Mike and Nan beaches and scheduled "W" for return to the United Kingdom. Over the next three weeks, and following the capture of Caen and



Royal Canadian Navy Beach Commando “W”

Page 4 of 4

Cherbourg, activity on Juno Beach gradually became routine. On August 22, 1944, after serving for almost seven weeks in the Juno Sector, “W” Commando returned to Cowes and nearby HMS Vectis. From a statistical standpoint, the unit had spent 80% of its ten-month existence in training and 20% in operations. Commando “W” had not been through the trial by fire of an assault landing for which it had trained so arduously for so long.

Although the Admiralty suggested sending Commando “W” to HMS Armadillo or HMS Dundonald, the Canadian authorities gave orders for “W” and the three Canadian LCI (L) flotillas to disband by the end of August, 1944, ending Canada’s involvement with Beach Commandos.

Sources and Acknowledgements:

Department of National Defence –
Directorate of History and Heritage

Canadian War Museum

Library and Archives Canada

www.commando.com/W%20Commando.htm

The late Lt. Eric Gault Finley, RCNVR;
ex-RCNBC “W”