

Lt. J.B. Johnston.  
1st Bucks. Batt.  
B. W. E. F.

1st July. '44.

My Dear Dad,

A bit more time tonight than last night so here is the promised letter, to make up for my short note of last night. I hope you are all as fit now as when you last wrote - I am still feeling fine, though somewhat the worse for a series of mosquito attacks on both flanks. I believe I asked if you could send some oil of lavender or something - in case I forgot, I do ask now! Also, while requests are the topic a nice big bottle of Eno's! I find that's the chief need on our present tinned diet!

So much for requests - now I have to try and work out what I can safely say without the letter arriving looking like a lace d'oyley! The whole operation so far has been a splendid show; never did one feel so acutely the sense of an epic of history in the making. It had to be, and as it had to be I wouldn't have missed being one of those who can say "I was there on "D" Day" for anything. One feels such a surge of pride in being British, such a tremendous sense of comradeship and co-operation and kinship with all the thousands of every kind who make the pieces of this fantastic mosaic. "D" Day was an unforgettable experience: to start with one felt that all the exercises, all the waiting, the marshalling, the checking of equipment, the fitting out of men, the hundred odd details were at last finished with, and that the final and decisive stage of the war was about to burst upon a world which waited and guessed while we knew. I can only just pass on a few of the pictures that stand out in my mind in those days of concentrated high-tension living. Firstly there was embarking - the moves through the marshalling area, and ~~the~~ last the patient file leading along the quayside, moving a few yards and then stopping, and then on again. A ripple of excitement "Eisenhowers come to see us off" and then the confident well-built figure with the great broad shoulders striding past the waiting men with a smile and a nod as they grinned cheerfully at "Ike". He'd spoken to most of us in our camps and had completely won the men over; coming to see them off finished his mastery completely. Tedder was there too, on the landing stage, tossing jokes and wise cracks into the sea of khaki and blue that flowed past him. We laid off for a while - there had already been a postponement of 24 hours and every one was hoping there wouldn't be another, smelling the air, discussing the ~~weather~~ weather, and hoping for the best. What a magnificent sight the assembled vessels were! They were of every size, from the great battleships to the ubiquitous 'ducks' plying busily about from craft to craft with rations; all the assault craft having the divisional sign of the infantry they were carrying painted boldly on their prows; and as the evening got darker the signalling lamps of the Navy winked at one another across the anchorage from every direction. Then we saw the battleships and the first wave of assault craft move out, and we knew the party was on. Officers hugging rolls of sealed maps waited for the word to come through officially so that they could be opened and our guesses evaluated - all our maps for briefing had fictitious names, and the air photos gave nothing away; but as it happened, my own forecast had been the Cherbourg peninsula, so I wasn't far out. The signal came through, and we were busy fitting up maps and checking up ~~maps~~ all the things we had memorised.

The next picture is of rolling across the channel - a moderate swell, that was all, - in line ahead, everything very peaceful, occasionally a flight of Spitfires racing back overhead for more ammunition and petrol, but otherwise as calm as a peacetime cruise. I read some paper-backed detective story or other going across. The next great moment of course was our first sight of France. I went up on to the little bridge with the captain, a young naval Lieut with Sicily to his credit already - he was a bit tense, constantly checking his course and lighting one cigarette off the end of the previous one. We picked up the coast line we recognised before long, tried to

see how much damage had been done compared with the photographs, picked out the places we wanted to make for, tried to make out where we would beach. We passed Ramilles and Rodney, crashing away with tremendous broadsides. Closer and closer in among the incredible armada lying off the coast, and then the grating sound of the hull on the beach, the rattle and splash as the ramp went down and Whoosh! off into five feet of water, self, kit, and bicycle. For future invasions I don't recommend the bicycle. ~~It~~ 70 yds away the yellow sand, and soon we were on it - self first in our flight, followed by batman also clutching bicycle. Lots of noise, but one's chief thought "Well, here we are at last. So this is France and this is the second front, and by golly, we've done it!"

A German fighter ~~fighter~~ bomber slipped in and came racing up the beach, banking steeply as a large bomb lazily detached itself from the plane's belly. One watched it fall a little way off with complete detachment: Bumped into another officer "That was my first life, Jack - that one was 25yds from me!" Quite unmoved.

There followed lots of hectic this and that, but the next great picture, and the one I shall most remember of the whole war, was the arrival of the airborne reinforcements. It was towards evening, and people were getting a bit harried and spirits were just beginning to flag, when there was a roar of planes and we looked up to see the sky one mass of planes and gliders: the whole impression was like some artist's imaginative drawing - the sky was so full of this great airborne fleet they seemed to stretch back from where we were, almost to England. How the spirits of every officer and man rose! People turned to each other as the gliders cut loose and floated down and said "That'll give the so-and-so's something to think about". It was a sight I shall never, never forget. Then the first evening and two chief things I shall remember, the first being tracer pouring into a house occupied by snipers, which caught fire and burnt like a torch, casting a sulphurous glow over men and material alike. I can hear the chatter of the machine guns and the crackle of the flames now. And the other the sight of the great assembly of vessels lying off shore opening up with everything that could fire. The sky was criss-crossed with streams of red tracer going up from a thousand different spots, with the shell bursts making a starry cloud above them.

But of course I could go on writing like this for ever and I must try and write some other letters tonight. One has to use time like one packs a portmanteau - put the big things in first, and fit the smaller things round as is convenient. I could do with a nice bath, a night in bed, with sheets and a breakfast of bacon and eggs. But that, like the rest of the saga, will have to wait. I've just thought of another request - a writing pad; a small one please, about the size of the Bucks notepaper I used to use, and some envelopes. Ask Stevens if they have any Basilston Bond left. Sorry I keep thinking of things I want - I'd better stop before you have to hire a ship to send them over in. Mail has just come in - unlucky today, nothing at all: better luck tomorrow we hope. My very best love to all of you - sorry I can't write you all, or always write very long letters, but time is limited. May God's blessing and protection always encompass you about, as so far in His kindness it has encompassed me. All my love,

Jack.