

Vernon Jones – A Steventon Man on Gold Beach





The Early Years

Vernon Henry Jones was born on **June 5, 1923** in Carmen Street, Caerau in South Wales to Elsie and Emlyn Jones - a coal miner.

The second child of five, he was brought up with three sisters **Thelma, Marian and Norma and his younger brother Bryn.**

In 1931 the family moved to Berkshire, settling in **Drayton** and Vernon attended what is now Carswell Community School in Abingdon.





Vernon Joins Up



Oxon & Bucks LI Cap Badge

After leaving school in 1939, aged sixteen, Vernon joined the Drayton Home Guard.

Two and a half years later, in January 1942, **18 year old Vernon** was called up to join the **Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry** regiment, based at Cowley Barracks.

During training **he contracted tonsillitis** and was unable to continue. After suffering illness for several months, Vernon was at last well enough to return. However, his squad had already graduated and been transported to Scotland to begin a new training role.





The Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment

In order to catch up, it was decided that Private Jones be transferred to the newly-formed **2nd Battalion, The Hertfordshire Regiment,** The Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment (T.A.).

It was with this regiment that Vernon would learn his role in, what was to become, the largest amphibious invasion in the history of warfare.





Combined Operations Training - Scotland

On **August 23rd, 1943** the 2nd Herts battalion moved to Scotland to the Combined Operations Training Centres at **Dundonald, Gailes and Inverary** to become the infantry element of the **No. 9 Beach Group.**

It spent the next three months building the sub-units of the Beach Group into a cohesive, well-trained, unit.

It did exercises in **January 1944 at Gullane** in the Firth of Forth. Here, the remarkable resemblance to the beaches of Normandy were an ideal practice ground for Beach Groups in the **rapid unloading of stores** on to beaches - **day and night, and in all weathers.**

Gullane Beach – Training ground for Beach Group landings





Preparations Begin in the South of England

In March 1944, No. 9 Beach Group was designated to support the 69th Infantry Brigade, part of the 50th (Northumbrian) Infantry Division and moved south to Studland Bay, Bournemouth and Hayling Island, for further rehearsals of its beach activities.

The group was concentrated at **Winchester in May '44** and broke down into transit camps in and around Southampton.

The brigade embarked for Normandy on June 5th at the Port of Southampton.

Southampton became a major embarkation point. Between D-Day and the end of the

war, about 3,500,000 military personnel would pass through the Port.



Infantry troops train on the south coast – disembarkation carrying equipment





A Surprise Birthday Gift



The 5th of June 1944 was Vernon's 21st birthday. Waking up in his camp, following the howling storm of the night before, there was not much time to think about birthday celebrations. The order soon arrived to prepare to embark.

The men thought it would be another drill, as they had rehearsed this moment many

It was not until the ship cast off and was making its way to the holding area in the Solent that they were told, "this time chaps it's for real, operation Overlord will

begin at Midnight"

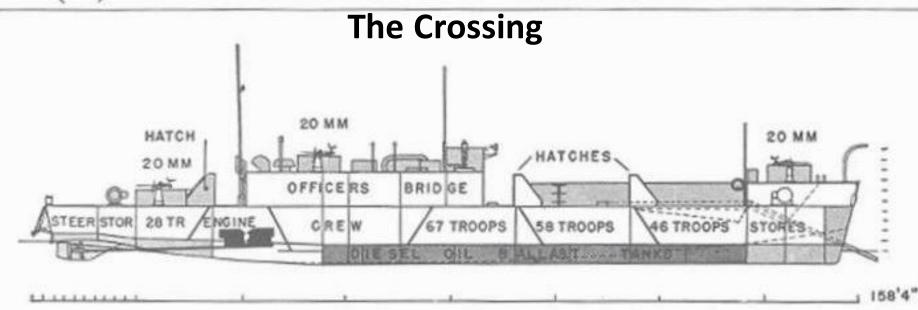
times before.

- what a way to spend your 21st birthday!





LCI(L)—landing craft, infantry (large)



The **huge flotilla of Naval vessels** (6,000 ships and landing craft) were to cross the channel under the **cover of darkness**. Vernon recalled; his was an American ship and at about 3am the crew came around with breakfast for the soldiers.

Due to the recent storm, **sea conditions were not ideal.** Inside the flat bottomed LCI, like many of his fellow soldiers, **Private Jones got very seasick**, with that and the thought of the mammoth task that lay ahead, he really couldn't face anything to eat. He asked the American crewman to **wrap his meal in paper**, he would carry it with him and **have it later**.

In fact he did get to eat his breakfast - on dry land, on Gold beach.





Meanwhile - Back in Steventon

At 7.00 on the morning of June 6th 1944, a young Hilda Prior was on her way to work at 'The Railway Inn' when she heard the sound of engines overhead. She looked up and saw aeroplanes.

Hilda remembers the Railway Inn was often full of RAF men in their uniforms and she was used to seeing planes fly over the village but what struck her that morning, and has stuck in her memory ever since, was the distinctive stripes on their wings.

Station Road, Steventon





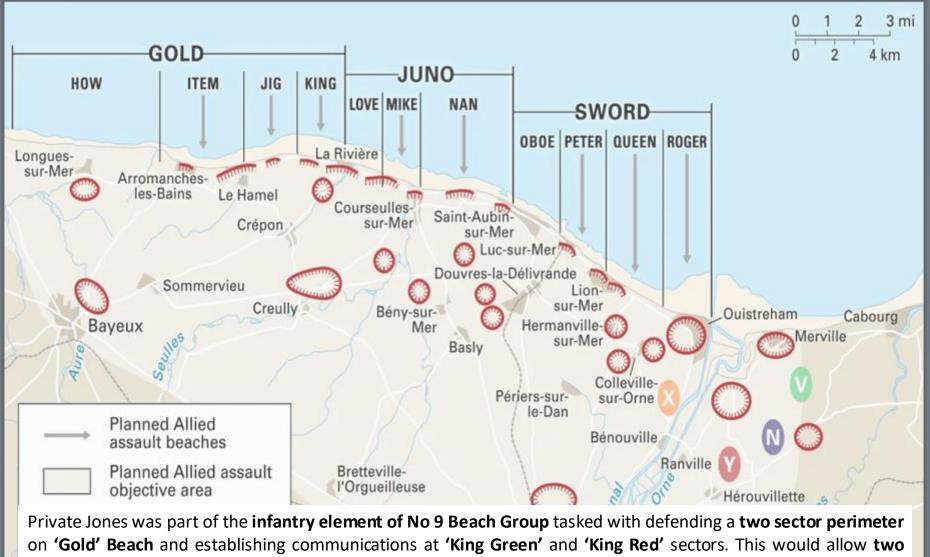
She only found out days later, that the stripes were to aid identification of all the allied aircraft taking part in the invasion of Normandy.

What she also was unaware of that day, was that a handsome 21-year old Soldier (who was later to become her husband of 63 years) was, at that moment, at sea in his landing craft off the Normandy coast waiting to take part in an event that would change the course of the war.

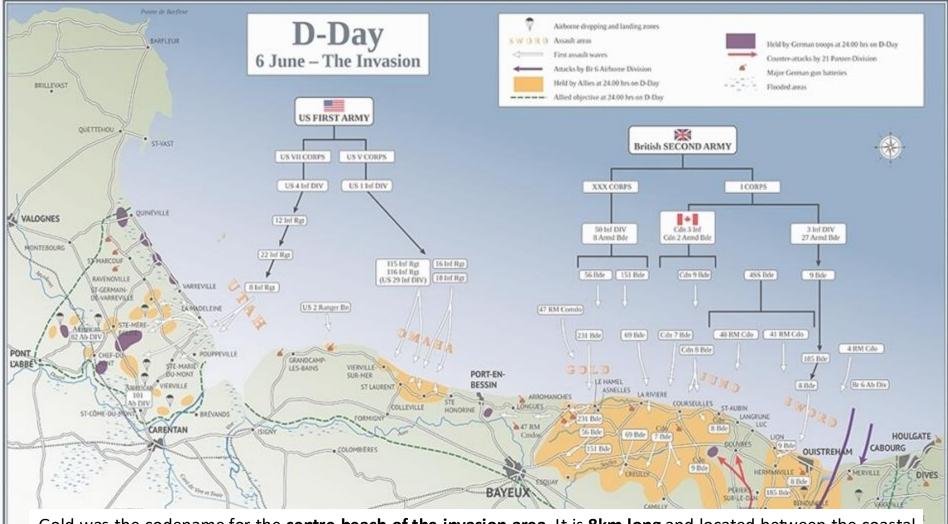
GOLD, JUNO, AND SWORD BEACHES

The Plan

NORMANDY INVASION — JUNE 6, 1944



Brigades of the 50th Northumbrian Division (151st & 69th Brigade) time to land with their equipment and armoured support.



Gold was the codename for the **centre beach of the invasion area.** It is **8km long** and located between the coastal towns of **La Rivière** in the east and, on the western end, the small port of **Arromanches**.

The **German defences** were massed on **both extremities of the beach.** Crew-served weapons in this sector were mainly **50mm guns** in concrete emplacement and **75mm guns** inside pillboxes. To the rear are **several artillery batteries covering the beach** (Mont-Fleury, Ryes, Marefontaine, Creully, Crepon). The main enemy defences at 'King' sector were the **fortified positions at La Rivière** on the left flank and on **higher ground near Mont Fleury and the lighthouse.**





The Naval Bombardment Begins...

At **05:10** on 6th June, whilst still under cover of darkness, the first shots of naval artillery began on German coastal positions. Led by the HMS Orion light cruiser off Gold Beach, then by the Ajax, Argonaut & Emerald cruisers, the Dutch gunboat Flores and 13 destroyers.

05:31 – Eastern Task Force warships led by Rear-Admiral Philip Vian open fire on the British and Canadian beaches of Gold, Juno and Sword.

05:58 – Sunrise. The weather is grey, a good swell very important, low clouds let out short bursts of rain. Wind force is 3 to 4.

07:15 – Gold Beach: landing craft (LCTs) equipped with 127 mm rocket launchers open fire on the German coastal defences.

07:20 – End of the naval bombardment on Gold, Juno and Sword.





...Followed By The Beach Assault

At 07:25, landing of the 50th British infantry division, led by Major General Douglas Graham, begins at Gold beach.

Private Jones was in the **second landing team**, as part of the **104th Beach Sub-Area** off La Rivière. **At about 08:20, Vernon waded ashore** up to his waist in water with **bullets and shells flying past**.

Once on the beach, under heavy fire, supported by the 7th battalion of the Green Howards and assisted by amphibious DD (Duplex Drive) tanks of the 4th/7th Westminster Dragoon Guards, they began to clear their sector and awaited the landing (slightly further West), at 08:25, of Commando No.47 The Royal Marines.





Men And Equipment Poured Ashore

The original plan called for **38 DD tanks to be launched from their LCTs** (landing craft tanks) about **5,000 yards** (4,600 m) out. However, due to **extremely choppy seas**, they decided to run the tanks **directly onto the beach**. Subsequently, Infantry, Engineers, and DD tanks arrived almost simultaneously.







Units disembarking onto the beach immediately came under fire from the casemated 88mm German gun at La Rivière, and the infantry were forced to take cover behind the sea wall.





Enemy Gun Emplacements Are Overcome

The gun was finally taken out when a flail tank of the Westminster Dragoons fired a shell directly into its aperture.







Final Pockets Of Resistance

The infantry element of the Beach Groups then combined with the main force to breakout of their perimeter against gathering opposition inland. The 5th East Yorkshires, supported by several tanks, spent the rest of the morning clearing out the heavily fortified houses of La Rivière, at the loss of 90 men, including six officers. By about 10.30am the village of La Rivière was secured and the main force continued their push towards the assembly point of Ver-Sur-Mer.

The main force bypassed some villages leaving the **beach group infantry** to **eradicate the opposition left behind** – this lead to some heavy fighting over the next few days.

Finally, once **all opposition had been overcome**, the beach group could consolidate and begin their task of **offloading and placement of ammunition**, **fuel and other supplies**.





The Beach Groups Consolidate

The beach groups were an essential part of each assault brigade group, gathering later into the vast supply organisation that would subsequently be needed to support the front-line advance.

This work of beach organisation began while beaches were still under enemy fire and in some cases men engaged in it joined in the fighting to overcome near-by enemy posts which were hindering progress.

Like others employed on the beaches in this early stage they had their **full share of casualties**. As ships and craft continued to arrive, **men**, **vehicles and supplies were landed in ever-increasing numbers**.

Unless the incoming flood of craft and troops was **well directed and efficiently distributed and controlled,** congestion on the shore would delay movement and the momentum of the forward assault would suffer.





The Infantry Move Inland

By early evening, almost all of the 50th Infantry Division's objectives had been reached and the Gold Beach bridgehead was considered one the strongest established.

The Brigades moved inland and were at the gates of Bayeux and had reached the Caen-Bayeux road, thus considerably impeding the movements of any German reinforcements.





The Cost To Life Is Realised

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By midnight on June 6 1944, 24,970 British soldiers had landed on Gold Beach. The 50th Infantry Division and Commando No. 47 were in defence of a bridgehead nearly 10 kilometers wide by 10 kilometers deep.

413 British soldiers had been killed or wounded on the beach and **89** landing crafts were destroyed in the shock of the initial assault.





Vernon Finally Moves On

For almost six weeks following D-Day, Vernon stayed in the town of La Rivière and at the beach unloading ammunition and supplies. On July 14th, finally, his group moved one and a half miles inland to Ver-sur-Mer.

It was during this time in Normandy that an extraordinary thing happened.

While passing a group of injured British soldiers being stretchered to an awaiting boat, Vernon suddenly heard "Hey Taff". Startled, Vernon looked down at the wounded man to see his old mate from Drayton, Len 'Bubbles' Miles. Len had been shot by a sniper on 16th June while on patrol in the sheltered lanes of Normandy. The bullet had passed right through his back, just missing his spine. Bubbles was on his way back to England and a bed at Stoke Mandeville Hospital. Of all the thousands of men in Northern France at that time, how amazing that Vernon should bump in to someone from his home village in Berkshire.





No 9 Beach Group were eventually **expected to move into the front line** in their entirety **but instead, were disbanded** with men distributed to **various other units** as casualty replacements.

In August 1944, Vernon was reallocated to his original regiment – 1st Battalion (43rd) The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, Light Infantry (Anti-Tank Company), now part of the 71st Infantry Brigade, 53rd (Welsh) Division.

Following on from his Normandy operations Vernon began the **next chapter of his war-time experiences** – which, incredibly, would turn out to be **even more challenging!**

