

A WAR STORY 1942 – 1946

By
Able Seaman Gwyn Evans



THE
BRITISH NAVY
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The Story of Landing Ship, Tank No 412

A BÔNAU CABBAGE PATCH SUPPLEMENT

A WAR STORY 1942 – 1946

This is a brief history of the LST 412, an American built ship, which ended its days in a nuclear graveyard.

It is a true story as seen through the eyes of the late Able Seaman Gwyn Evans of Pwll, Llanelli.

It was March 1942, and I was due to report to HMS Raleigh at Tor-Point, Cornwall. I was seventeen and a half years old. Today at that age I would most probably be still in school. Never having been away from home before, I was looking forward to seeing the world. Looking back I can see why my father had such a concerned look. He had fought in the trenches in France during the First World War and knew what it was all about. My mother, who had lost a brother in that war, was naturally unwilling that I had volunteered and being very religious her prayers would be with me for the next 5 years. At that age I did not have a care in the world, but I would soon be brought firmly down to ground.

The night train to Plymouth was packed with troops – mostly sailors. At Bristol an air raid was in progress and in our civvies and sitting on our suitcases, the South Wales contingent spent a sleepless night. There was no glamour here! Arriving at Plymouth's North Road station at six o'clock in the morning, the experienced sailors would know where the NAFFI was situated. We followed. It was every man for himself. Mam was far away in Wales.

A lorry took us to the Tor-Point ferry for the first of our many crossings, and then our first sight of HMS Raleigh. A wooden ship consisting of over one hundred wooden huts, surrounding a large parade ground, drill shed and administrative buildings.

Allocated to hut 64, our instructor, Chief Petty Officer Williams from Torquay who had 25 years service in the peace time navy. He had worked in the Post Office and when war broke out he had been called up as an instructor. He was a tough old nut! The twelve weeks training there was really intensive and I was never more physically fit in all my life. There were air raids most nights, but Plymouth had



Able Seaman Gwyn Evans

already suffered its worst raids. These raids now were very sporadic.

Leaving Raleigh we were sent to the Britannia Naval College at Dartmouth, where we operated a kind of ship's company, manning anti-aircraft guns, sentry duties and burial parties. Motor Torpedo Boats based there had many casualties and there were many burials.

The hunt class Destroyer HMS Penylan was sunk off Stark Point and her survivors were accommodated in our messes. Six Focke-Wulf 190's came down the Dart Valley one day and bombed the college. Fortunately the cadets had gone on holidays, but two young Wrens were killed. I was rapidly growing up!

Manning the anti-aircraft guns one day, a lady visited the college and she reminded me of someone. Then it came to me – it was Susie Hughes who had taught me English at the Llanelli Rural Central School. She had come to visit her brother whom was an instructor at

the college. Showing much concern she could see that I was not the same boy that she had taught those years before.

After 7 days leave we were sent back to HMS Drake for another draft and on January 12th 1943 our brief stay there was over and over a thousand ratings boarded a train at Devonport for an unknown destination. They had been issued with tropical kit and as most of them had never been to sea before the speculation as to their destination was understandable.

Twenty-four hours later, after several stops en-route, we eventually arrived at Greenock in Scotland. We embarked onto a large tender and leaving Greenock we nosed out into the Clyde Estuary. We circled under the stern of one of the large ships that were anchored in the bay. Despite its name being painted over, we could see that she was the Queen Elizabeth – the largest ship in the world at that time.

It was apparent that we were to cross the Atlantic but our ultimate destination was still unknown. The draft chits only gave letters and numbers. Our small party had the number LST D9. Others had different numbers whilst among the remainder several Llanelly boys were designated 'HMS Chaser' – an escort carrier.

After a six-day crossing in rough seas and unescorted on a zigzag course we arrived in New York. Following the usual sorting out at the Royal Navy's two luxury hotels at Asbury Park, our group was allocated to the Tank Landing Craft LST 412

She was built at the Bethlehem Steel Corporation yards at Baltimore in 1942 and commissioned by the Royal Navy at Port Covington on January 28th 1943. Her Captain was Lt Commander Richards Brown RNR. He was an Anglo-Argentinian, six foot tall, lean and wore a full beard. The First Lieutenant, who came from Liverpool, was Lieutenant Clune RNR. The crew's average age was about twenty years and we set about getting used to ship board routine.



LST 412 in dry dock at Antwerp

LST 412 was now getting prepared for duty and after storing and ammonitioning the ship we left Baltimore on 23rd February 1943 to arrive on the following day at Norfolk, Virginia for compass adjustments.

Leaving Norfolk she arrived at Hoboken, New Jersey to load a cargo of baked beans and spinach into the troop accommodation and oil well equipment onto the tank deck. As the ship had a displacement of 4,000 tons, it was a sizeable cargo, but a strange one for an assault ship.

On 13th March, after experiencing two months of ration free America, we left New York in convoy with LST 421 and LST 365. Our course for the next few days was around 180 degrees south. During wartime the destination of any ship was a matter of much speculation especially with the rumoured expected opening of a second front in Europe – and this being a ship built for that purpose.

As the direction of our convoy was south from New York, the shipboard rumour and speculation centred around the question of

whether we were due to go through the Panama Canal into the Pacific and join the conflict there.

However, we arrived at the Dutch Island of Curacao on 24th March. It was at this tropical island in the West Indies that we unloaded the oil well equipment. This was our first taste of the tropics and apart from the smell of oil it was a beautiful island. But the type of ship we were on constantly reminded us that this was no pleasure cruise.

By this time most of our young crew, helped by a sprinkling of pre-war ratings, were gaining more experience in seamanship and watch keeping at sea. On 23rd March the swing bridge of the capital Willemstad opened and our voyage continued. We arrived in Port of Spain, Trinidad, to join a large convoy, still heading south. There were many alarms on this leg of our journey. Our escort included American Coastguard cutters who were constantly depth charging ASDIC contacts.

In company with the other two landing crafts, we left the convoy on the 7th April within sight of Stampa Island, British Guiana. Pilots came on board and we proceeded up the Esquibo River for about 60 miles. The three LST's beached at a logging camp and opened the bow doors. An alligator climbed into the tank deck of 365 and had to be shot.

The following day loggers rigged up a system to winch 200ft Greenheart logs into the tank deck. This kind of timber is used to build piers and is resistant to salt water. When the loading was completed we sailed down the river through the overhanging trees of the jungle to the capital Georgetown. During our stay in Georgetown the local population made us feel at home – they ensured that we were well stocked with Demerara sugar and even played a local side at cricket, which I'm afraid, we lost.

On the 16th of April we left Georgetown, still heading south – further away from the war! On this part of our voyage we crossed the equator, with all the ceremony that entails. We also passed the mouth of the Amazon River.

Fifty miles out at sea the brown waters of this great river could still be seen.

Dawn of the 28th April saw the LST 412 arrive at Recife, a raw bustling sea port in Brazil, which contained a large number of houses of ill repute of which some of the crew later regretted having visited. But there was a war on and who could foretell the future. Soon we left Recife in company with six American built minesweepers and crossed the Atlantic to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where in temperatures of 100 degrees plus we unloaded the beans and spinach and also the greenheart logs. The logs became part of a pier that still stands to this day; the beans and spinach were essential supplies for the convoys and escorts that called at Freetown.

The natives of Freetown were exceptionally good divers – dozens of them were forever circling the ships at anchor and calling for silver coins to be thrown into the water. Copper coins were ignored so it became common practice to wrap half penny pieces in silver paper and the enraged native, when he retrieved it would shake his fist and complain in unrepeatable language something about a 'Glasgow Sixpence'. Their complaints were justified, as these were shark-infested waters.

Leaving Freetown, where we had acquired a monkey called Jacko, we headed north and we realised that our voyage was at last leading us toward Europe and the theatres of war. Speculation as to our ultimate destination was again rife, but on 3rd of June we turned starboard into the Mediterranean, arriving in Algeria on 8th June. Here, at anchor, was a huge allied fleet. Among them was the battleship Howe and the tribal class destroyer Eskimo. Having joined this fleet the exhilaration of impending action was almost overwhelming. I wondered whether I could cope and I expect that thousands of other young men and women had thought the same.

Jacko, our monkey, was by now a firm favourite with all the crew. One of his best tricks was to jump on the back of our dog, biting him and jumping out of his reach all in

one movement. At this time fruit was plentiful so feeding him was no problem.

On leaving Algiers on 22nd June en-route for Bizerta, with the intentions of loading tanks and troops destined for the invasion of Sicily, our generator caught fire and we had to put into the port of Bougie on the North African coast. We remained there for a month waiting for spare parts. During this time we listened to the reports of the Sicily invasion with mixed feelings, but we knew that our time would soon come.

Arriving in Tripoli on August 31st 1943 we embarked units of the Scots Greys and the Ox and Bucks light infantry. These troops were veterans of the Eighth Army and it was obvious that we were to be involved in the action that we had long anticipated.

Leaving Tripoli on 6th September our flotilla of landing craft joined with a large task force north of Sicily and headed for the Italian coast. On September 8th 1943 there was an announcement over the tannoy to the effect that the Italians has surrendered. There was a great feeling of rejoicing and a hope that tomorrow's landings would be unopposed.



Aerial view of the LST 412

At dawn on the following day as we crept in towards the coast we could see gun flashes and tracers coming in our direction and the fleet behind us opened up in reply. In our immediate support was the six-inch cruiser Orion. She covered us as we landed our troops and armoured cars on the beach. We had several near misses from the 88mm guns sited on the hills over Salerno Bay. Enemy

aircraft bombed and machine-gunned the beach. It was far from being the unopposed landing we had imagined and in fact, became one of the bloodiest battles of the entire Italian campaign.

It was the LST 412's baptism of fire and, strangely enough, one of our crew – our butcher by the name of Rowlands – chose this moment to jump ship. It was certainly a very strange place to choose.

We made three more trips from Tripoli to Salerno and on one of these trips we dragged our anchor and were stranded broadside on the beach for two days. Eventually we left Salerno with our butcher, who had lived and fought with the American Army for the three weeks. Arriving in Bizerta on October 5th, Rowlands was sentenced to 90 days detention, which was rough justice indeed.

The ship arrived in Taranto when our monkey, Jacko, dies. Fruit had been scarce for weeks and he had been reduced to eating onions. He was sadly missed by all the crew.

The advance of the Allied armies had been halted at Casino. Churchill conceived the idea of landing a large force behind the enemy lines at Anzio with the intention of outflanking the German army. So, on January 24th, a great fleet left the Bay of Naples to land the following day at Anzio. That first day gave no indication of what lay ahead of us. During the next few days the opposition stiffened to such an extent that of the fifteen trips we made into the beachhead ten of them had to be made at night. This was done to avoid the attention of the German Air Force and to avoid the shelling of the long-range guns positioned on the slopes of Mount Casino, which included the notorious 'Anzio Annie'.

Our time in the Mediterranean was now coming to an end. Twelve LST's assembled at Casablanca, and on the 10th April we embarked the 2nd French Armoured Division and arrived at Swansea on 23rd April 1944.

Normandy and D-Day would be our next operation.



HMS Howe

Arriving at Gosport on 14th May 1944 we loaded troops of the 3rd Canadian Division with their waterproof tanks and vehicles. All types of landing crafts were loaded with troops of many nationalities. Fortress Europe would soon be under attack by the greatest fleet ever assembled. After loading we eased out into the Solent and anchored off Ryde pier. Our crew were allowed shore leave but not the soldiers. More and more ships arrived until by early June as we weighed anchor to await the crossing of the channel, it seemed that the whole sea was covered by a mass of ships from horizon to horizon.

We arrived off Juno beach on 6th June. Under the guns of the battleship Warspite we passed many khaki clad bodies face down in the water. Approaching the beach one LST on our starboard side was on fire and we passed two cruisers who seemed to lie back as they fired their guns. One of them was HMS Belfast, which today is anchored near the Tower of London. The bombardment that was pounding the installations all along the coast was the heaviest in naval history.

We landed our troops at about 8am and lay off the beach until midday when we were called

back in to take wounded aboard. They consisted of some of the Canadians we had landed in the morning. We also took on board British and German wounded, but the most pathetic were the French – one man obviously dying and several French civilians among them a mother with shrapnel wounds to her body and her daughter who had lost her leg at the knee. We landed the injured at Southampton that evening. In the true tradition of the Royal Navy they had all received our constant attention because we did not carry a doctor on board.

The next week, until the beachhead was secured, was bedlam with very little sleep. Arriving off Arrormanches one night, we were straddled by three bombs. The German Air Force only operated by night and would pick up the wake of any ship travelling by night. For this reason we reduced our speed to a minimum.



HMS Warspite

Up to the end of the war we operated out of Tilbury Docks and we were one of the first ships into Ostend after the Germans had tried to block the entrance. We sustained some damage, which was quickly repaired, but although the war was coming its end there was no let up on the German attacks on the Ostend and Antwerp convoys. There were many anxious moments with mines and one-man submarines.

We had come a long way from Port Covington on those cold days of January 1943. Some of

the original crew had left and there were many new faces.

As a postscript to our story some of the original crew sailed the 412 back to the Brooklyn Navy Yard via the Azores on Christmas 1945. She was in almost the same condition as when we borrowed her from the USA, except for 50 tons of concrete that had been poured into her bilges to strengthen her after her stranding at Salerno. She was a lucky ship. She had ended her active service by being sold to the Northern Metal Company for scrap but she still lives on in the memory of her crew. Eventually the LST 412 ended her days with some other better-known ships at the Bikini Atoll, in an H-Bomb test in 1947.



We left her at the Brooklyn Navy Yard in January 1946 – not far from the giant aircraft carrier Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which had recently been commissioned by the United States Navy. At the time I wondered whether she would witness anything like the events our little ship had witnessed in her brief lifespan. Hopefully not - the world was now at peace.

As most of our crew had about three months to go before being demobilised, we had one more duty to perform. I was to cross the North American continent by train via Montreal, the Great Lakes and the Rocky Mountains.

It was a fantastic journey that took 6 days and in effect made up for some of the other times when things were not so good. The object of it all was that we were to be part of a crew of HMS Cape Wrath, a depot ship being built in Vancouver, and sail her back to the UK by way of the Panama Canal. Arriving in Vancouver we were ordered to the Canadian Naval Base at Esquemo, Victoria Island to await the construction of the ship. The keel

had only recently been laid and it would take another 5 months to complete. What a shambles!

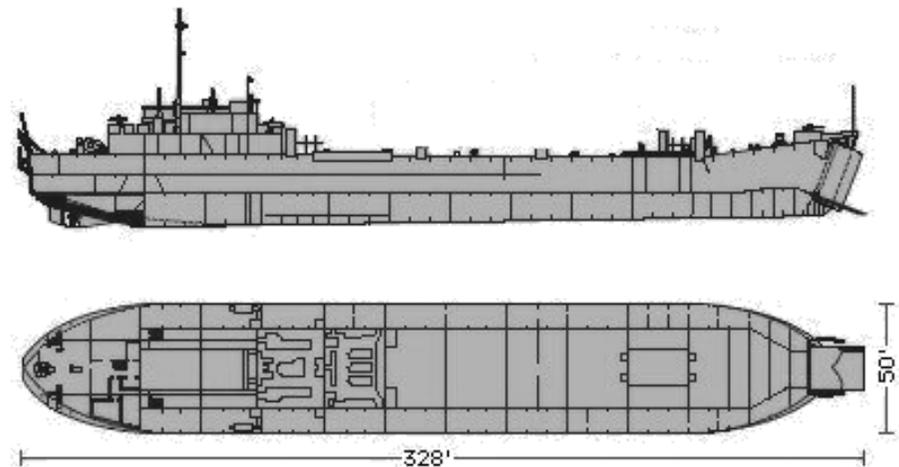
I was allotted as a cell sentry in the detention block. These young Canadians were a tough bunch and the cells were always fully occupied but they seemed to respect us more than their own people. Maybe because we wore campaign ribbons and had spent most of our time at sea, and discipline was not our strong point. The time soon passed and our deadline for demobilisation soon came about. We then repeated our train journey across Canada, where at Halifax, Nova Scotia we joined the ship Lady Rodney and sailed home to Southampton. What became of the Cape Wrath I never knew?

The memories of these 4 years will remain with me forever, but now I was 23 and going home for good. Mam was overjoyed!



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LST; Landing Ship, Tank



LST-1 Class Tank Landing Ship: Laid down, 24 September 1942, at Bethlehem Fairfield Co., Baltimore, MD; Launched, 16 November 1942; Commissioned USS LST-412, 26 January 1943, and transferred to the United Kingdom that same day; Returned to US Navy control, 23 January 1946; Decommissioned, (date unknown); Struck from the Naval Register, 20 March 1946; Final Disposition, sold for scrapping, 16 December 1947, to Northern Metals Co., Philadelphia, PA.

Specifications: Displacement 1,780 tons, 3,880 tons (fully laden); Length 328'; Beam 50'; Draft unloaded, bow 2' 4" stern 7' 6", loaded bow 8' 2" stern 14' 1"; Speed 12k; Complement 8-10 Officers, 100-115 Enlisted; Troop Capacity, approx. 140 officers and enlisted; Boats, 2-6 LCVP; Armament; one single 3"/50 gun mount, five 40mm gun mounts, six 20mm gun mounts, two .50-cal machine guns, four .30-cal machine guns; Propulsion, two General Motors 12-567 diesel engines, two shafts, twin rudders.



