

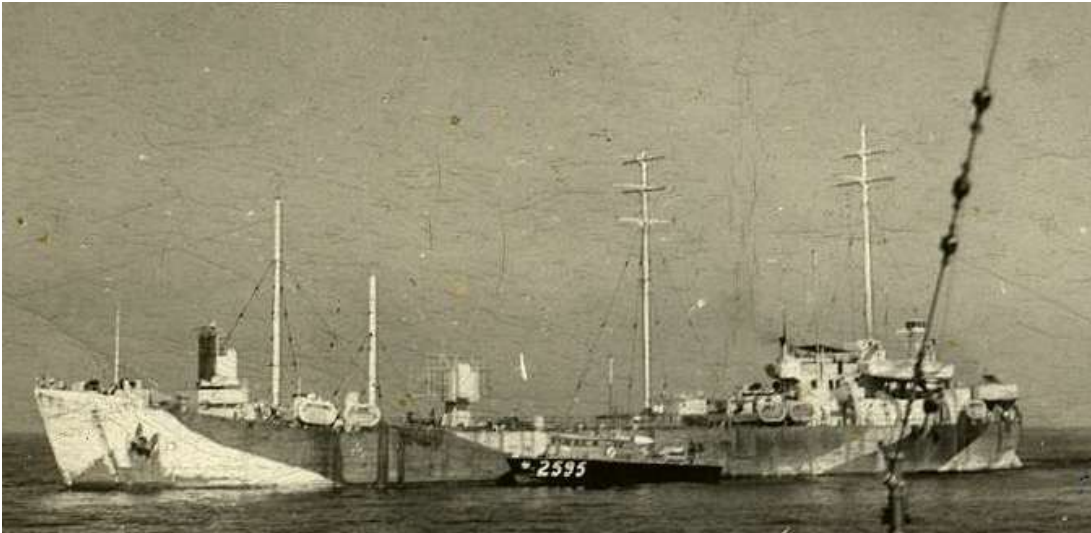
TACTICAL Y INTERCEPTION/DF

The story of the Normandy beaches and the FDTs

A few days before D-Day Admiral Ramsay's Intelligence staff levied a requirement on the Admiralty Operational Intelligence Centre (OIC) to send ULTRA decrypts direct to them, obfuscating the OIC. They wanted the raw and undigested intelligence direct from Bletchley Park, something that the OIC and its founder, Admiral Sir Norman Denning opposed vehemently. It was a significant departure from the well established protocol, but it was trialled for a few days. In less than ten days the ANCXF Intelligence staff had become overwhelmed with the volume of traffic from Bletchley that the decision was revoked and the OIC was reinstated as the processing hub for Bletchley ULTRA traffic.

The OIC had been involved with much of the preliminary planning for NEPTUNE, most notably on the minefields and approach lanes to the allocated Normandy beaches. These approach routes changed frequently before D-Day, and numerous aerial and naval reconnaissance missions were mounted in the final days to make sure the current intelligence on the River Seine basin was as current as it could be.

For the Normandy landings the Royal Navy introduced 3 Fighter Direction Tenders (FDT) whose mission was to protect the beachhead. They had been converted from the most suitable ships available at the time to the Royal Navy, HMS BOXER, BRUISER and THRUSTER, and were to be the Allies eyes and ears in the crucial period of NEPTUNE. In essence, they were the command and control centres for the entire invasion fleet. In the early stages of the landings, the three FDTs (FDT13, FDT216 and FDT217) were to be responsible for providing immediate tactical intelligence from radio intercept to the Controller of Fighters back in England. Their role was vital for the RAF and USAAF to dominate the airspace above Normandy to protect the huge logistical chain from the south coast of England. The *Luftwaffe* had been decimated through a concerted bombing campaign in Northern France in the preceding weeks, and they had less than 300 operational aircraft by D-Day. The *Luftwaffe* 3rd Air Fleet, under the command of Field Marshal Hugo Sperrle, based in Northern France had just 172 fighters, 59 reconnaissance aircraft and 88 bombers at its disposal. All air operations had been suspended just before D-Day due to the weather conditions.



FDT 13



FDT 13

The Allied Expeditionary Air Force (AEAF) had decided that RAF mobile radar could provide early warning and Ground Control Intercept (GCI) for German Luftwaffe aircraft. The disastrous raid on Dieppe had shown that low-grade signals intelligence needed to be interpreted at one central hub before being assessed and presented to senior military commanders. For OVERLORD, the Air Section at Bletchley Park was to act as this focal point. Dieppe had also shown how easy it was for a breakdown in communications to occur between the forces taking part in the invasion. Allied commanders were to moot the idea of having a Headquarters ship which would act as a command and control communications centre for the three services taking part in OVERLORD. It would need to be located close to the Normandy coast and have deployed SIGINT staff on board to collect and intercept German military signals during the battle but also to receive timely SIGINT from back in Britain, produced by the Y Services and Bletchley Park.

Fitting out each of the three FDT's with the most sophisticated communications and radar equipment available began in earnest from February 1944. Crucially the fits included the new Type 11 radar which could operate on German frequencies and situated on the deck with a rotating gantry. The success of the Bruneval raid (Operation BITING) in February 1942 had led to the Type 11 development. These vital raids on the French coast had provided unique dividends for the OVERLORD forces. It was this Type 11 which was used most off the Normandy coast during OVERLORD. Each FDT had in the region of 250 highly trained military staff, most of whom were RAF radar and communications specialists.



FDT receiver room



FDT transmitter room

One role the FDT teams would play would be as a deployed Y Service collection platform to intercept German wireless communications from ashore, most notably those command and control communications between ships, between *Luftwaffe* ground control to airborne pilots, or from ship to shore. OVERLORD had learnt many lessons from the Dieppe raid in 1942, and Allied planners had understood that an operation the size and scale of OVERLORD would require very effective command and control communications, and effective radar and radio counter-measures plan.

A former passenger liner, HMS HILARY was also employed as a HQ and SIGINT ship for the Commander of Naval Force 'J' attacking JUNO beach Personnel from No. 4 Ship Signal Section were deployed on HILARY, alongside Army signallers to provide radio links between the HQ and the troops ashore. HILARY had a number of other HQ sister ships – HMS LARGS (operating off SWORD beach with Force S); HMS BULOLO (operating off GOLD beach with Force G). These three vessels were referred to as Headquarters Landing Ships (HQLS). They were responsible for control and management of the NEPTUNE landings and of all the Naval vessels taking part in the operation into their designated zones and beaches. Similarly to the FDT ships, they had mixed crews, but mostly RAF personnel and Royal Navy. These HQLS were vital for choreography in the chaos of war – ensuring there were effective lines of communication between the units ashore on the beaches with the landing craft, HQ ships, FDTs and other HQ elements back in England to make

sure up to date information was being communicated across the chains of command. It was HILARY that would distribute air raid warnings over the invasion fleet with intelligence gleaned from the FDT Y service teams. But it was considered that *'these warnings might better be promulgated from the Fighter Direction Tender or Ship, which has better knowledge of the position of friendly and hostile aircraft than an HQ ship, which has no proper air warning radar.'*

The ships were in place on 6 June 1944. FDT217 positioned itself about 5 miles off JUNO, SWORD and GOLD beaches covering the Eastern (British & Canadian) section of the assault area, whilst FDT216 was off OMAHA and UTAH beaches covering the Western (US) part of the assault area. FDT13 was located 40 miles off GOLD beach in the main shipping channels for convoy protection. They were in position by 0430hrs and sequenced to have their full radar operating capability by 0725hrs, breaking their radio silence. FDT217 was to be the Master Control vessel, choreographing Allied fighter's dependent on the disposition of and the threat from *Luftwaffe* fighters operating in the region.

On that first vital day, 6 June 1944, it was these FDT vessels that would make sure there was continuous daytime low level air cover for the five beaches. This was effected through a rolling wave of aircraft sorties whereby Spitfires would arrive after an outward journey from an English airfield, spend 15 minutes patrolling the beaches, and then return for the necessary refuelling and rearming. During the night around 40 fighters were on continual patrol in the area, all equipped with Airborne Interception (AI) radar. This was all interwoven with the hundreds of Allied bombers who were operating in the area, striking key German defensive targets.

The FDT ships were to stay in position for 17 days after D-Day providing this vital activity supporting the Allied push into the hinterland, and it has been estimated that 76 German aircraft were destroyed as a result of the FDTs. Of equal importance was the function these FDTs played in the collection of tactical intelligence for the Allied force. The intelligence 'Y' group sections on board each of the three FDTs were critical in listening into the German wireless communications and conveying their significance in near real time to the Commanders on the ground or onboard ships. Some of the radio intercepts by the Y teams merged with their own Direction Finding (DF) capability onboard resulted in successful interceptions of enemy aircraft. It was a huge advantage having deployed Y service capability onboard to give advance warning of German *Luftwaffe* attacks and as an aid to identification. On ship the Y Office opened out into the Air Control Room which during the restless early days of OVERLORD allowed *'priceless lastminute information to be passed to the directing officers and via them to their aircraft without delay.'*

The main duty of the FDTs were to prevent the enemy attacks firstly on the Allied shipping and secondly on the beaches. Their success could be gauged by the fact that the only loss caused by German bombing was that of the LAWFORD.



Fighter Direction Tender – the converted LST 216 (©IWM Archive reference A21922)



HMS Largs

