

D-DAY

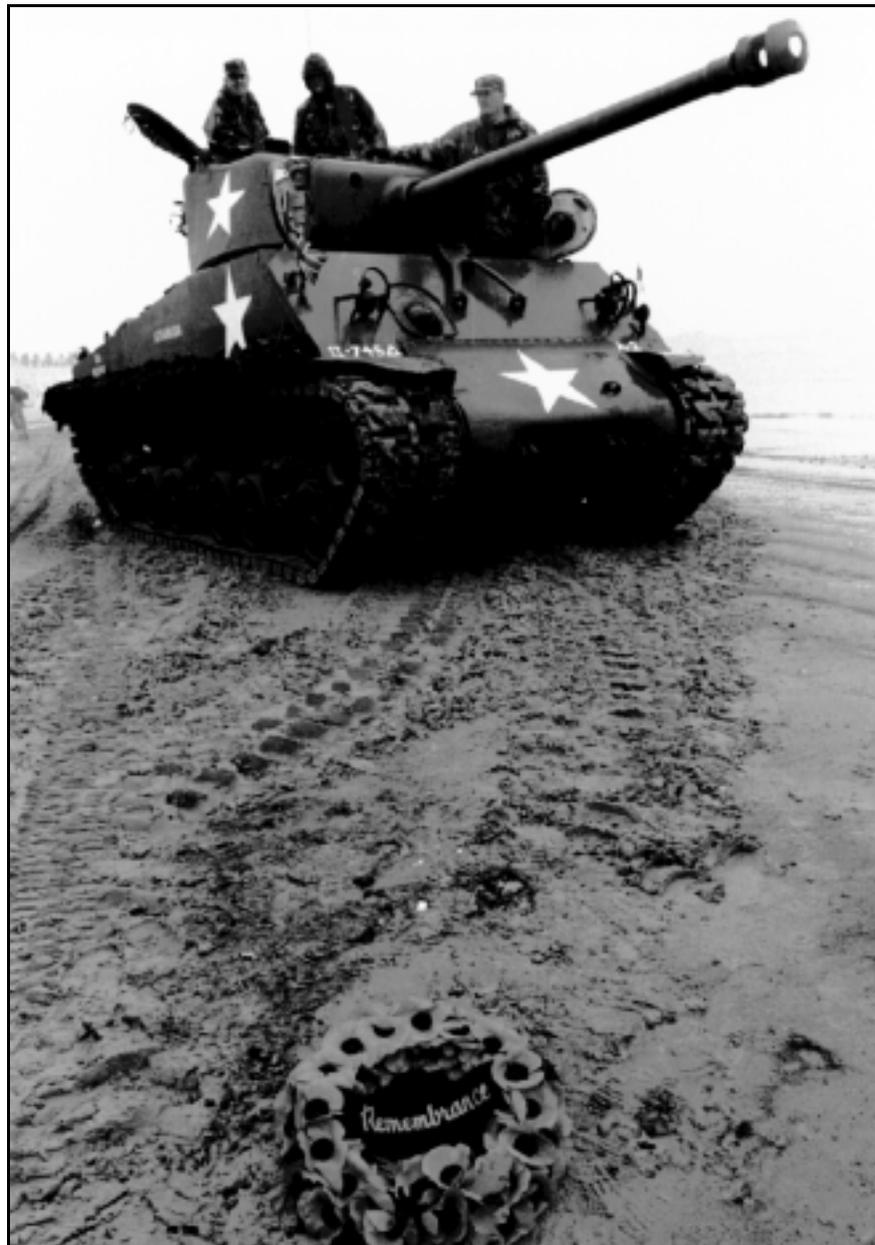
Old vehicles and old soldiers return to the Channel ports for the 50th anniversary of their greatest adventure

by Lieutenant Colonel John Gillman

LTC Gillman, Light Dragoons, commands the British Army's Armoured Trials and Development Unit - Ed.

American Army personnel from Fort Knox were heavily involved in supporting the British Army's Royal Armoured Corps Centre and Bovington Tank Museum activities during the 50th Anniversary commemorations of D-Day. A large number of American veterans traveled to Europe to commemorate D-Day, many visiting the Bovington, Weymouth, and Poole area in the South of England before departing for France.

The main event was the presentation by Major General Jordan from Fort Knox of a set of General Patton's uni-



form stars to the Tank Museum at Bovington, supported by the firing of a salute from an American Sherman tank by an honor guard tank crew from Fort Knox. Major General Jordan then took the salute at a large commemoration parade at Weymouth, the jump-off port for the main American forces 50 years previously.

The choice of vehicles used on the commemorative parades was complicated by the need to be able to drive on tarmac roads through Weymouth and Poole without damaging the tarmac. This effectively prevented the use of British vehicles, such as Cromwell and Churchill, or any medium American tanks using steel chevron tracks. Another factor considered was the need for reliability, as it was estimated that

track mileage would be in excess of 35 miles per vehicle. It was therefore decided to concentrate efforts on fielding Sherman tanks fitted with rubber padded tracks, an M5 Stuart light tank, again with rubber padded tracks, and the Museum's halftrack, which was already fitted with rubber tracks. A 1944-vintage Ford Universal Carrier, despite having steel tracks, was considered light enough not to cause road damage.

Margaret Gillatt, from Retford, provided her father's M4 Sherman, following months of preparation, especially fitted with new rubber chevron track. The Patton Museum at Fort Knox provided the markings for this tank, depicted as being in the U.S. 1st Infantry Division, 745th Armor. Fort Knox sent over a comprehensive color scheme for



Along the beachfront at Weymouth, one of the D-Day embarkation ports, residents, visitors, and returning veterans cheer the parade. At left, the author in his restored Ford Universal Carrier.

At right, an M5 Stuart, called "Honeys" by the British soldiers who also used them.

Most of the vehicles were privately owned by collectors. Unless a tank had rubber tracks, it was not permitted to appear in the parade.



the tank, including paint swatches and a full description of markings. It was decided to use the M4A2E8 Sherman, stored at the Tank Museum. The tank was a 76-mm gunned, 1944-vintage twin diesel-engined Sherman with HVSS suspension. However, it was fitted with unsuitably aggressive steel chevron track. The track was exchanged with the rubber chevron track fitted to the Museum's M74 Sherman Armoured Recovery Vehicle by Armoured Trials and Development Unit (ATDU) personnel testing the latest designs of track tools issued for the new Challenger 2 battle tank. The ATDU workshops also fitted new fuel filters to both engines, rebuilding the old filter elements using modern Challenger components. The vehicle was painted

to conform to markings suggested by the Patton Museum, again for the 1st American Infantry Division. This choice of American markings for both Sherman tanks may not have sounded very patriotic to the British vehicle restorers, but it should be borne in mind that over 541,000 Americans departed for France through the port of Weymouth, with yet more Americans going afloat from nearby Poole.

The first event, the May Bank Holiday Military Vehicles Trust Rally held on Southsea Common from 27 to 31 May, saw both Sherman tanks displayed, together with an American M5 Stuart light tank, a British Matilda 1 Infantry Tank, and a Priest, all organ-

ized by the Friends of the Tank Museum, Bovington. The Friends' display was joined by the American Honor Guard crew from Fort Knox, led by Captain Kevin Emdee, serving at Fort Knox, together with his brother, Sergeant Major David Emdee, U.S. Army, Mr. Bill Stallworth, and Mr. Ted Salter, ex-U.S. Marine Corps. Their participation had been arranged during a visit a year previously from England to Fort Knox by Lieutenant Colonel John Gillman, with crewing details agreed while waiting at the check-out queue in Fort Knox's PX! It had been a long queue and the arrangements agreed survived the test of time. A group of Royal Armoured Corps volunteers from ATDU helped with vehicle crewing, with the Americans concentrated on the



At left, MG Larry Jordan, then Chief of Armor, is greeted by an unidentified British veteran. The Lord Mayor of Weymouth, at right, wears her ceremonial robes.

In photo above right, the author's wife, at left, with Margaret Gillatt who had to repair the track of her father's Grizzly, a Sherman variant made in Canada.

Inevitably, a bagpiper led the parade. How very British!



M4A2E8 Sherman and Margaret Gillatt on the older M4 Sherman. Camping facilities were provided by ATDU, but life was complicated by having to camp on extremely boggy ground between very large pools of water, as it had been raining non-stop for the previous 10 days. Sadly, it also meant that vehicle movement was therefore restricted to the barest minimum. The Americans quickly settled down into the routine of showing British school-children through the M4A2E8, dodging rain storms, and trying to poison the British with MRE ration packs.

The Matilda 1 proved to be of great interest, although it was not a D-Day vehicle. In May 1940, a counterattack by 48 of these tanks cut through Rommel's 7th Panzer Division and halted the German advance outside the Dunkirk evacuation port. On 31 May,

the majority of MVT exhibitors departed for France while the Friends' Shermans, Stuart, and Matilda 1 all returned to Bovington.

The Museum hosted a reception for Major General Jordan on 1 June. Major General Jordan and the Master General of the Ordnance, Major General Sir Jeremy Blacker, were driven into the Hall in the American halftrack from which they made their speeches. Major General Jordan presented the RAC Centre with a set of General Patton's stars. The reception culminated in a band recital and beating of the retreat by the band of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards. The concert culminated in a salute fired by the M4A2E8, crewed by Captain Emdee and his American honor guard.

Friends of the Tank Museum fielded six vehicles for the commemorative parade at Weymouth on 2 June. The pa-

rade featured a long, two-mile drive along the seafront at Weymouth, followed by a static display and reception. The Friends' vehicles were led by the Ford carrier, followed by the halftrack, Dingo scout car, M5 light tank and both Shermans. Most of these vehicles were showing their age by the time the parade started. The Dingo had a fuel leak, the carrier's right hand brake jammed on. Margaret Gillatt spent three hours removing the track and drive sprocket in order to free the brake. Her Sherman needed a link taken out of each track, and the M4A2E8 was suffering from lack of engine synchronization. Despite these problems, the vehicles all completed the ceremony without a hitch. The salute was taken by Major General Jordan, half-way down the seafront in Weymouth, a poignant reminder that this was the main American departure port. At the end of the parade, the tanks

all lined up by the Pavilion at the end of the seafront, where they were besieged by crowds of interested onlookers from the estimated 20,000 people who had lined the streets of Weymouth to cheer the parade. There were a great many American veterans visiting, as well as many serving American soldiers and sailors, as an American cruise liner and Marine assault ship were lying close offshore.

The enforced lack of vehicle movement enabled the crews to synchronize the M4A2E8's diesel engines and adjust the throttle settings so that both engines ran at the same boost. During this exercise, there was no shortage of advice from veterans, with no fewer than seven American mechanics offering their services. They had done this same job many times 50 years previously. Major General and Mrs. Jordan were then invited as guests of honor to the mayor of Weymouth's lunchtime reception at the Pavilion, where they met many older townspeople who had been present 50 years previously to witness the embarkation of the main body of American forces for the invasion of France. After tea, both Shermans were driven back around the seafront, two miles through the town traffic to Lodmoor Car Park, where they were loaded to be transported to the Royal Marine Barracks at Poole.

The parade at Poole on 3 June began with both Shermans following a marching parade for a mile and half through Poole to the Quayside, where they formed a static line in front of a series of marching parades. Again, the majority of those parading appeared to be American veterans. During the afternoon, both vehicles were driven back to the Royal Marine Barracks, loaded, and transported back to Weymouth. They were both then driven around the seafront to the Pavilion Car Park, ready for the church service the following day.

The church service on 4 June was held on the beach at Weymouth, despite very wet weather reminiscent of the actual weather suffered 50 years previously. Friends helped crew both Shermans, the M5, the Dingo, the halftrack and the Universal Carrier. Vehicle Squadron from Bovington also provided Challenger 1, Warrior, CET, CRARRV, and Scimitar. Despite the weather, a large number of American veterans attended. Following the service, full advantage was taken of the op-



A privately-owned M16 halftrack, followed by a Weasel tracked carrier, parade in Weymouth.

portunity to drive vehicles up and down the empty mile and a half long beach front at Weymouth. The Universal Carrier was in great demand, as its hot engine louvres quickly dried people's clothes, even the local traffic wardens queuing up to get dried out. By the end of the afternoon, it had covered over 22 miles transporting people up and down the sands.

Much consternation was caused by the crew of the Combat Engineer Tractor, who drove into the sea and proceeded to swim their vehicle out towards an American cruise liner about 500 meters offshore. At the end of the afternoon, all vehicles drove back around the seafront to Lodmoor Car Park where they were loaded for transport to the Tank Museum, to be ready for the Concert Day on 5 June. The American honor guard crew was put on board the Poole-to-Cherbourg ferry to visit the French invasion beaches, carefully briefed to revert to driving on their usual side of the road. (This appeared not to confuse Captain Emdee at all, as he had only ever been observed to drive down the middle of the road throughout the previous week.)

June 6th, the 50th Anniversary of D-Day, saw the majority of Friends of the Tank Museum returning to work for a rest, following a hectic weekend. The first casualty returned from France: Ted Salter, the co-driver from the American honor guard crew of the "Easy Eight" Sherman. He had taken the ferry to Cherbourg and then a train to Bayeux. Unfortunately, the train's driver opened the door on the wrong side at Bayeux and Ted fell onto the railway track, breaking his arm fairly comprehensively. So, a mere 30 hours after leaving Bovington, he found himself back in the officer's mess, his arm in a cast and having "done" France. He reported that the main British/American campsite near Arramanches, organized by

the Military Vehicles Trust, had suffered days of continuous rain and was a quagmire. A number of tanks taken to France still had their steel tracks fitted, so the French had banned their movement onto the roads. After two days of rest, he was able to fly home and phoned to report that his arm was mending well, the French doctors having done an excellent job of setting his arm despite multiple fractures.

Following the D-Day anniversary activities, the vehicles used were serviced and then returned to their home bases. Repair work on the cooling system of the "Easy Eight" Sherman was undertaken at ATDU and revealed that a return pipe had cracked between the two GMC diesel engines. It was a simple fault to repair but required over 30 hours work to gain access to the pipe! The Carrier was washed down and greased, but the sea water from Weymouth Beach still managed to seize all the steering and brakes within days. Driving the vehicle through the local fresh-water pond a few times seemed to wash most of the salt and freed the steering and brakes, although the vehicle and driver became rather smelly as a result.

The participation of Fort Knox's Major General Jordan and his Honor Guard crew under Captain Emdee were much appreciated by the veterans of D-Day and the local people who turned out in their thousands to commemorate the American commitment to peace in Europe. It was especially fitting that the parade at Weymouth, the embarkation port for 541,000 American troops in 1944, should have been taken by Major General Jordan from Fort Knox. The American commitment 50 years ago, continued in Europe to the present day, was honored and acknowledged. For those who embarked never to return, we must remember them and remain forever in their debt.