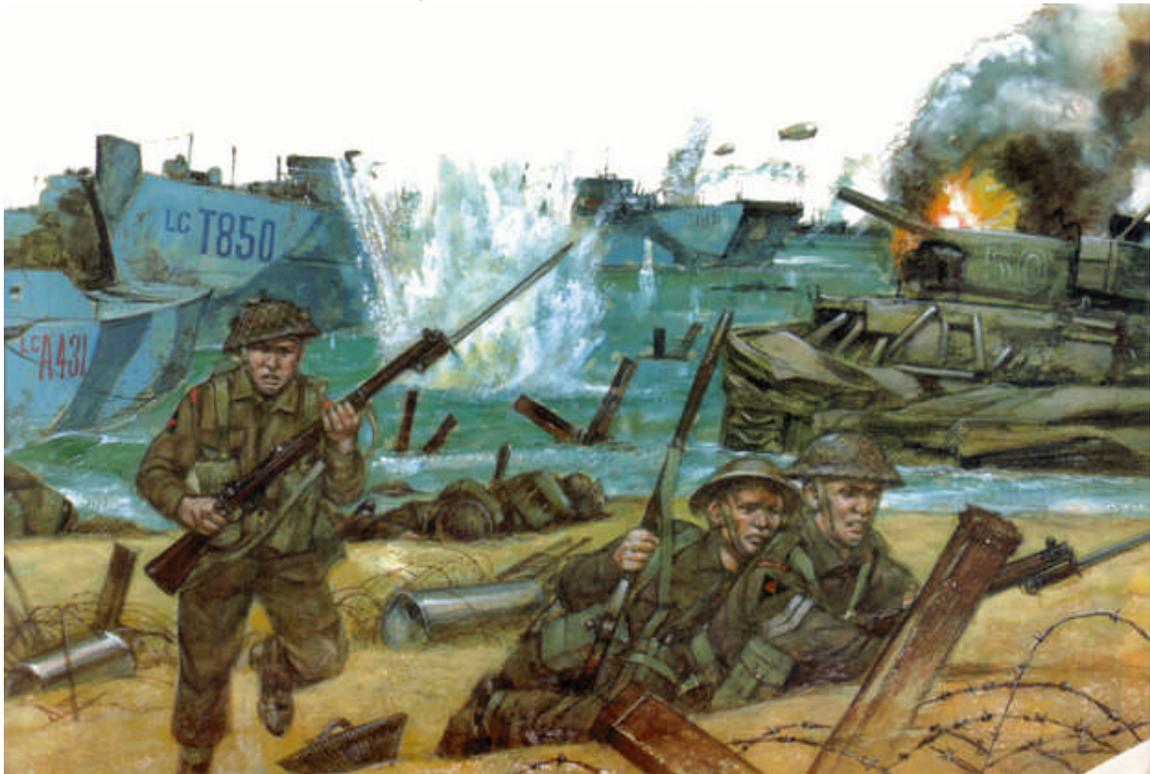


## D-Day - June 6, 1944



Interview with John Demmings

## John Demmings Landed on Normandy Beach June 6, 1944

by Robert LaFrance

(This is part of a 2004 newspaper story I wrote, observing the date of June 6, when thousands of Allied ships, soldiers, sailors and flyers attacked the Nazis in Normandy. John passed away at the age of 91.)

John Demmings well remembers D-Day. It seems like a long time ago and Normandy, France, seems like a long way from Perth-Andover, New Brunswick, but John remembers the time and place very well.

As a member of the Third Canadian Division, Demmings was a machine gunner with the Saint John Fusiliers who hit June Beach, Normandy in the afternoon of D-Day as part of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa (MG).

Today he and his wife Grace live quietly in Perth-Andover but especially this time of year when June 6 comes around he remembers the day when he and hundreds of thousands of other Allied soldiers, airmen, and sailors gained the first foothold in France after several years of that country's occupation by Nazi Germany.

Like many soldiers who have experienced war, he is not easy to get talking about his battle experiences. It was only through a written memoir that he consented to relate any of the details of his military life in the 1940s when he not only participated in the Normandy campaign, but went on with the Camerons to help in the liberation of the Netherlands, a campaign that stretched into the following year.

On July 9, 1940 John Randolph Demmings hitchhiked from Aroostook Junction and enlisted in the Saint John Fusiliers (MG), the letters referring to 'machine gun', and took his basic training in Saint John. Following that he was ordered to report to North Sydney, Cape Breton Island. "It must have been late summer by that time," he said, "because the weather was not that bad. There was lots of fog in Saint John." He didn't remember much more about that part of his military training in Canada other than that his regimental number was on

the dog tags that he wore around his neck. He was training for war in the mortar section of the Saint John Fusiliers machine gunners and by mid-1942 he and his fellow soldiers were ready for overseas.

In July of 1942, in the month before five thousand Canadians stormed the beaches at Dieppe and underwent huge casualties as part of what British commanders of the operation called 'a test of Normandy's defences', John Demmings's unit, which included about one hundred forty officers and enlisted men, left Halifax on the ship called Atlone Castle. "We landed in Liverpool, England," he remembered, "and joined the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa. From there we went to Aldershot, then Horsham, and later Crookham Crossroads where we lived in tents. For nearly two years we were training, moving from place to place." He said that being part of a regiment that followed Scottish traditions had its interesting moments, none of which resulting in his having to wear a kilt.

"Many the morning we were awakened by the sound of the bagpipes," he said, "but at no time did I ever wear a kilt," he added emphatically. "The tartan was the Cameron of Erracht."

Later based in Canterbury, close to the fabled white cliffs of Dover, he would visit London on 48-hour leaves but eventually all the training and waiting came to an end and the Camerons went to the Port of Southampton. The skirl of the regiment's Pipe Major Scott played the bagpipes as the soldiers boarded their troopship at daylight on June 6, 1944 and headed across a very rough English Channel toward Normandy, France.

"We landed on Juno Beach," he said, "and some of the men were wounded or killed right away. We were in the 9th Brigade made up of several Canadian regiments. The 7th and 8th Canadian Brigades had landed earlier. "We were a reserve brigade," John Demmings said, "for landing in Normandy. The Highland Light Infantry landed near Bernier Sur Mer.

"We were stalemated for a while, but later captured Carpiquet Airport. At the Falaise Gap our own planes dropped bombs on some of our own men. Caen was taken on July 9 by two British divisions and one Canadian division,

the 3rd Division of which I was a member. Caen was practically destroyed. They went through with bulldozers to get the troops through. I got separated from the other men around Rouen. We were at Boulogne, not far from Calais, and headed toward Belgium.”

John Demmings was in the Dunkirk area, possibly at Bruges, where his later neighbour on Hillcrest Drive, Perth-Andover, Arnold ‘Bus’ Lewis, was hospitalized. “Around the end of September, the worst seemed to be over,” he said, and later on his unit went to the Netherlands, whose campaign will observe its sixtieth anniversary next year.

Since coming home to Canada after the war, John Demmings has returned to Normandy several times, the first in 1984 for the 40th anniversary of D-Day, and later in 1994 and 1999, when he was chosen to represent the still active Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa at the 55th anniversary.