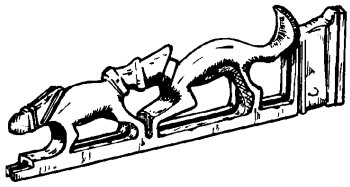
Ampthill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society

Invasion of Normandy

An Ampthill Man's War

James Gillett

www.adalhs.org.uk

Chairman's Foreword.

Jim Gillett was not a member of this Society but he was a good friend and collaborated with us on behalf of the Ampthill & District Preservation Society in our successful bid to save the Alameda, a magnificent double avenue of lime trees, from being cut down by the Ampthill Town Council in 1986. He was a quiet man with a firm resolve and an active member of St. Andrew's Church, Ampthill. It was in the Church Magazine *"Church and Town"* that I first heard of his WW 2 exploits even though I had known him for many years. His article in the May 1994 edition to mark 50 years after D-Day was the basis for this paper. He provided advice, the photographs and memorabilia. Permission to publish was obtained from the Rev. R. I. Hodson.

On 4th March 2000 The Bedfordshire Local History Association organised an exhibition "Bedfordshire in World War 2" at the Parkside Hall in Ampthill. I posted this as part of the ADALHS contribution.

Kevan Fadden F.S.A.



R.A.M.C. Cap Badge

INVASION OF NORMANDY 1944.

James W Gillett.

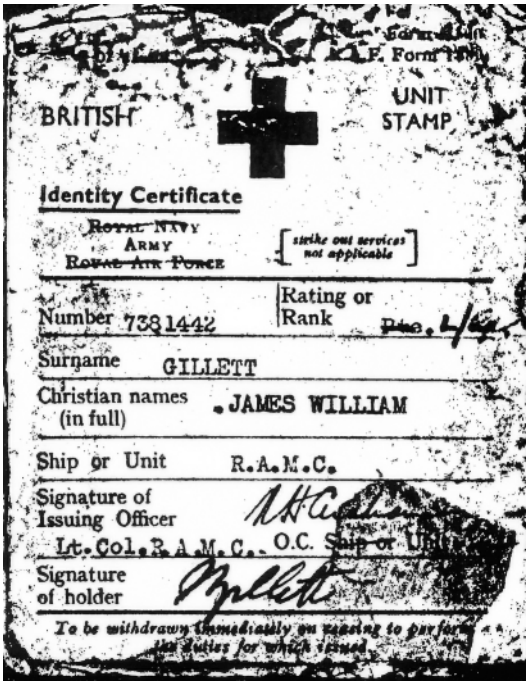


Jim & Joan on their wedding day just before D-Day.

My involvement with the invasion forces began in the summer of 1943. At that time I was stationed in Wiltshire with the 225 Field Ambulance, part of the Guards Armoured Division. On returning from leave late one night, I was told that the 225 LFA had been split up into two Field Dressing Stations, and I was allocated to the 21st FDS.

Our unit was then posted to Scotland where we were to train for the opening of the 'SECOND FRONT', the invasion of occupied Europe. We were part of the 15th Beach Group, a forward unit of the 3rd British Infantry Div.

Our first stop in Scotland was in Hamilton in Lanarkshire - here we found many walls daubed with the slogan 'Open the second front now'. Our thoughts were, “Well, they might let us get in a little training before pushing us into battle!” We then moved to the Ayrshire coast where we made a lot of 'wet landings' - followed by further landings in South Wales, and we took part in exercises in the Dover area before returning to Scotland on the north-east coast in Morayshire - here our training became much more intensive. On the exercises here we boarded a ship in the Cromarty Firth - one of the renowned 'welded' ships built in America. Ours was named The Empire Cutlass, and it was about 10,000 tons. It had been victualled in America, so the food we had on board was vastly different to our army rations on shore. One thing which was very noticeable was the snow white bread! After we had boarded the ship it cruised out into the North Sea, and then returned and lay off the coast of Morayshire. We had to get on all our equipment - each of us had very heavy loads to carry. I had a large Bergen rucksack so heavy that I had to seek assistance to get it on my back! We then had the hazardous task of climbing over the side of the ship, scrambling down cargo nets into small landing craft bobbing about below. Having safely entered these craft they immediately headed for the beach. As soon as the craft touched the beach the front went down forming a ramp into the water - and we had to plunge in the sea and get to the shore as quickly as possible. On these exercises the


BRITISH
UNIT STAMP
Identity Certificate
ROYAL NAVY
ARMY
ROYAL AIR FORCE
[strike out services not applicable]
Number 7381442
Rating or Rank
Surname GILLETT
Christian names (in full) JAMES WILLIAM
Ship or Unit R.A.M.C.
Signature of Issuing Officer
Lt.Col.R.A.M.C. O.C. Ship or Unit
Signature of holder
To be withdrawn immediately on ceasing to perform the duties for which issued.

Jim's Identity Pass. Travel worn but still legible confirming he was in the Royal Army Medical Corps.

water was never less than chest high when we jumped in. On one occasion it snowed as we got to the beach - not very pleasant when we were to stay in our sea-soaked clothing for two or three days!

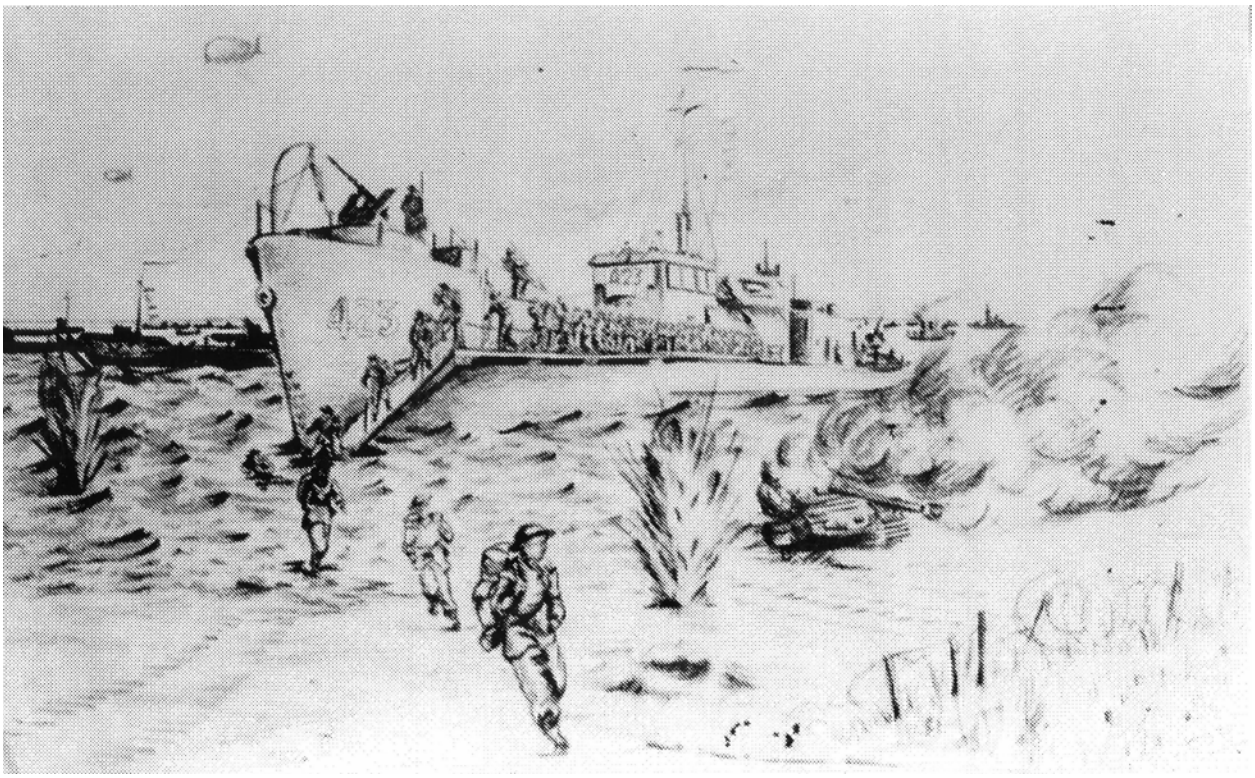
In the spring of 1944 we moved down to a holding camp just outside Portsmouth - we then knew that D-Day was not far away. From here we had our final exercise - Exercise Fabious. We boarded the Empire Cutlass in the Solent and made a landing on the coast just outside Bognor Regis - I had nostalgic thoughts of the happy days I had spent on that coast camping with the Boy Scouts.

On Whit Sunday and Monday we were given our first briefing for D-Day. We were shown marvellous aerial photographs of the part of the beach where we were to land and where to leave the beach. There were photos showing the road to the orchard where we were to set up our Dressing Station - even the apples on the tree were visible! Thereafter we were confined to camp for security reasons and not allowed any contact with civilians. We then moved to our final staging camp which was in Stanmer Park near Brighton. We expected to leave there on the evening of June 4th but owing to rough weather in the Channel the move was postponed, this enabled us to attend Evensong in the Church in the Park. Next day we moved down to our embarkation port - Newhaven. Here we found that we were not to go over on the 7,177 GRT Empire Cutlass, as we had done in all our exercises but on a small landing craft - LCI 423 - which only held about 100 men. We had a meal as soon as we boarded, I grumbled at one of my pals for dishing me out a small ration - in about an hour I was to realise that what I had eaten didn't matter! We left harbour at about 5.00 p.m. - the sea was still very rough and, being such a small craft, most of us were soon seasick. In fact only about six men on the craft escaped 'Mal de mer'. We had to first rendezvous with the invasion fleet off the Isle of Wight and by dawn we were in mid-Channel. In the grey light of the dawn it was an amazing scene - there were thousands of ships of all shapes and sizes as far as the eye could see. It seemed unbelievable that this vast operation was still a secret from the world and especially from the Germans. Standing on the deck of our small little craft it all seemed so quiet and eerie. I stood there and thought of our little town of Ampthill, I wondered what their re-actions would be when they woke up to the news that D-Day had arrived - what would my mother and family feel - how would my wife feel knowing that my unit was to be one of the first to land on D-Day?

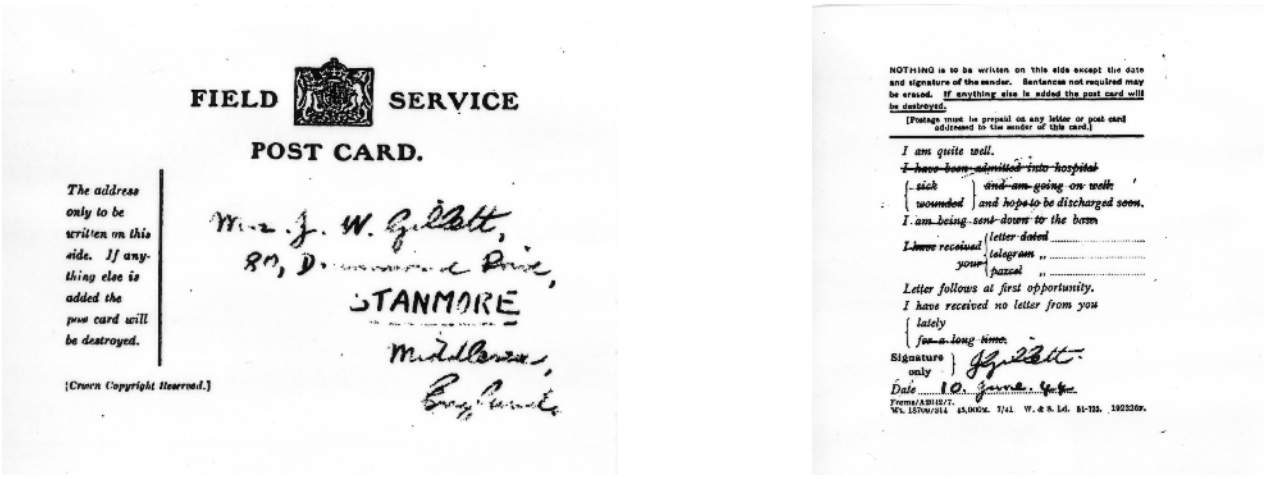
The whole operation was such a tactical surprise and so effective that not one single attack was made by the German Air Force on the assault forces during the sea passage or at any time on the beaches during D-day.
As we came nearer to the Normandy coast we saw smoke and flames rising - the result of the terrific bombardment that our Navy was putting up, and the bombing by our Air Force. We landed on the eastern flank of Sword Beach at H + 230.



Hermanville-sur-mer: As seen from the landing craft LC1 423. Copies of sketches by one of the men on Jim's landing craft, known to his mates as Blondie Haswell. Drawn on the beach three days after the landing: Blondie was nearly taken as a spy.



Although the area was badly damaged, because of the marvellous photos we had seen at our briefing, we were able to recognise our exit from the beach and proceed a little way inland to the orchard in Hermanville-sur-mer where we were to operate our FDS. From then onwards we were very busy attending to the many casualties. Our forces were supposed to have captured Caen in ten hours, alas this did not happen until D + 33 - the 9th]uly. We stayed at Hermanville for six weeks - being at the extreme eastern flank of Sword beach we were within range of some big German guns further along the coast which even the terrific bombardments by the big guns of HMS Warspite could not



FIELD SERVICE

POST CARD.

The address only to be written on this side. If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed.

[Crown Copyright Reserved.]

Mrs. J. W. Gillett,
89, D[illegible] Drive,
STANMORE
Middlesex,
Eng[illegible]

NOTHING is to be written on this side except the date and signature of the sender. Sentences not required may be erased. If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed.

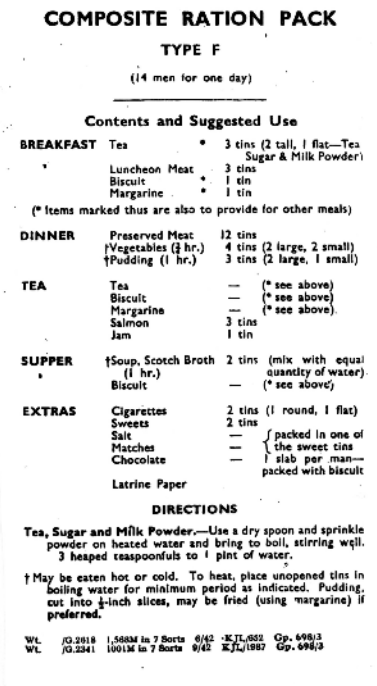
[Postage must be prepaid on any letter or post card addressed to the sender of this card.]

I am quite well.
~~*I have been admitted into hospital*~~
{ *sick* } ~~*and am going on well*~~
{ *wounded* } *and hope to be discharged soon.*
I am being sent down to the base.
~~*I have received*~~ *your* { *letter* dated ..... / *telegram* ,, ... / *parcel* ,, ... }
Letter follows at first opportunity.
I have received no letter from you { *lately* / ~~*for a long time.*~~ }
Signature only } J. Gillett
Date 10. June. 44.

Forms/ABH/17.
Wt. 15700/214 45,000m. 7/41 W. & S. Ltd. 81-125. 1922/6r.

The first communication after D Day, imagine the feelings of a new bride.

silence. Then we moved down to the Falaise pocket where many enemy troops were trapped. We were amazed to see the Germans still using horse drawn vehicles. After the battle of the Falaise Gap we moved up to Amiens and Abbeville where we were left behind by the swift advance into Belgium and Holland. After a quiet spell there, we were sent right up to the front in Holland as the Germans were making their last ditch attack in the Riechwald Forest. Then came the crossing of the Rhine and we were into enemy territory. What a difference, through France, Belgium and Holland we had been feted in every town as conquering heroes. No longer were streets decked with colourful flags and cheering crowds but houses showing white flags and grim faced people turning their backs on us - we were now the enemy. We moved through Westphalia up to Celle on the Aller - the Germans were surrendering faster than our forces could cope with them, many thousands of Germans were sent through our lines with no escorts to get them out of the way. On the 4th of May I was in Luneberg and saw General Admiral von Friedeberg and his party going to Luneberg Heath to sign the Instrument of Surrender. So this was the end of



COMPOSITE RATION PACK

TYPE F

(14 men for one day)

Contents and Suggested Use

BREAKFAST	Tea *	3 tins	(2 tall, 1 flat—Tea Sugar & Milk Powder)
	Luncheon Meat	3 tins	
	Biscuit *	1 tin	
	Margarine *	1 tin	
(* Items marked thus are also to provide for other meals)			
DINNER	Preserved Meat	12 tins	
	†Vegetables (½ hr.)	4 tins	(2 large, 2 small)
	†Pudding (1 hr.)	3 tins	(2 large, 1 small)
TEA	Tea	—	(* see above)
	Biscuit	—	(* see above)
	Margarine	—	(* see above)
	Salmon	3 tins	
	Jam	1 tin	
SUPPER	†Soup, Scotch Broth (1 hr.)	2 tins	(mix with equal quantity of water)
	Biscuit	—	(* see above)
EXTRAS	Cigarettes	2 tins	(1 round, 1 flat)
	Sweets	2 tins	
	Salt	—	packed in one of the sweet tins
	Matches	—	1 slab per man— packed with biscuit
	Chocolate	—	
	Latrine Paper		

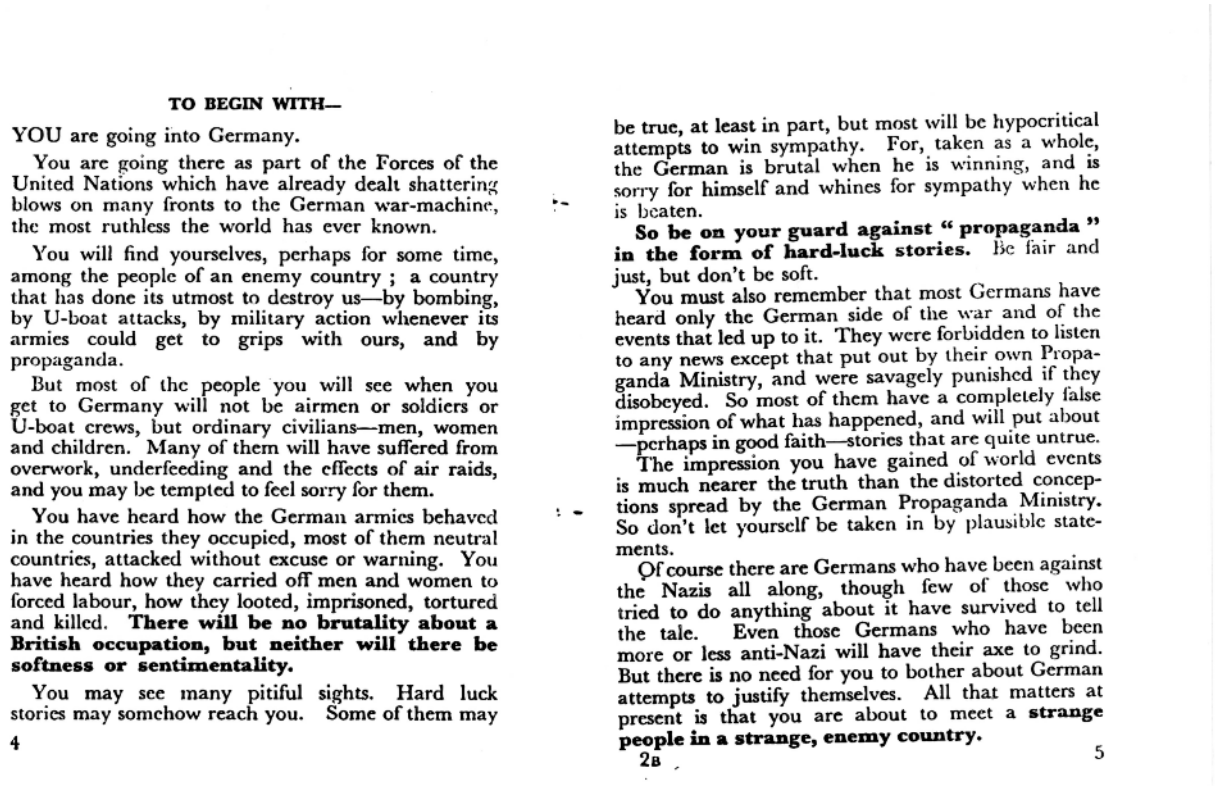
DIRECTIONS

Tea, Sugar and Milk Powder.—Use a dry spoon and sprinkle powder on heated water and bring to boil, stirring well. 3 heaped teaspoonfuls to 1 pint of water.

† May be eaten hot or cold. To heat, place unopened tins in boiling water for minimum period as indicated. Pudding, cut into ½-inch slices, may be fried (using margarine) if preferred.

Wt. /G.2018 1,568M in 7 Sorts 6/42 K.H./652 Gp. 698/3
Wt. /G.2341 1001M in 7 Sorts 9/42 K.H./1987 Gp. 698/3

Ration Pack for 14 Men for one day.



TO BEGIN WITH—

YOU are going into Germany.

You are going there as part of the Forces of the United Nations which have already dealt shattering blows on many fronts to the German war-machine, the most ruthless the world has ever known.

You will find yourselves, perhaps for some time, among the people of an enemy country ; a country that has done its utmost to destroy us—by bombing, by U-boat attacks, by military action whenever its armies could get to grips with ours, and by propaganda.

But most of the people you will see when you get to Germany will not be airmen or soldiers or U-boat crews, but ordinary civilians—men, women and children. Many of them will have suffered from overwork, underfeeding and the effects of air raids, and you may be tempted to feel sorry for them.

You have heard how the German armies behaved in the countries they occupied, most of them neutral countries, attacked without excuse or warning. You have heard how they carried off men and women to forced labour, how they looted, imprisoned, tortured and killed. **There will be no brutality about a British occupation, but neither will there be softness or sentimentality.**

You may see many pitiful sights. Hard luck stories may somehow reach you. Some of them may

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be true, at least in part, but most will be hypocritical attempts to win sympathy. For, taken as a whole, the German is brutal when he is winning, and is sorry for himself and whines for sympathy when he is beaten.

So be on your guard against " propaganda " in the form of hard-luck stories. Be fair and just, but don't be soft.

You must also remember that most Germans have heard only the German side of the war and of the events that led up to it. They were forbidden to listen to any news except that put out by their own Propaganda Ministry, and were savagely punished if they disobeyed. So most of them have a completely false impression of what has happened, and will put about —perhaps in good faith—stories that are quite untrue.

The impression you have gained of world events is much nearer the truth than the distorted conceptions spread by the German Propaganda Ministry. So don't let yourself be taken in by plausible statements.

Of course there are Germans who have been against the Nazis all along, though few of those who tried to do anything about it have survived to tell the tale. Even those Germans who have been more or less anti-Nazi will have their axe to grind. But there is no need for you to bother about German attempts to justify themselves. All that matters at present is that you are about to meet a **strange people in a strange, enemy country.**

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An excerpt from a booklet given to all troops as Germany was overrun.

the road - thank God I had come through the operation from D-Day to the surrender safely!

Footnote.

Jim was a member of the Royal Army Medical Corps and as such would not have carried weapons, he was one of the first into Normandy and had to deal with the dead and wounded from the word go. The nature of his duties meant he was always in the front line and in danger.

I know that Jim and his wife Joan visited Hermanville-sur-mer many years later and found the area where the Field Dressing Station had been set up. It is now a very neat war cemetery with lines of graves. Jim wondered if they contained the bodies of the troops he helped to bury.



Hermanville cemetery in Herman-sur-mer as it is today, a quiet tranquil area which brought back vivid memories to Jim Gillett. By Wernerve-own work