

Our Navy

First of January, 1945

D-Day for a DE

*The USS Rich Helped Put 'Em
Ashore in France*



As told by D. J. LAWRENCE

IT WAS June 2, 1944, and the USS RICH was several hundred miles from those crowded British ports in which the invasion armada was assembling. Aboard the RICH they had heard all the rumors, but the crew figured they were to be the unfortunate ones who would have to tell their grand-kids, "Well, no, I wasn't actually *in* the invasion—but I was pretty close to it!"

So they went ashore at the Irish port in which they found themselves, and made the best of the situation.

Ireland wasn't Australia. That's what D. J. Lawrence was saying to Mizes, TM2c, and Russo, BM2c, as they stood on a street corner and watched the colleens pass. Now, in Australia the girls were . . . well, something pretty special. Lawrence had been aboard the DD PATTERSON at Pearl Harbor on December 7, and had cruised the dark and bloody seas of the South Pacific until he had been returned to Water Tender's school and an assignment to the nucleus crew of the new destroyer escort.

Whatever opportunity the three men might have had to make any further comparison between the females of the east and west were interrupted by a pair of SPs who cruised up the street—not sauntering, the way of SPs since the days of Noah, but with urgency in every stride. They cut a course toward the three Lotharios and hauled up before them: "You guys off the RICH?"

"That's right."

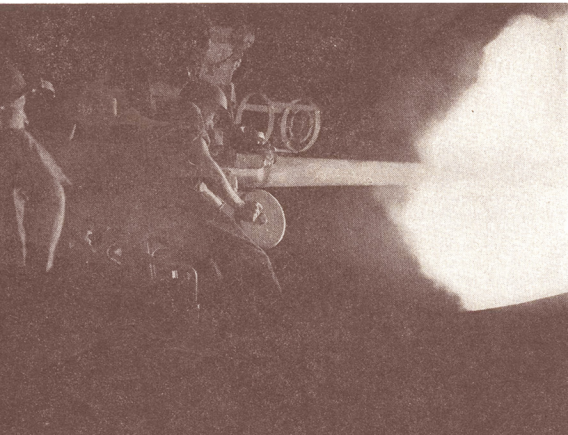
"Then, back to the ship, on the double."

"Why? We haven't done anything."

"I know, Mac, but we just take orders around here. So, back to the ship."

The trio knew better than to argue, and they had a hunch. They took the

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shortest route to the waterfront and were soon aboard.

Fate had played one of its incomprehensible little tricks—and the RICH was the goat. One of the DEs slated for an invasion role had broken down, and the RICH was ordered to pinch-hit for her at the last moment.

But for this unforeseen circumstance, the stupid fools, of whom there are a small number on any ship, would have been saying to the crew of the RICH, "Where were you guys hiding when the big show was on? How was the liberty back in the States? Yeah, we know all about the RICH—never around when there's action." They've said such things about some brave ships before now.

The men of the RICH would have been just as brave had those last minute orders not come in. As it was, they were in the thick of the fire and fury for hour after long hour while the Nazi shore-batteries roved back and forth across the sea, searching with destructive fingers for the ships of vengeance off the shores of France. And the same fate that had picked the little DE off the sidelines and thrust her rudely into the fray, brought her to disaster and a glory she could well have dispensed with.

The DE scheduled for this meeting with Fate off Normandy, came to life under circumstances peculiar from the very beginning. The RICH was built at the Defoe yards, Bay City, Michigan, a thousand miles from the ocean. It was here that Water Tender Lawrence and a few other veterans came aboard as the nucleus crew. From Lake Michigan, the RICH was towed through the "river that runs uphill," the steaming Chicago drainage canal, to Joliet, Illinois. Here she was fitted with pontoons to lessen her draft for the shallow Mississippi, and then towed down that winding river to New Orleans.

The regular crew joined the ship at New Orleans, and she was commissioned October 1, 1943. Lt. Comdr. Edward Michaels became her first Skipper.

DE duty was new to most of the crew, and they were quick to make comparisons with other ships. Lawrence, who had spent all his Navy on tin cans, prefers the Destroyer Escort. "More room," he says. "Not so many men, not so much gear. For instance, there's only one boiler to a fire room, where on the DDs you've got two. There's more room in the crew's quarters, too. Not much difference in the way a DE or a DD rides—both of them can pitch and roll."

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The RICH showed that ability on several occasions during the next few months. She made five trips to the other side with convoys, with a couple of side trips to Newfoundland and Panama in between. She pulled into Boston harbor on one occasion with the ice nearly a foot thick over her decks and superstructure. On another she battled storms for fourteen consecutive days, rolling 38 degrees. Yet, from her record it would appear that she'd lived a tame, almost a monotonously secure existence. Perhaps it was tame, considered from the angle of the bronzed vets of South Pacific battles with rows of stars across their area ribbons.

But there was nothing tame about the morning of the 6th of June, when the RICH moved in through the sharp swells of the channel and dropped her hook. As far as the eye could see the heterogenous display of invasion craft moved through the gloom. Inland the dull roar of bombs could be plainly heard as the air force softened up the opposition. Then the battlewagons and cruisers opened up.

The Nazis were coming back hot and heavy. Splashes were keeping the QUINCEY moving around as she laid her own salvos on the beach, and as a precaution a smoke screen was laid between the main bombarding force and the eyes on shore. The CARRY, however, was so far in that she alone of the main force was denied this protection, and in a few seconds the entire weight of the Nazi batteries was on her. Big shells found their mark and broke the back of the little DD, the only ship of size to fall to the German marksmen.

All of June 6th and 7th the story was the same for the RICH—GQ all night, steady steaming, and watchful eyes turned toward the skies. But the Luftwaffe made only one appearance, that on the night of the seventh when the AA guns on the RICH suddenly woke into life for the first time. The men on her deck swore the Nazi was dropping a string of blue lights, that trailed out like Christmas tree lights but seemed to have no purpose they could see. Fox, GM3c, on No. 3 gun, thought he should have had the Nazi, and was still cursing his luck the next day. The bomber swooped low and dropped a bomb that exploded close astern of the DE, dropped another as he roared on and caught a 2100-ton French destroyer with a square hit. The Frenchman went up in one crashing, blinding flash.

It was eight-thirty of the 8th that the RICH moved in toward the beach with orders to stand by GLENNON, which had hit a mine. All hands were at GQ, but there was no premonition of any danger. It had been announced that the beachhead was firmly established and that the invasion forces were pressing inland.

"I was at GQ in the fireroom," Lawrence says. The Jo pot was going, as usual, and we were more or less relaxing. I had just made an entry in the log at nine o'clock and had turned away when an explosion rocked the ship. It felt like we were picked out of the water and then thrown violently back again. The coffee pot flew across the room. Buckets crashed

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around our heads, and the floor plates came loose. The floor plate in the engine room was ripped up and hurled into the condenser. Then the lights went out, and as I picked myself up I could hear the hiss of superheated steam."

To the layman, and even to many of the topside men, the word "superheated" will probably conjure up no dreadful pictures; but any blackgang man will know the chill feeling that descends on a man below decks when he is suddenly plunged into absolute darkness and knows that somewhere in that darkness is a thin, stabbing finger of steam so hot it can sear the flesh from the bones.

Lawrence got hold of a flashlight and soon found that the port gauge glass was shattered. The fireroom crew cut the glass out of the steam line, and then lit off No. 2 boiler, hoping to raise the steam pressure which had fallen to 300 pounds.

The lights went back on again now, and from the engine room it was learned that the explosion had only tripped the generators.

"We didn't have much time to think about what damage might have occurred," Lawrence goes on, "because no sooner had the lights come on again than we were thrown to the deck by a second explosion. Again we were plunged into darkness, and again that hissing of steam in the inky black told us a steam line had ruptured somewhere."

It was the starboard gauge glass this time and the crew of men set about rectifying the damage as swiftly as possible. The Chief Engineer groped his way into the fireroom and when he'd checked the damage he ordered the men there to get topside.

They needed no urging, and headed for the ladder, feeling the ship taking on a list even as they climbed. It was now that the third blow struck, this one the heaviest of all. The *RICH* had evidently gotten into the center of a Nazi mine field, perhaps one that had been planted the night before by the plane whose "blue lights" had caused the crew so much debate.

Lawrence relates: "Bateman was just going up through the hatch, and the explosion threw him clear to the overhead, giving him a nasty gash across the head. Balack, the evaporator man, had secured the evaporators before he started up, and he, too, was hurled across the deck and badly bruised.

"We made our way up through the gloom, into the shambles of the machine shop. Here it was like going through tangled barbed wire on a dark night; the spare boiler tubing had come down from the overhead and was twisted in a maze like spider webbing; ammo from the 20mm clipping room was all over the place; tools, boxes, pipes, spare parts, dangled and hung and leaned in crazy and dangerous positions. But we got through the tangle and out to the deck.

"Now, for the first time, we men from the engine room spaces could get an idea of what had happened. The entire stern was blown off from the 1.1 clipping room at frame 201. There was no smoke or fire—just the slow, deadly hiss of steam from No. 1 fireroom and the grotesque and

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broken body of the twisted ship. There was no doubt about it, we were finished. The starboard side had been thrust upward a good three feet above the rest of the deck. The mast had come down across the flying bridge, trapping several of the men there."

The ship began to settle almost immediately, going down slowly by the bow. And in a matter of seconds rescue craft were alongside, PTs and Coast Guard craft, ready to take off the wounded.

There was no sign of panic as the crew worked to care for the wounded, and although the ship was going down under their feet, those who were unhurt had only one thought in mind—to care for those who needed help. Every man did something. Some went about the ship administering morphine to the more painful cases. Others got the wounded onto stretchers and over the side to the waiting PTs, and when there were not enough stretchers, volunteers descended to the officers country and brought up mattresses on which the wounded could be transferred.

As Lawrence went over the deck assisting where he could, he was hailed by the gunnery officer, Lt. Fraser who was injured, and had gotten a bad blow on the head. "Go up and see if the Captain is all right," he ordered Lawrence.

When the torpedoman got to the bridge he found that the range finder had been blown off its mount and had fallen to the deck, and it and the fallen mast had inflicted injuries on a great number of men. The Skipper was alive but had a bad leg. The Executive Officer, Lieut. Comdr. Pearson, USNR, was also injured quite severely, but when efforts were made to move him he refused. "There are others hurt worse than I am," he said. "I'll be all right." Ensign Cunningham, the Assistant Gunnery Officer, had a broken leg, but he kept going in spite of it, helping others down from the shattered bridge.

And so it went through the whole ship, the quiet kind of heroism that raises no man to prominence above his fellows—but heroism nonetheless.

Lawrence reported back to the gunnery officer, and found the water had almost covered the main deck now. Lt. Fraser made sure that the depth charges were set on SAFE so that when the ship went down the pressure would not automatically discharge the ash cans with inevitable injury to the men in the water.

Almost all the wounded had been transferred now. A few could not be moved, and others were trapped by the mast and range finder on the bridge. Now, however, the ship began to roll, slowly and as though reluctant to give up its hold on life. The rescue craft cast off and put distance between them and the sinking ship in order not to be caught by her as she turned over. Two or three men on the flying bridge went off at the last moment as the ship revolved under their feet, and used the top part of the bridge as a boost when they dived into the water that was rising up to meet them.

The executive officer, Lt. Comdr. Pearson, who had refused to allow himself to

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be taken off ahead of other members of the crew, went down with the ship. He had refused aid in favor of others until it was too late to help him.

Those in the water turned on their backs as they swam, to watch the ship. The little DE went down, all the time slowly and gracefully, with her colors still flying.

The rescue craft swarmed in to pick up the last few to get off, and had most of them out of the water in a few minutes. The majority of the men who lost their lives were killed outright by the three explosions that tore the ship apart.

The survivors were taken to England and most of them were returned to the States shortly afterward.

There was nothing in the short span of the DE's life that will emblazon her name across the history books for future generations to read. The name of her Skipper, the names of the men who made up her crew, the very name of the ship itself will be recorded only in the official records of the Navy Department.

Yet, it is the RICH, and ships like her, that every day, every hour of every day, perform the monotonous and seemingly unimportant jobs that, in their total, mean the difference between success and failure. Each is working toward the "D-Day" when glory or tragedy will strike, when, in the hours of crises and death, ordinary men become "heroes." If that crisis is safely detoured anonymity will be their lot until the end of the war. But, like those who fought and died aboard the valiant little DE off Normandy they will be waiting to prove the adage that, "Heroes are made by moments."

THE NARRATOR

Donald Joseph Lawrence, Water Tender, First Class, is an example of the young American who early realized that this country inevitably faced a war in defense of its ideologies, perhaps its very existence. He joined the Naval Reserve in 1936, and after four years, enlisted in the Regular Navy, August 16, 1940. From boot camp he went aboard the destroyer Patterson, and was a fireman on that ship at Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941.

The Patterson had her share of action during the hit-and-run days in the Pacific in 1941 and 1942. Lawrence left her in '43 for the Watertender's School at Philly, and from there went aboard the DE Rich for the action he has described here.

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