

AN AUSTRALIAN PAVED THE WAY FOR THE D-DAY LANDINGS

A naval officer from Hobart in a miniature submarine played one of the most significant roles in the historic D-Day landing 75 years ago.

Lieutenant Ken Hudspeth was the Commanding Officer of the British Royal Navy miniature submarine (known as X20) which conducted a survey of the Normandy beaches in January 1944 and then acted as a beacon for the landing craft as they approached the beaches five months later on 6 June.

The survey was a pivotal exercise as the Allied Supreme Command had very little knowledge of that part of the French coastline and needed critical information about the beach's gradient and load-bearing capacity.

Lieutenant Hudspeth and his crew surveyed Omaha, Juno and Sword beaches over four days (17-21 January 1944) in extremely dangerous conditions as detection by the Germans would have almost certainly eliminated the surprise element of the planned Allied invasion.

In June, Lieutenant Hudspeth was dispatched to the region from Portsmouth just four days prior to the D-Day landings.

His task this time, as commanding officer and in company with a second submarine (X23), was to use the two miniature submarines as beacons to guide the landing craft into Juno and Sword.

While maintaining their positions, they listened to the BBC news broadcast every night at 10pm waiting for the coded message that would confirm the landings would commence the following morning.

They received the message on the evening of 5 June.

At 5am on 6 June 1944, X20 raised a mast that had the beacon lights fitted to guide the landing craft into the beaches and waited for the invasion of Europe to begin.

This was the period of greatest risk. The two miniature submarines had to avoid being run down by the Allied landing craft or shelled by the German forces defending the beach.

History tells us that Lieutenant Hudspeth was successful and was awarded his third Distinguished Service Cross for his work in support of the D-Day landings.

Lieutenant Commander Hudspeth retired from the Royal Australian Navy in 1965 and although he died in 2000, his legacy remains strong today.

Editorial note: photos are available upon request.

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