The Operation Dragoon drama of Douglas Fairbanks

By: David Sears, World War II Magazine (Originally published in August 2018)

Lt. Cmdr. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Capt. Henry C. Johnson and Lt. Cmdr. John D. Bulkeley (commander of the Special Operations Group's Eastern Diversionary Unit, commander of CTG 80.4 and the commanding officer of the destroyer Endicott), during operations off France in August of 1944. (Courtesy of Rear Adm. John D. Bulkeley, now in the collections of U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

Early in 1943, as Allied forces battled across North Africa and contemplated amphibious assaults on Italy and France, U.S. Navy Radioman Bob Rainie spotted a bulletin at the Naval Amphibious Base in Little Creek, Virginia: “The Navy requests volunteers for prolonged, hazardous, distant duty for a secret project.”

Rainie, 22, a seagoing veteran bored with shore duty, jumped at the opportunity.

Among the officers screening volunteers at the base was a tall, studious lieutenant commander named Harold Burris-Meyer, who surprised Rainie by asking technical questions not normally covered in radio school.

Fortunately, recalled Rainie, “I was in college studying electrical engineering before entering active duty. One of my last courses had been properties of sound.”

The 39-year-old Burris-Meyer, Rainie learned later, was a sound pioneer who before the war had created sonic effects for theatrical plays, engineered the stereo soundtrack for Walt Disney's 1940 film *Fantasia*, and even consulted with New York's Metropolitan Opera.

If Burris-Meyer's questions deepened the mystery surrounding the project, the presence of another screener, a suave 33-year-old lieutenant, added a jolt of astonishment.

To men — and especially women — of Rainie's generation, Douglas Fairbanks Jr. was a Hollywood icon.

His father, Douglas Sr., a silent screen legend, had starred in *The Mark of Zorro*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Robin Hood*, *The Thief of Bagdad*, and *The Black Pirate*.

Fairbanks Jr. took up the swashbuckling mantle in *Dawn Patrol*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *Gunga Din*, *Safari*, and *The Corsican Brothers*.

The younger Fairbanks was now looking for real-life action. Teamed with Burris-Meyer, Fairbanks was building a seagoing "dirty tricks" outfit to confound German and Japanese beach defenders.

"All my life," Fairbanks later wrote in a memoir, "I had loved…everything to do with ships."

Cmdr. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., taken 21 November 1945. (National Archives)

In truth he possessed little actual nautical experience. But the biggest obstacle to Fairbanks's sea command ambitions was education.

"Getting a naval reserve commission…meant one had to have a university degree," he recalled, "and…I had no such thing."

What Fairbanks did have, however, were influential contacts. In October 1941, after getting a correspondence course degree, a commission as a lieutenant junior grade, and a post to Washington, Fairbanks stayed overnight in Franklin D. Roosevelt's White House, where his host, a former assistant secretary of the Navy, blithely assured him promotion to "Captain of the Head" — shipboard slang for toilet.

A "snotty" lieutenant commander from Navy Personnel soon set Fairbanks straight.

"The quickest way for you to be a seagoing deck officer," he scolded, "is to go to sea."

After humbling "familiarization" tours aboard several ships, Fairbanks crossed the Atlantic in March 1942 as flag lieutenant to Rear Adm. Robert C. "Ike" Giffen. The admiral dispatched Fairbanks on even more observational forays, though this time closer to the action: on board the aircraft carrier *Wasp*, delivering British aircraft to embattled Malta, and then the heavy cruiser *Wichita*, screening an ill-fated Russia-bound convoy, *PQ 17*, that would be devastated by the Luftwaffe in June-July 1942.

Determined to achieve more, Fairbanks wrote Britain's Lord Louis Mountbatten, a longtime family friend. Mountbatten, or "Dickie," as Fairbanks knew him, led Combined Operations, responsible for British commando warfare.

Eager to have America's armed forces adopt Combined Ops' methods for deceiving and misdirecting the enemy, Mountbatten attached Fairbanks to his staff. Fairbanks learned about explosives, camouflage, and the operation of Landing Craft, Vehicle, Personnel (LCVPs), best known as Higgins boats. He even participated in several "pajama raids" — Combined Ops' slang for nighttime, cross-Channel, hit-and-run assaults on German outposts.

Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, Royal Navy, talks with officers on board the aircraft carrier Saratoga, at Colombo, Ceylon, in April 1944. Those present are (left-right): Lt. Cmdr. Robert Dose, USN; Adm. Mountbatten; Capt. John H. Cassady, USN; and British Rear Adm. Clement Moody. (National Archives)

In mid-November 1942, Fairbanks reported to Norfolk, Virginia, to join the staff of Vice Adm. H. Kent Hewitt, commander of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet Amphibious Force.

He soon convinced Hewitt to allow him to organize Combined Ops-style training in seaborne deception tactics. At the same time, Fairbanks leveraged his Washington contacts. On March 5, 1943, Adm. Ernest J. King, chief of naval operations, formally authorized recruitment for what would be called Beach Jumper operations.

Beach Jumper Unit-1 (BJU-1), the first of nine such units the U.S. Navy organized during World War II, was officially commissioned on May 25, 1943, at Little Creek's Camp Bradford, where Burris-Meyer established a Beach Jumper training group.

While there are several stories about the derivation of the “Beach Jumper” name—“BJ” for short—the most credible is Burris-Meyer’s oft-quoted determination to use sonic deception to “scare the be-Jesus” out of the enemy.

In a prewar staging of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Burris-Meyer had used the “BJ factor” on a theatrical audience, synchronizing visual and audio effects to dramatize the movements of the play’s ghost. Whenever the projected apparition crossed the stage, its voice eerily moved with it, thanks to a backstage technician controlling a dozen carefully placed speakers.

For his wartime work, Burris-Meyer devised portable, self-contained gear consisting of sophisticated generator-powered amplifiers and multi-directional speakers. Connected to recording and playback equipment, the units (code-named “heaters”) broadcast prerecorded noises simulating a seaborne invasion.

Operating heaters from small boats offshore, Beach Jumper personnel aimed to convince enemy defenders an attack was imminent. If the “BJ factor” worked, hoodwinked enemy troops would rush to the “ghost” invasion beach, leaving the actual invasion site vulnerable.

Living out of four-man tents, BJ volunteers attended classes and learned to operate small craft. In addition to Higgins boats, BJU-1 employed 63-foot, high-speed Air-Sea Rescue boats, or ASRs — also called “crash boats” — each manned by an officer and six sailors.

Recalled Rainie, “it took six men to lift the ‘portable’” Burris-Meyer equipment onboard the ASRs.

“I created the [invasion sound] effects by recording boat engines, bos’n whistles, tank engines from a nearby Army training site, [and even] anchor chain sounds by pulling a chain over the edge of an old bucket.”

Other Beach Jumper contraptions included smoke generators and Roman candles, which could be tossed overboard to simulate gun flashes. For radio and radar countermeasures, boats carried radio transmitters and radar-jamming devices. Crews could also stream 25-foot-long balloons covered with metal strips to further mislead enemy radar operators.

Deception was key because ASR firepower was scant: four twin-mounted .50-caliber machine guns, 3.5-inch barrage rockets, and small arms.

Operation Husky, painting, by Mitchell Jamieson; 1943; "Grim, stark reality and the enemy lie ahead for these steel-helmeted men as they are huddled closely together inside an invasion craft bound for the beach at Sicily." (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

The Beach Jumpers' expertise was soon tested when BJU-1 was abruptly called to participate in the July 1943 British-American invasion of Sicily — Operation Husky.

"We were hustled into trucks and raced to Newport News to board a ship for Oran, Algeria," Rainie recalled.

The unit reached Oran in early June, then took to its ASRs to follow Algeria's coast east to Ferryville, Tunisia, an abandoned French lakeshore facility near Bizerte.

BJ sailors again bunked in tents — now, according to Rainie, sharing space with "wharf rats the size of cats."

Burris-Meyer came along to fine-tune gear, while Fairbanks temporarily joined Vice Adm. Hewitt's headquarters in Algiers. For Operation Husky, at least, Fairbanks would watch from afar as what he called his "diversion baby" went into action.

BJU-1's first mission was to convince German defenders an invasion in western Sicily was at hand, keeping them away from Husky's southwestern and southeastern landing beaches, where the real invasion was set to begin on July 10.

With the BJs facing unknowable hazards in vulnerable craft, navy brass predicted huge losses. Accordingly, each man received a crate to stow all their personal effects for their next of kin.

BJU-1 craft sortied from Pantelleria, a newly captured island midway between Ferryville and Sicily. Their opening foray was a diversion off Sicily's western coast, but mountainous seas forced them to abort it.

The next day's foray went better: one ASR generated smoke, an escorting PT boat laid down cover fire, and four other crash boats paralleled the Cape San Marco beachfront. As Burris-Meyer's sound equipment blared a cacophony of simulated invasion noises, a six-inch German gun began firing shells just over their heads.

"Two searchlights came out, one opposite my boat," Rainie recalled, "so I loaded a Garand [M1 rifle] and shot it out."

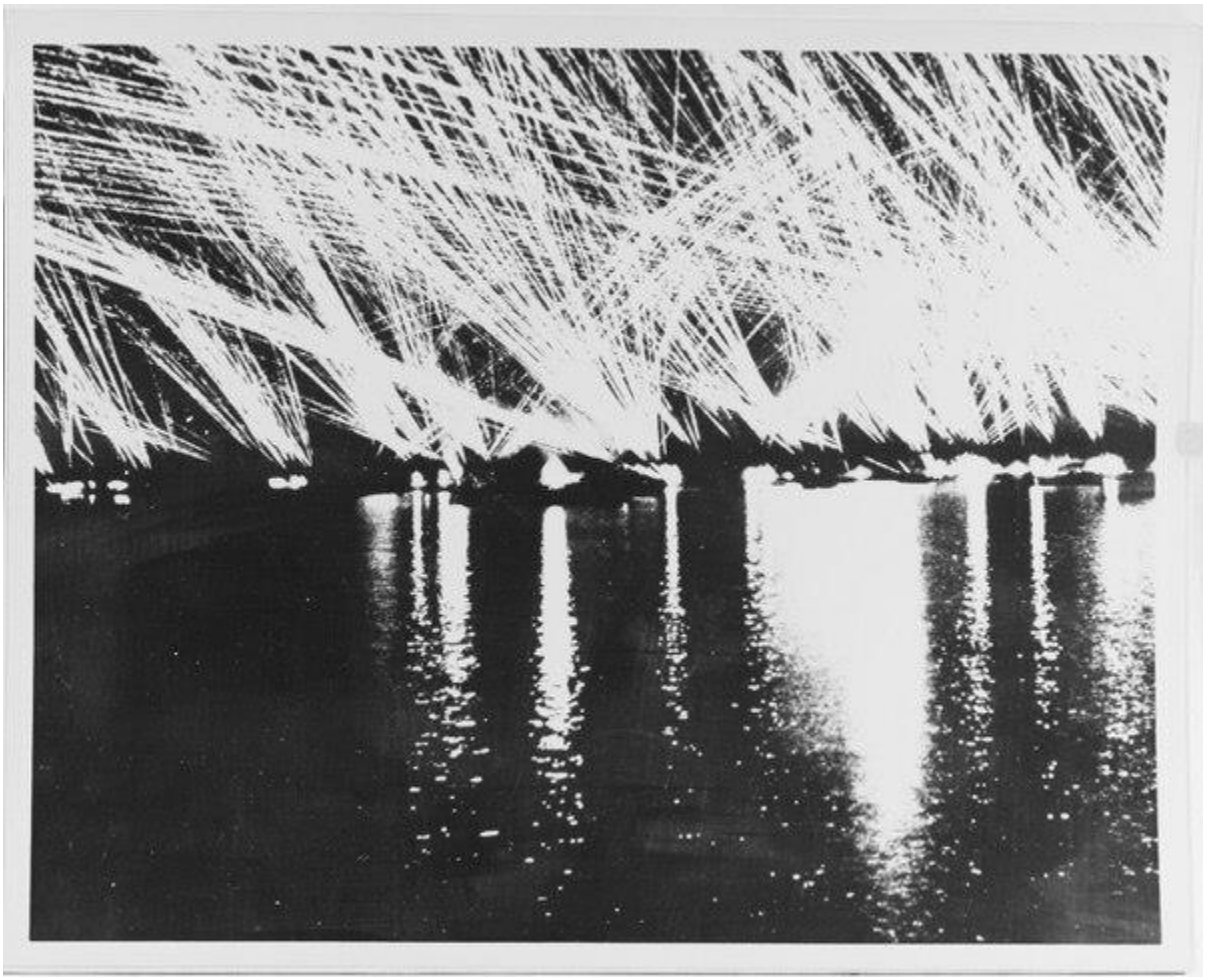
When ordered to withdraw, ASR crews secured their sound gear, sped beachward, fired guns and rockets, pivoted, and then retreated — leaving enemy confusion in their wakes.

The Beach Jumpers returned triumphant to Pantelleria, but their Husky labors were not over. When Fairbanks, stationed on board Hewitt's flagship, learned that a British aerial bombing diversion had been postponed, he persuaded Hewitt to substitute a nighttime BJ diversion using all available craft.

The next day 11 ASRs and eight PT boats, split into groups Able and Charlie, staged sequential coastal diversions between Mazara del Vallo and Granitola, farther up Sicily's western coast.

Group Charlie struck just as the moon went down, one of its PT boats dashing ahead to fire guns, launch rockets, and lay smoke. The group's subsequent display of sound, balloons, pyrotechnics, radar-jamming, and fake radio chatter promptly stirred a hornet's nest of enemy searchlights, artillery, and heavy machine-gun fire. Charlie's ASRs and PT boats escaped the fusillade, but Able's nearly didn't. Before they could even begin, shore batteries had opened up with heavy, accurate radar-controlled fire.

Fortunately for Group Able there were no personnel casualties — no need to send the "next of kin" crates.



Anti-aircraft fire, Bizerte Harbor, mid -1943. (U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

Despite glitches, BJU-1 performed impressively. An entire German reserve division stationed in the west froze in place as the true Husky invaders secured beachheads well to

the south and east. In recognition, Vice Adm. Hewitt elevated Fairbanks to special operations officer, now directly responsible for all BJ operations.

His frontline swashbuckling was about to begin.

Fairbanks's responsibilities took a new tack for Operation Avalanche, the Sept. 9, 1943, invasion of Salerno on Italy's southwestern coast.

Assigned to an expanded task group that included American destroyer *Knight*, the Dutch gunboat *Flores*, four American sub chasers and 20 American and British PT boats, his Beach Jumpers were to capture the lightly defended but vital islands controlling seaward approaches to the Gulf of Gaeta and Bay of Naples.

Fifty paratroopers from the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division, on board one of the task group vessels, would reinforce the Beach Jumpers.

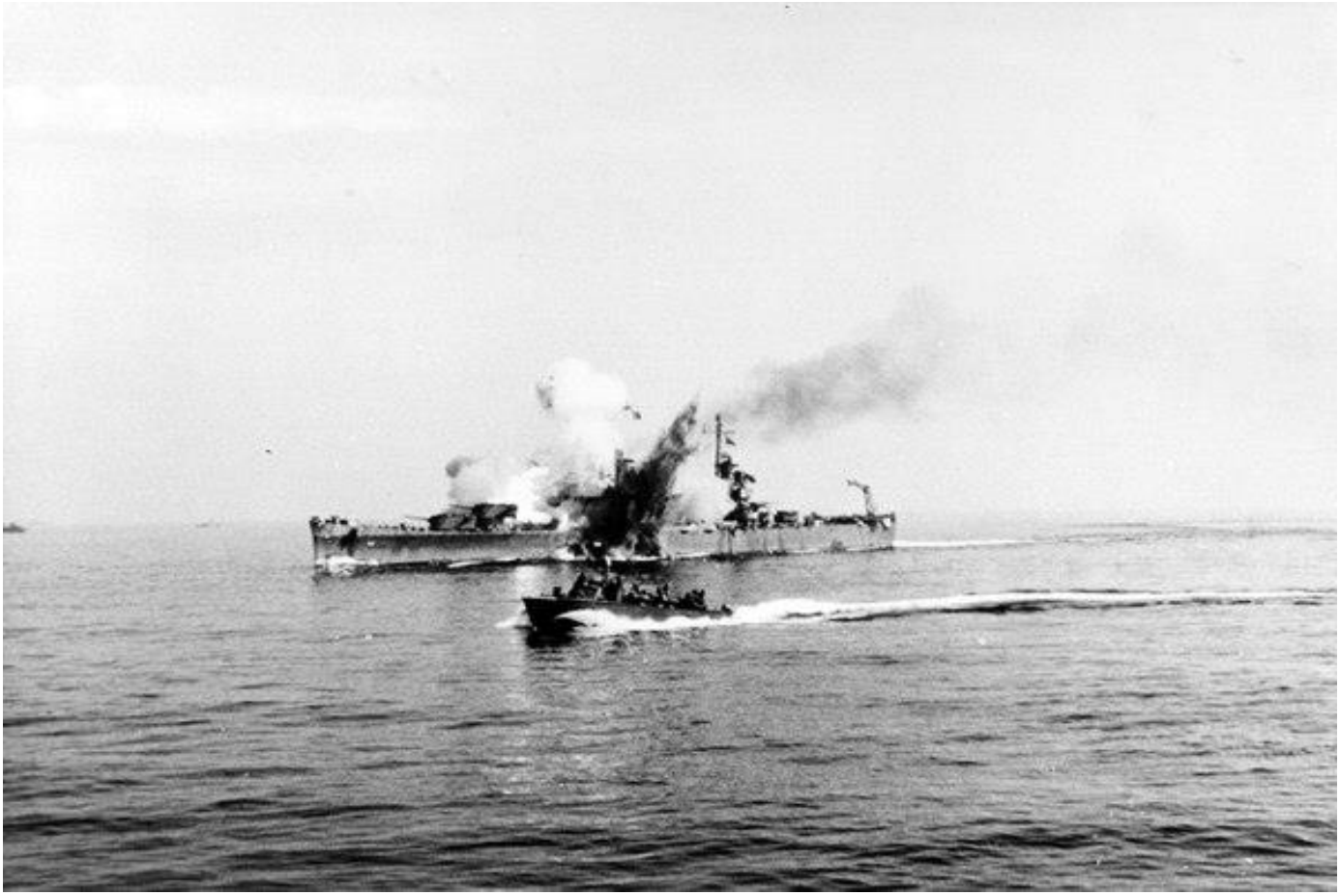
During a Sept. 7 briefing in Palermo, Sicily, Fairbanks promised participants — including several OSS intelligence agents and novelist-turned-war correspondent John Steinbeck — "a real game of pirates…capturing islands, starting with Ventotene."

On the eve of the main Avalanche landings, the task group, enveloped by smoke screen, approached Ventotene Island, 180 miles north of Palermo. From the decks of *Knight*, speakers blared a warning in Italian: surrender or face devastating shelling and massive invasion. Tension mounted until white flares — the surrender acknowledgment signal — finally arced across the sky.

Then, as Fairbanks led a Tommy gun–toting landing party into Ventotene Harbor on board a lone ASR, things escalated. Ventotene's 50 Italian militiamen readily surrendered, but 90 Germans fled inland to dig in for a final stand.

Fairbanks and the OSS agents accompanying him improvised a plan: The 50 paratroopers would come ashore, the agents would then deliver an ultimatum to the dug-in Germans, while Fairbanks returned to *Knight* bearing instructions to lob five-inch salvos.

The bluff worked. Awed by the token bombardment and cowed by the paratroopers — a "hard, ragged and trigger-happy crew" according to Steinbeck — the Germans surrendered.



The light cruiser Savannah is hit by a German radio-controlled bomb, while supporting Allied forces ashore during the Salerno operation, 11 September 1943. The bomb hit the top of the ship's number three 6/47 gun turret and penetrated deep into her hull before exploding. The photograph shows the explosion venting through the top of the turret and also through Savannah's hull below the waterline. A motor torpedo boat passes by in the foreground. (Courtesy of the Naval Historical Foundation, Adm. H. Kent Hewett, now in the collections of U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

While Ventotene proved the most harrowing of the BJs' "invasions," it was not the last.

Other largely bloodless conquests included the Pontine Islands (30 miles northwest of Ventotene), plus five islands nearer to Naples, including idyllic Capri. By the time the task group finally dissolved, on Sept. 18, 1943, Fairbanks and his BJs had displayed valor and versatility.

They had been fortunate as well: Aside from incidental boat damage, a few minor shrapnel wounds, and one lamentable suicide, BJU-1 escaped Husky and Avalanche largely unscathed.

BJU-1 remained in Capri until November, then rotated stateside for leave and refit. Burris-Meyer came back separately to Washington, DC, taking up chief instructor duties for what he jocularly called the "Young Ladies Seminary" course, instructing senior officers in how to infuse deception into their combat operations.

For his part, Fairbanks, then a lieutenant commander, returned to Algiers. In mid-September he briefly accompanied BJU-4, newly dispatched from the States, as it supported anti-Nazi partisans of Yugoslav leader Marshal Tito in the Adriatic Sea.

Late that year, Fairbanks devised deception plans for the January 1944 invasion of Anzio, Operation Shingle, which would become the longest and bloodiest battle of the Italian Campaign.

The BJs themselves didn't carry out the deceptions, though, and received "more credit," Fairbanks admitted, "than we actually deserved."

In spring 1944, as he shifted Beach Jumper headquarters to Naples, Fairbanks got wind of deception planning for the upcoming cross-Channel D-Day invasion of France.

"I could easily guess that we in the Mediterranean were to be…part of the smaller part of two invasions of France — one from the U.K. and one from the south," he remembered.

Now seasoned veterans of Allied invasions, Fairbanks and his Beach Jumpers anticipated their biggest challenge.

The heavy cruiser Quincy fires its forward 8/55 guns off Toulon, France, while supporting the invasion, 16 August 1944. Note smoke screen laid by the ship next ahead to prevent accurate counter-fire by German coastal artillery. (National Archives)

Operation Dragoon, the Aug. 15, 1944, American/Free-French invasion of southern France, aimed to relieve pressure on Operation Overlord's forces in the north while securing port facilities in the south.

The BJs' job was to convince the enemy that landings could come anywhere from Marseille, France, to Genoa, Italy.

Beach Jumper manpower there combined BJU-1, back for a second tour, along with units 3 and 4 — altogether 70 officers and 400 sailors. The 40-ship task group to which they were assigned was split in two: half for western diversions, half for eastern diversions.

"Our job was radio deception," recalled BJU-1's Bob Rainie, back himself for a second tour.

He and fellow radiomen installed voice radios on two western diversion PT boats. Using transmission scripts Fairbanks had written, they were to convince the enemy that destroyer *Endicott*, the task group flagship, was actually an amphibious command ship controlling a dozen troop-laden transports.

The day before the Dragoon invasion, Fairbanks, stationed on board British gunboat *Aphis*, led diversions against eastern coast targets between Genoa and Cannes. Four of his PT boats simultaneously landed Free-French commandos at Deux Frères, a coastal promontory near Cannes. At 2 a.m., with the commandos ashore, Fairbanks's flotilla swung west to join the other diversion team.

Western diversion ships, meanwhile, had used radio and radar countermeasures gear to simulate an eight-by-10-mile assault convoy.

On board a PT boat, Rainie poured out "all kinds of commands and other information by voice."

The imitation convoy maneuvered as if to invade Marseille, then veered east toward Toulon. A little after 3 a.m. the day of the invasion, as Dragoon's main forces splashed ashore between Nice and Saint-Tropez, western diversion ASRs charged toward La Ciotat Bay, midway between Marseille and Toulon — only to become disoriented in heavy fog.

Arthur Henoch, a 19-year-old sailor riding one of the ASRs, captured the chaos in a hastily scribbled contemporaneous diary entry: "D Day 0200-0500 Lost in fog in Bay of Ciotat. Tried to form waves [orderly formations] for action, gave up at 0500."

Four decades later, Henoch visited the small town of La Ciotat with his son Gary.

"It was a clear day," Gary recalled of the visit he made with his father, who died in 2016. "[From a pier] he looked to the west where the Germans fired on them. He always remembered seeing tracers cutting through the fog. They'd run too far into the bay. It shook him a little bit just how close they'd been."

Through the rest of Aug. 15, as western diversions' personnel sorted out missteps and eastern diversions' personnel absorbed news that half the French commandos on Deux Frères had died after stumbling into a minefield, BJs geared up to return to La Ciotat Bay.

The destroyer Endicott sinking the German corvette Nimet Allah on 17 August 1944. A large splash or explosion can be faintly seen in the left center. Helmets on watching men indicate that this photograph may have been taken from a British ship, perhaps the gunboat Aphis or Scarab. (Courtesy of Rear Adm. John D. Bulkeley, now in the collections of U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command)

Early the next day, as *Aphis* and sister gunboat *Scarab* lobbed six-inch shells at pre-selected targets, PT boats and ASRs from both diversion groups sped into the bay, laying smoke, launching rockets, blazing away with 40- and 20mm gunfire, and sowing delayed TNT charges.

According to Fairbanks, “The whole area lit up…[as] star shells roared in the sky…Searchlights flashed along the coast…[inbound] 20- and 40mm shells flew in all directions…followed by huge flashes from 88-, 105-, and 240mm near misses.”

The Beach Jumper craft fled seaward unscathed, only to confront an unanticipated threat: two high-speed German corvettes boasting rapid-fire, radar-controlled main batteries. Fairbanks frantically radioed *Endicott* for aid and then ordered *Aphis* and *Scarab* to turn and engage.

“Our returning shots were wide…but we pressed on,” he wrote.

At best, *Aphis* and *Scarab* could make 12 knots — the Germans nearly twice that speed.

Still worse, *Aphis*'s gunnery officer reported that its overheated six-inchers needed to pause fire. Astern, *Scarab* spotted four-inch enemy rounds splashing close-by. One by one, radars, radios, and compasses on both gunboats failed.

Fairbanks signaled nearby smaller craft to lay smoke, allowing the bigger and speedier ASRs to flee.

With the situation desperate, BJ luck unexpectedly returned.

Maneuvering in a column as they knifed through a gap in the smoke, *Aphis* and *Scarab*, according to Fairbanks, "by the purest chance performed the classical maneuver of 'crossing the enemy's T,'" thereby allowing the gunboats to mass superior firepower on the vulnerable enemy corvettes.

"With our very first salvo…we made a direct hit."

Then, as their opponent slowed and listed, "*Endicott* came pounding in, her 5-inch guns blazing."

The destroyer's salvos exploded the second corvette and finished off the first, forcing German crews into the water.

What began as a diversionary mission and devolved into a surface action, finished as a rescue.

Reported Rainie: "I spent from 9:00 am 'til noon on the bow [of his PT] with a heaving line pulling in German survivors."

With Allied troops now firmly ashore across Europe, Dragoon proved a fitting swan song to BJ operations there.

Many veterans of BJU-1 were assigned to other units. Rainie went on to serve in the Pacific as a radio watch supervisor on an amphibious assault command ship.

Lt. Cmdr. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., making a radio broadcast, circa February 1945. (National Archives)

Fairbanks became a staff officer for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington, DC. While he played no swashbuckling Beach Jumper part in the Pacific, he did have an unexpected role there.

His father, during the silent movie heyday, had traveled to the Far East, befriending Japanese royalty and meeting Empress Teimei and her son, then-Crown Prince Hirohito. Fairbanks Sr. even gave young Hirohito a pony that once belonged to Fairbanks Jr.

Based on these connections, Fairbanks Jr. concocted an elaborate diplomatic scenario whereby the dowager empress would influence her son to end the bloodshed.

The scheme never gained traction, but language Douglas Fairbanks Jr. had drafted for it became part of the preamble to the July 26, 1945, Potsdam Declaration — the historic document outlining Allied terms for Japan's surrender.

With that contribution, Fairbanks closed the curtain on wartime derring-do, returned to Hollywood, and resumed his celluloid career.

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