

DESPITE the success of D-Day, we must never forget its horrors. Eyewitness accounts leave us in no doubt about quite how brutal June 6, 1944 was for so many.

Marine Edward “Tommy” Treacher, of 45 Commando, gave a vivid description of just how dangerous it was arriving on one of the five Normandy beaches.

“We was [sic] 400 yards from shore and there was a crash on our boat and a shell had landed amongst all the chaps waiting to get off,” he said. “They were lying there, they were wounded, they were dead – as a matter of fact we had 23 casualties on our boat, 11 dead and 12 wounded.

“As we were getting closer, the matelots [seamen] were ready to push the ramps down and there was blood everywhere – there’s no doubt about it, it was thick – and when the Navy blokes was going to push the ramps down another shell hit us and it killed all four. As a matter of fact, they were decapitated.”

An officer and three sergeants took the place of the four dead men and pushed down the ramps, which were badly twisted from the explo-

‘They had lipstick put on their faces, M for morphine’

sion. Treacher said: “God, it was a state. We had to walk through this blood on the deck and it was really running, it was terrible, and as I was going to get off the boat I spoke to one of my friends and I said, ‘How are you, Jasper?’ And he says, ‘How am I, Tom? How am I? I reckon I have broken both my legs.’”

Pte Lionel Roebuck of the 2nd Battalion, East Yorkshire Regiment, described horrific scenes, too.

“Each side of us there were wrecked boats, sometimes side on, sometimes upside down. There were bodies facing face down in the sea. There were men halfway up the beach who were in really peculiar positions, legs all over the place, really grotesque positions, and there were shells landing all around us in the sea and on the beach.”

As thousands of men ran up the beaches, Pte William Lloyd, also from the 2nd Battalion, said “bullets just came at you like raindrops. You could hear them whistling and passing you and hitting the ground near you but you kept going on.”

A lack of leadership was an issue too, particularly for regiments that had lost their senior officers in bat-

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By Lord Ashcroft
Businessman, philanthropist, and author

tle. Sgt Arthur Thompson, from the same battalion, said: “We lost our company commander and quite a number of officers on the beach.

“The company commander called an O group to arrange what we were going to do and they got killed. They’d formed a circle or something and I think a shell or mortar dropped in amongst them.

“After that we’d only some young lieutenants and we’d got to take hold of their hands and take them on with us because they had no idea, you see. It was one of the

times where you’ve got to have someone who can do things without getting excited or flustered.”

Another of the 155,000 Allied servicemen who took part was my father Eric Ashcroft, then a young lieutenant with the 1st Battalion, South Lancashire Regiment.

He was wounded as he raced up

Sword Beach into murderous enemy fire. “About two-thirds to the high water mark I was knocked sideways when, so it would appear now, an 88mm splinter struck my right arm,” he recalled.

“I was moving across the beach fairly fast and I didn’t think anything about it. I just kept moving. I

remember, when we were [sheltering] in the sand dunes, I was looking down and saw a procession of ants and thought, ‘Goodness me, they’re not affected by the war.’ These silly thoughts you get.”

It was at this point that his commanding officer was shot dead next to him. “Colonel [Richard] Burbury was about 2ft away from me and the next thing I knew he rolled to his side and was shot in the chest.”

One of my father’s many qualities was modesty: he failed to highlight in his interview that he kept

on fighting for a long time after being wounded. It was only when he was ordered off the battlefield that he had his injuries treated.

“I was sent back to the field dressing station and it was at that stage that I saw many of the wounded on the beach area. I saw officers that had been blinded, walking wounded, stretcher cases and all the documentation was going on. Labels, tags.

“Ones they were giving morphine had lipstick put on their foreheads, I seem to remember: a capi-

tal M. The documentation went on meticulously by the Royal Army Medical Corps.

“Towards nightfall we were collected by a Royal Army Service Corps DUKW vehicle, incredible

Smell

vehicles which go on land and swim on water. Just about dusk we entered a fairly rough sea, we inflated our life jackets and we swam – that’s the word used for the propelling of these vehicles – out to

a Landing Ship Tank (LST) and this ship lowered its ramp and we went inside into brilliant light.

“The whole area was like entering a great hall. Around the sides were bunks and towards the end were green tents with lights in. They were the mobile operating theatres. And you could still smell the oil from the tanks.

“There must have been about 300 people on this LST and the ones that were able were given a higher bunk and the ones that found it difficult were given a lower

bunk. It was a hospital ship, really, and they were able to carry out quite sophisticated treatments right from [leaving] the beaches.”

Just over 4,400 Allied troops were killed on D-Day alone and just over 5,000 were wounded.

But it was far less than the Allied command had feared. My father once told me that he and his CO, had been briefed to expect 75% casualties – dead and wounded.

It was only a decade ago, several years after my father’s death, that I discovered he’d been tape-recorded giving his recollections to the Imperial War Museum. As I listened for the first time, tears rolled down my cheeks. It brought home how small the margin can be between life and death. If the sniper’s bullet that killed Colonel Burbury had been just 2ft to one side, my father’s life would have been over, aged just 27, and I would never have been born.

His recollections of D-Day and those of others give us a valuable record of events that day. My father was one of the lucky ones: he recovered fully from his injuries and went on to enjoy a satisfying career as a colonial officer. He died in February 2002, a month before his 85th birthday.

He is the person most responsible for my life-long interest in bravery that has seen me build up the

world’s largest collection of Victoria Crosses: more than 200. It has also seen me write seven books in my “Heroes” series and lecture widely.

Of course, I have no monopoly on being proud of a close relative’s part in the D-Day landings. And the 80th anniversary is an entirely appropriate date to remember those who lost their lives or were wounded while playing a key part

‘As I listened to him, tears rolled down my cheeks’

in changing the course of the Second World War.

The success of the Allied servicemen marked the beginning of the end for Nazi Germany. Tomorrow we will remember their commitment, bravery and sacrifice.

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com or follow him on X/Facebook @ LordAshcroft. Detailed descriptions of the landings can be found in the book *Forgotten Voices of D-Day* by Roderick Bailey

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Iconic...replica aircraft will take part in commemorations

Spitfire joins veterans on voyage

A FERRY taking D-Day veterans to France was also carrying a Spitfire on its car deck for the 80th anniversary commemorations in Normandy.

The iconic aircraft was loaded on to the Brittany Ferries ship Mont St Michel at Portsmouth and arrived at Caen where it was to be reassembled.

A specially designed trailer was used for the fighter, which had been separated into a fuselage section, with its landing wheels down, alongside its famous elliptical wings.

The aircraft nicknamed “Lucy” is a highly detailed non-flying replica of a

By Robert Kellaway

Spitfire Mark IX and will form a static display overseen by volunteers from the Spitfire Display Team in Blackpool.

The ship crossed the Channel accompanied by Royal Navy patrol vessels Trumpeter, Medusa and Basher, minehunter HMS Cattistock and Training Ship Royalist.

The Jedburgh Pipe Band played the ferry out of the harbour and a Royal Air Force flypast circled overhead as members of the public gathered to wave off a group of 31 D-Day veterans

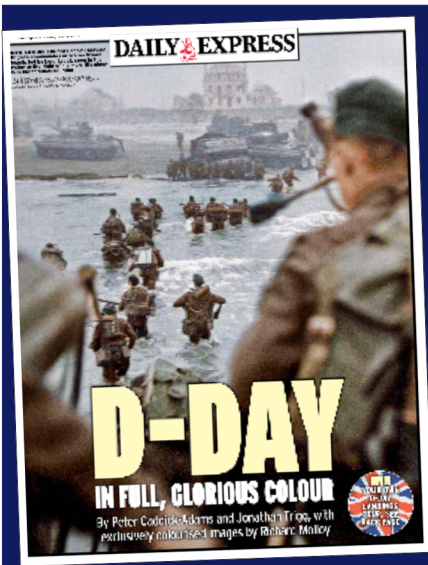
as they crossed the Channel. The Ministry of Defence said: “The veterans, travelling with The Spirit of Normandy Trust and the Royal British Legion, will carry with them a commemorative torch from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which will form the centrepiece of the vigil at Bayeux War Cemetery on June 5.”

A young person passed it to a veteran before they boarded the ferry. At 1300 (ship’s time), a wreath-laying took place on the ferry to remember those who never made it to shore.



Vivid memories
...Eric Ashcroft during the war and, below, his son on the beach where he landed

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