

Pictures: JONATHAN BUCKMASTER

‘These are extraordinary people, they must be helped’

EXCLUSIVE
By **Jon King** and **Martyn Brown**

THE Daily Express stands with veterans today in urging Sir Keir Starmer not to abandon the few Second World War heroes left but to pay for them to honour lost comrades.

Our plea to the Prime Minister comes after funds from an earlier Government scheme dried up. The old soldiers fear they might miss events this summer – the 80th anniversary of VE Day falls on May 8.

D-Day veteran Ken Cooke is among those backing the Respect Our War Heroes crusade. The 99-year-old, who was seriously wounded in the Normandy landings, said it is a “very emotional experience” to visit the last resting place of friends who “didn’t come home”. Falklands hero Simon Weston, *below*, said simply: “These are extraordinary people, they must be helped.”

During commemorations to mark 80 years since D-Day last year, Sir Keir said its veterans “represent the very best of us”.

Campaigners say that the PM would need to find just “tens of thousands of pounds” to help the heroes, most aged 98 or 99, travel to France and the Netherlands for memorial events this summer.

Former Veterans Minister Johnny Mercer also backed the campaign. The ex-Tory MP, who served four tours in Afghanistan, declared: “For as long as these heroes from WW2 are around, the Government should be contributing what in context for the Government is a paltry sum to ensure these veterans can attend commemorations for as long as they wish.”

The previous scheme was set up to help veterans travel to the Continent to attend commemoration events.

Former Tory Chancellor George Osborne said in 2014 that money from fines paid by banks following the Libor interest rate scandal would help support British veterans. The D-Day Revisited charity ran a system on behalf of the Treasury which saw it financially help veterans of campaigns in France, Italy and the Netherlands. It was due to cover events up to



and including the 75th anniversary of D-Day in June 2019, but was extended to 2020 and again to 2024 after the pandemic.

Veterans and aid groups were invited to apply for Libor cash. Individual applications were usually limited to a veteran plus a relative or carer. Successful bids received £1,000 per person, but the money ran out after last year’s 80th anniversary of D-Day.

Dick Goodwin, vice president of the Taxi Charity for Military Veterans,

said his group is hoping to take 12 to 15 veterans to Europe for this year’s D-Day events and this could cost £50,000 to £80,000 depending on how many are able to go.

He urged the Government: “Please consider funding these remaining veterans to get them to the theatres of war they fought in. The Libor money has made a real difference in the past.”

Mr Cooke, just 18 when he hit Gold Beach in D-Day’s second wave of soldiers, is a special guest on the forthcoming Express/Leger Battlefield Tours VE Day coach tour.

He said it is important that veterans can still revisit the sites where comrades fell: “It’s a very emotional experience...because we’re

going to see our friends who didn’t come home. We go to revive some memories and visit different cemeteries.

“I shall never forget [D-Day]. For me as an 18-year-old it was like being a boy scout. I had never seen a ship before or a beach. Everything was brand new. Once you see it you never forget.”

His son Stephen said: “We’re very grateful that Leger is funding the cost of our trip. But I think there will be other veterans who were relying on the Libor money. I understand the Government needs to cut spending, but this year marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the war.”

Richard Palusinski is chairman of the



D-Day warriors...from the left, Reginald Pye (died in February), Alec Penstone, Jack Quinn (died in January 2024), Richard Aldred, Henry Rice, Stan Ford and Ken Hay at Sword Beach in 2023



In step...veteran Ken Cooke marches in a D-Day 75th memorial event in June 2019 at Arromanches

All UK children invited to send letters to heroes

EVERY child in Britain is being invited to “connect” to a war veteran ahead of the VE Day 80th anniversary.

The new initiative – called VE Mail – will involve youngsters exchanging letters with veterans in the lead-up to the event in May.

Schools and youth organisations, including the Scouts and Girl Guides, can sign up to request a personal note which details wartime experiences and what victory means 80 years on.

Children will be able to write back to share their gratitude and say why the sacrifices made still matter today.

War veteran Tom Jones said: “The victory meant the world to us at the time – but the values are as relevant today as they were then.

“With fewer surviving veterans still with us, we hope VE Mail will be a

By **Stephen Beech**

major opportunity to pass the baton of memory and of meaning to the next generation.” TV star Dame Joanna Lumley, whose father served in the Second World War, backs the initiative.

The actress, *inset*, said: “This is simply a beautiful idea. This might be one of our last opportunities for our youngest generation to hear first-hand from surviving veterans.”

Chief Scout Dwayne Fields said: “It’s vital that our young people understand and appreciate the sacrifices made for the freedoms we

enjoy today. The VE Mail campaign serves as a powerful testament to that commitment.

“This is truly an inter-generational learning opportunity and I would love to see all communities across the UK to get involved.”

Brendan Cox, co-founder of the Together Coalition which has organised the project with the support of Royal Mail, added: “VE Mail gives the opportunity for the next generation to hear from the greatest generation in their own words and while they are still with us. We hope millions of schoolchildren will take the chance to join in.”



DAILY EXPRESS VOTE Is it the Government’s duty to help all WW2 veterans who wish to attend commemorations?



YES: 0901 133 4440
NO: 0901 133 4441

Calls cost 50p plus network access charge.

Yes text DXYES to 63333
No text DXNO to 63333

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Spirit of Normandy Trust which has taken veterans to D-Day commemorations in France for 30 years.

He said: “The Libor funding was a helpful sum of money. We believe veterans have paid

the price so we refuse to charge them for going back to Normandy.

“These trips cost a significant amount of money. We pay for travel and accommodation and take a full medical team with us.

For the veterans this is their opportunity to go back to Normandy and remember their old comrades. While they are fit enough and able enough to make the trip it is beholden upon us to enable them to do so.”

He said the trips have become increasingly complex as Second World War veterans have aged. Many are centenarians and no longer physically capable of travelling by coach.

Shadow Defence Secretary James Cartledge said: “It’s absolutely vital that veterans are able to properly participate in these important events.

“The passing of our last Battle of Britain pilot is a reminder of the extraordinary sacrifice previous generations made. In

Government, we made Britain the best place in the world to be a veteran. The Government must continue this. I will be asking questions in Parliament to make sure the Government are working closely with charities so they are fully honouring our veterans.”

The Government said it “has major plans to mark the 80th anniversary of VE Day in May...with a military procession in central London, a service at Westminster Abbey and a spectacular concert. Veterans will be at the heart of the VE Day anniversary commemorations and the Government is supporting community events across the country”.

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COMMENT

LORD ASHCROFT

Philanthropist and businessman



AS a champion of bravery and as a collector of gallantry medals, I believe it’s important to honour our war dead. We must always remember those who have given their lives for their country, for their monarch, for their comrades and for wider freedoms.

However, I also believe it is vital that our surviving war veterans are given the chance to attend major commemorative events whatever their motivation for doing so.

Such men, and women, may want to pay their respects to lost comrades or they may want to enjoy a day in the spotlight at which their service to their nation is recognised.

For many years now, fines from the Libor interest rate-fixing scandal have supported veterans, enabling them to attend significant events around key military dates, including visits to France for the June 6 D-Day anniversaries of the Normandy landings.

Now, sadly, this source of funding for welfare and travel has been exhausted, meaning some veterans who struggle to make ends meet will find it hard, or even impossible, to attend major events this year to mark the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

Defeated

This is because they cannot afford the necessary accommodation and travel costs involved in attending such commemorations – sometimes in the presence of relatives or carers who are needed because they are old and frail. It would be a tragedy if these brave men, and women, who have served their country so courageously in its hour of need were to be deprived of the opportunity of attending such events, including those planned in London for the 80th anniversary of V-Day on May 8. V-Day, or VE Day (Victory in Europe Day) as it is also known, marks the end of the fighting in Europe after Nazi Germany was finally defeated.

As an international businessman, I am fully aware that governments, like companies, eventually need to balance their books but I would appeal to our current Labour Government to find the necessary funding for veterans to be able to attend such significant events in 2025.

As a former treasurer and former deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, I am not trying to make any political points by making this request.

Honouring our war veterans, along with our war dead, should not be in any way a political statement – it’s much more important than that.

As a result of amassing the world’s largest collection of Victoria Crosses and writing seven books in the Heroes series on bravery, I have been privileged to meet hundreds of war veterans over the decades.

Typically, their courage and sense of duty are matched by a modesty and humility that I find deeply moving. It is these very people and many like them who deserve some financial help if it’s needed. It’s hard to imagine a more deserving cause.

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more information on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft

Vanessa's joy at 'nice little oasis' chat show

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THE EXPRESS CALLS FOR URGENT FUNDING SO VETERANS CAN ATTEND MEMORIALS

**BRITAIN
MUST NOT
ABANDON
OUR LAST
WW2 HEROES**



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