

Brave veterans still insist on coming to Normandy... just as they did eight decades ago

Lord Ashcroft's moving tribute to survivors and fallen from the D-Day landings



Emotional...Lord Ashcroft with veterans and King and Queen at last year's event



EXCLUSIVE By Lord Ashcroft

THE fact that there are still Second World War veterans who are determined to travel to northern France this week to mark the 81st anniversary of D-Day makes me feel proud and emotional in equal measures.

These are former service personnel, now aged each side of their 100th birthdays, who could so easily stay at home but, just as they did more than eight decades ago, they have displayed a humbling sense of resolve and determination in journeying to Normandy.

This is because, for the most part, they want to pay their respects and remember comrades who died or were seriously wounded on June 6, 1944, while taking part in the D-Day landings.

It's incredible to think that on the British Normandy Memorial, which was unveiled on June 6, 2021 by the King, there are the names of the 22,442 servicemen and women under British command who fell on D-Day and during the Battle of Normandy in the summer of 1944.

The memorial, which is situated on a hillside overlooking Gold Beach, finally brought together the names of these brave individuals from more than 30 countries who gave their lives.

Inevitably, because of their age, some of these veterans will be travelling to Normandy this week for the final time. Whether or not they are able to return in future, they will go home with treasured memories of their visit.

In truth, the mere mention of D-Day makes me feel a little proud and emotional for personal reasons. My late father, Eric Ashcroft, whom I loved and admired, was one of those who took part.

Then a young lieutenant with the South Lancashire Regiment, he and his fellow officers had been privately briefed to expect up to 75% casualties as the first landing craft arrived on the beaches. As part of Operation Neptune, within the wider context of



Pride...Lord Ashcroft with Eric, who took part in the landings, left

Operation Overlord, around 155,000 men came across the Channel to five beach areas, each given a codename. They reached their destination in assorted ships and craft, numbering upwards of 6,000 vessels.

My father had been designated to land at Sword Beach in the first wave at 7.30am. As the ramps of their landing craft dropped down and they raced up the beach, they encountered anti-tank, mortar, machine-gun and rifle fire from a German strongpoint.

My father later described his run up the beach in an interview recorded decades later for the Imperial War Museum. He said: "About two-thirds to high watermark, I was knocked sideways when, so it would appear now, an 88mm splinter struck my right arm."

Resting beneath a bank, he applied a field

bandage to his bloodied wound and crouched beside his Commanding Officer.

"Colonel [Richard] Burbury was about two feet away from me and the next thing I knew he rolled to his side and was shot in the chest," my father said.

Later in the day, after his battalion had achieved most of its objectives, my father was ordered from the battlefield to receive treatment for his wounds. He returned to Britain on a hospital ship and made a full recovery.

I credit my father with what has turned into my lifelong passion for bravery. Eric Ashcroft was a quiet, modest man but, when I was aged about 10, he recounted his wartime experiences to me for the first time.

It filled me with pride that my father had displayed such courage and had played a part, if only a small one, in such an historic event. Eventually, my passion for valour trans-

formed into an interest in gallantry medals. I purchased my first Victoria Cross in 1986.

Over the decades, I amassed the world's largest collection of VCs, currently more than 200, and a smaller collection of George Crosses. My pride and joy went on display at the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the IWM in 2010. At the IWM's request, I paid £5million to design and build the gallery to house the medals, along with other VCs and GCs belonging to, or loaned to, the IWM.

It was heartbreaking when I learnt from a third party earlier this year that the IWM had decided to close the gallery bearing my name. Living VC and GC recipients and many others have since expressed their anger that the gallery is to shut down after just 15 years.

Originally it was due to close on June 1 but I have now "persuaded" the IWM, with help from my legal team, that the gallery should remain open until the end of September.

I hope thousands of people will take advantage of this temporary reprieve to visit it and learn more about the men and women who I refer to as "the bravest of the brave".

Lucky

I will not be in Normandy this week due to other commitments but I have visited both Sword Beach and the British Normandy Memorial in recent years to pay my respects.

I will end where I began by paying tribute to the veterans who are travelling to Normandy this week. The importance of such a visit was described perfectly by George Batts, MBE, in an interview in 2021 when he visited the British Normandy Memorial for the first, and what was to be the last, time.

Mr Batts was an 18-year-old in the Royal Engineers when he took part in the D-Day landings and who died in 2022 aged 97.

He said: "We lucky ones, we got off [survived] but we left a lot of mates behind. And you never forget them. When you come back here, you see their faces. And, of course, they'll never be older. We still see them [at] 18, 19, 20 years old."

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