

D-DAY

80TH ANNIVERSARY

Soldier Stories

A collection of local and national stories from the
D-Day landings.



WITNEY
TOWN COUNCIL

“On one particularly bad day George pulled from his wallet a photo of the love of his life – the Ramsden 1st XI cricket team.”

For the 80th Anniversary of D-Day, we have gathered a few stories of local soldiers for reminiscing, re-living, and recollecting.

We hope you enjoy reading about their lives and the trials and tribulations surrounding the Second World War.



WITNEY
TOWN COUNCIL

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Grateful thanks to those who graciously donated their stories:

Harold Simpson & Will Moss - **Jeff Clements**

Patrick Churchill - **Frank Churchill**

John Reginald Howard & Captain Richard Todd - **Volunteers**

at the Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum

George Panting - **Rev. Dr. Brian Ford**

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- **Some stories have been abridged to ensure inclusion -**

William Richard Moss

The information and photographs are shared by the Trust with kind permission from the Moss Family and Jeff Clements, the author of 'Remembered - The Men On The War Memorials On Witney, Crawley and Hailey'. The history book includes information supplied by William's sister, Irene, and other family members. The passages below are taken directly from the publication (pages 100-102).

William 'Billy' Moss was born at 39 West End, Witney, On 27 January 1920, the sixth child of William, a 'blanket cleaner' at W. Smith and Co's, Crawley Mill, and his wife, Bessie (née Eeles).



In September 1932, he joined the 1st Witney Company of the Boys Brigade, remaining a member until 1934 when, aged 14, he left school.

Upon leaving school, Billy worked for James Walker and Sons Ltd at their blanket mill in the Crofts and within a short time his father, who had begun to find the journey to Crawley each day increasingly tiring, left his job and also obtained employment at Walker's where he remained until becoming ill. In March 1940, aged 16, he succumbed to cancer. It was not long after his father's funeral that Billy received his call-up papers.

Billy enlisted on 16 May, joining the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. But, following his basic training, on 21 June 1940 he was transferred to the Royal Warwickshire Regiment and posted to Northern Ireland along with the 182nd Infantry Brigade, part of the 61st Infantry Division.

By the summer of 1941, Billy was serving with the 182nd Brigade's Anti-Tank Company. In September of that year the 61st Infantry Division, in line with other infantry divisions, was required to form a dedicated reconnaissance battalion. This unit was to be raised from existing brigade anti-tank companies, although each man was required to pass tests to assess his suitability for the new role. Many failed and were returned to regular infantry battalions, but Billy was successful and become one of the first to join the newly formed 61st Regiment, Reconnaissance Corps. He remained in Northern Ireland and gained promotion to sergeant.

At the end of 1943, the 61st Regiment was detached from the 61st Division and sent back to England to join the 50th Division, recently returned from North Africa. By January 1944 the 61st Regiment were encamped at Shorncliffe, near Folkestone, but they did not stay long. The training was intense and every few weeks the unit was moved to a new location with the final move being in May 1944, when the 61st Regiment was sent to a tented camp in 'Nightingale Wood', close to Romsey, near Southampton.

Billy had a period of leave before the move, during which Irene remembered that her brother had a sense of foreboding regarding the forthcoming military operation. Before returning to his unit, he told his older brother, Walter, that he knew he wouldn't be coming back.

At dawn on 6 June 1944, the Allied invasion force began to fight its way ashore onto the beaches of Normandy. The priority for the 61st Regiment, coming ashore on Gold Beach that morning, was to land contact patrols to support the assaulting battalions. The light Reconnaissance Cars and jeeps of 'A' and 'C' Squadrons were the first vehicles ashore but were vulnerable to enemy fire. Over half the crews were killed or wounded on the beach or in trying to reach it. The problem of landing men and machines was compounded by the uneven sea bed, churned up by shell fire and littered with hidden craters.

It is understood by his family that as Billy Moss left his landing craft he fell into the sea, possibly into one of these areas of deeper water. Out of his depth and weighed down with his equipment and a radio set, he drowned.

Billy Moss is buried in Bayeux War Cemetery.

Lance Corporal Harold Simpson

(Abridged)



Harold 'Dick' Simpson, was born at 20 Station Lane, Witney, on 31st March 1918, the youngest son of John, and his second wife Nora.

Dick attended St. Mary's Church School and later Batt School. He joined the 1st Witney Company Boys Brigade and played cricket for the Witney Swifts. On leaving school Dick worked for local blanket manufacturer, Charles Early & Co. and then for the Swan Laundry in Corn Street.

In the autumn of 1939, following the outbreak of war, Dick volunteered for service with the Royal Marines and was later selected for No.48 Royal Marine (RM) Commando. Early in 1944 they underwent rapid specialist training ahead of D-Day. Many men failed to qualify but Dick completed the course and earned his green beret.

On the eve of 'D Day', the marines boarded the six landing craft that would take them across the Channel to Normandy. Their objective was to support Canadian assault troops, on Juno beach, an area code named 'Nan Red'.

As dawn broke on the 6th June the marines put on their equipment and camouflaged their hands and faces. The Canadian's went ashore at 08.05hrs and immediately came under attack. Casualties were heavy and the area remained just as deadly some thirty-five minutes later when 48 RM Commando arrived.

The six landing craft approached 'Nan Red' at full speed, only slowing down as they neared the beach, for fear of striking hidden obstacles. The craft came under intense enemy fire and one of the landing craft suffered a direct hit amidships. Several of them struck underwater menaces, two were 'grounded' in relatively deep water and many of the men were drowned whilst trying to get to the beach. Nevertheless, as more of them gradually made it safely ashore, those remaining were able to press home their attack and force a way off the beach.

Lance Corporal Dick Simpson was one of the early casualties of the landing on Juno. Mortally wounded before he could leave his landing craft, he died at sea and his body was returned to Southampton where he was buried.

His mother wanted her son returned home and made the necessary arrangements for Dick to be re-interred at Tower Hill Cemetery in Witney. The inscription on his Commonwealth War Grave Commission headstone reads very simply, "SO HE GAVE HIS BELOVED LIFE. TO THE WORLD A MARINE, TO US THE WORLD".



George Panting



George's story as recounted by his friend Rev. Dr. Brian Ford.

George Panting joined up early at between 18 and 20 years old. He was a member of the Ox and Bucks Airborne Division for the D Day landings and trained to fly in aboard Horsa gliders. He was sent in one of these into France to gain a foothold for D Day. He was also flown in by Horsa for the Crossing of the Rhine.

Throughout one of the assaults in France it poured with rain and George and his fellow soldiers spent a lot of time in wet dug outs during some very bleak weather and their morale was very low.

On one particularly bad day George pulled from his wallet a photo of the love of his life – the Ramsden 1st XI cricket team! Apparently, this lifted his spirits and gave him the will to fight on so he could return home, which thankfully he did.

Back in Ramsden he served as Parish Clerk for 25 years and formed and build up the Royal British Legion branch there. George was a popular figure in his village, known for being 'chirpy' and enjoying a pint.

Major John Reginald Howard

DSO Croix de Guerre



Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (Extracted from 1999 RGJ Chronicle)

John Howard was born in Camden Town on December 8 1912, the eldest of nine children. As the eldest child, John had to give up some of his time to looking after the younger members of his family. Although he won a scholarship which would have taken him on to further education, he had to leave school at 14 to work as a stockbroker's runner, but he continued his education by attending evening classes until the firm collapsed in 1931.

As jobs were hard to find, he then enlisted in the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, where he was successful at swimming, boxing and cross-country running, and rose to the rank of sergeant.

At the end of his military engagement in 1938 he joined the City of Oxford police, but in 1939 he was recalled to the KSLI, was promoted rapidly and became Regimental Sergeant Major.

He was then selected for officer training, and after OCTU, was commissioned into the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry in 1940. He chose that regiment because he had enjoyed his time in Oxford.

When the War Office announced that the Second Battalion of the Oxford and Bucks was to be converted to a gliderborne unit, he volunteered, although it meant dropping a rank from captain to lieutenant. However, he was soon promoted to major in command of D company, the company assigned to capture the Benouville bridges.

At six minutes past midnight, Howard and his men landed silently 50 yards away from the canal bridge just outside the small hamlet of Benouville near Caen.

On arriving at the bridge they took a German pillbox by surprise; the two sentries later told him they had been paralysed with fear when they saw the blackened faces and guns of the assault force. Within 10 minutes both bridges had been captured.

They then held the bridges, until joined by men from the 7th Parachute Battalion of the 5th Parachute Brigade. They were relieved at 11.30pm on June 6 by men from 3rd Infantry Division, who had landed on the beaches.

Howard then moved his men to join his Battalion to take part in the fighting around Escoville, where a sniper's bullet went through his helmet but only grazed his skull.

Two months after that mission, when on leave in England, Howard was badly injured when the jeep he was driving was hit by a queue-jumping truck approaching an American convoy. His right hip and both his legs were smashed, and he was invalided out of the Army.

In 1962, Howard's role in the war was made famous in the film 'The Longest Day', in which he was portrayed by the actor Richard Todd.

Major John Howard died on 5 May 1999, aged 86.



CAPTAIN RICHARD TODD OBE

(Extracted from the 2009 Rifles Chronicle)

Richard Andrew Palethorpe-Todd, British film and stage actor, was born in Dublin on 11 June 1919 into an Anglo-Irish family.

Against his mother's wishes, he opted for a career in the theatre, first appearing in *Twelfth Night* in London in 1936.

On stage in Dundee the day war was declared, he took the train over the Tay Bridge to St Andrews University. He passed his English undergraduate with a Cert A from his School Cadet Corps.

Clearly officer material, he was accepted for Sandhurst. Narrowly surviving an air raid, he was commissioned in the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in 1941. He joined the 2nd/4th KOYLI, part of Montgomery's XII Corps, defending Kent against German invasion.

In December 1941, he was sent to Iceland with 1/4th KOYLI to be trained in arctic and mountain warfare.

Back in England in September 1942, Todd attended a two-month Signals Officer course at Catterick. As an actor he was able to memorise and confidently present large tracts of information without necessarily having grasped the subject matter. He thus passed out top of his 200-strong class. But his desire to see active service led him to volunteer for the Parachute Regiment. He completed his jumps course in November 1943 with a glowing, if economical, report: "Jumps well, cheerful, fine example to his men". He was posted to the 7th (Light Infantry) Parachute Battalion, under the command of Lt Col Geoffrey Pine-Coffin, as they prepared for D-Day.

The battalion was to parachute in, link up with the glider force and complete the main assault against Pegasus Bridge near Caen. Invigorated by the stirring words of the Battalion's popular Padre, Todd landed in a Norman cornfield at around 0040 hours on Tuesday 6 June 1944.

He later recounted:

"The CO said there was no way of knowing if the glider-borne attack on the bridges had been successful and we must get to the rendezvous as quickly as possible. We broke out from the woodland and set off at the double. Scurrying figures were everywhere. By about 0100 our group, numbering by then some 50, was at the rendezvous. A bugler repeatedly blew our rallying signal, and men came stumbling towards us, shadowy, bulky figures. But still no mortars, no machine guns and no wireless. At about 0130 hours the CO gave the order to move off to the bridges even though we still numbered only 150 men, a quarter of our strength."

They met up with Major John Howard and his men of the 2nd Oxf and Bucks Light Infantry on Pegasus Bridge and there helped repel several German counter-attacks. Todd was to recreate the scene in two epic films: D-Day, the Sixth of June (1956) and The Longest Day (1962). In the latter, Todd took the role of Howard, performing one scene opposite the actor playing himself.

Richard Todd later recalled:

“Since our landing 24 hours earlier, approximately half the battalion had been killed, wounded or were missing. But as we headed through the darkness, the pace was that of light infantrymen – brisk and buoyant – laden and weary though the men were. It had been a day to remember.”

On 11 June, Todd left to take up the post of GSO-3 (Operations) at HQ 6th Airborne Division with whom he remained until the Rhine Crossing in March 1945, when he returned to the 7th Battalion. After the War, he accompanied the Division to Palestine but was seriously injured in a road accident.

Discharged in 1946, Richard Todd had kept his acting profession secret throughout the war, fearing a posting to the Entertainments National Service Association. He made his West End debut in The Hasty Heart. The film version followed in 1948. Cast as a dour young Scottish corporal, he co-starred with Ronald Reagan, and was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor in 1949. He had become a box office star overnight. At 5'8", Todd was possibly a touch too short but his chiselled good looks and piercing blue eyes made him perfect for swashbuckling roles.

He starred in The Story of Robin Hood and his Merrie Men (1952), The Sword and the Rose (1953) and Rob Roy, The Highland Rogue (1954). His big break was The Dam Busters (1955) in which he starred as Wing Commander Guy Gibson VC, probably the role for which he is best known and Yangtse Incident: The Story of H.M.S. Amethyst (1957).

Todd had been the first choice of author Ian Fleming to play James Bond in Dr No but his busy schedule resulted in Sean Connery getting the part.

He was appointed OBE in 1993.

Richard Todd, war hero, film star and gentleman, died in his sleep on 3 December 2009.



Patrick Churchill

1924 - 2018

ROYAL MARINES COMMANDO



Former Witney resident Patrick Churchill was aged just 20 when he landed on Juno Beach with the Royal Marines Armoured Support Regiment.

Equipped with Centaur MK. IV tanks, the regiment's role was two-fold: to provide close range support and suppressing fire for the first wave of assault troops; and to punch a hole through the enemy's defences.

Recalling his experiences many years later, Patrick recounted:

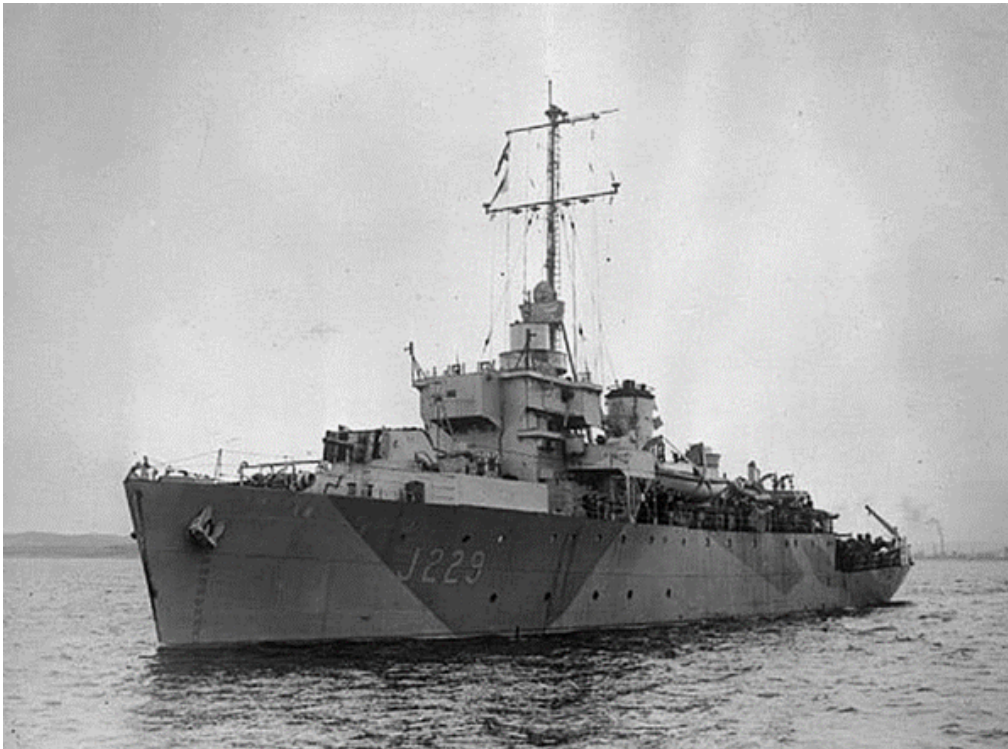
“It was actually a relief to reach the beach. So rough was the crossing and so loaded down was our landing craft, I thought we were bound to sink before we got there. In fact, the craft next to ours did sink. Once we hit the beach, training and adrenaline took over so there wasn't time to feel scared. You had to get off the beach as quick as possible and carry on to your objective.”

After a month in Normandy, Patrick was re-assigned to No.4 Commando as signaller to French Troop (10 I/A Commando) with whom he remained until the end of the war, taking part in a second landing on the Dutch island of Walcheren in November 1944, for which he was awarded the Croix de Guerre (with Silver Star) for defending his post against repeated enemy attacks when his section had become isolated from the main Commando force.

In 2004, on the 60th anniversary of D-Day, Patrick was chosen to represent the UK veterans as the recipient of the Légion d'Honneur, presented by President Chirac at a ceremony in Arronanches.

Fred Bates

Born 12th October 1918



The following text is spoken directly from Fred Bates:

“During the early part of 1944 I was a crew member on the HMS Cockatrice which was operating in the North Sea. Our main role was mine sweeping patrols and to be on the lookout for any enemy submarines in the area.

The ship was ordered to Portsmouth as there was talk of a possible invasion. During the D Day period my ship was responsible for patrolling the entrances to the beaches for mines in order to allow smaller boats to land.

Something I do remember clearly was that we had to clear an entrance to the shore for the battleship HMS Warspite. I watched as the Shore Battery fixed upon the Warspite but was not hit. In return the battleship guns opened up on the shore firing position and in one huge bang it was gone. We spent the rest of the time patrolling the shores for mines.”

Jethro Gordon Bellwood



The following text is spoken from Dorothy Burfitt:

“On that day I was at Hill End camp with a group of friends. I was 14 years old at the time.

The 6th Airbourne Division was stationed at Fairford at that time.

Gordon Bellwood , my brother in-law (to be) was a glider pilot and during practice he sometimes flew his glider a little lower than the plane in front, to which he was attached by the hawser. In that way we were able to identify him and his glider above our house.

On that memorable day, I watched as he flew over, not knowing why so many planes were flying south, or that the gliders would be transporting paratroop infantry. The gliders were made up of plywood, cloth and steel tubing. They landed their gliders behind enemy lines and fought where they stood.

A few days later, Gordon arrived at our house in Oxford, dirty, dishevelled and exhausted and with a gunshot wound.

He never spoke about his experience, or how he got back home is something we will never know. Like so many others during the war they were doing their bit to keep our land safe for future generations.”

Alan Stimpson Recalls 1944



My Dad, Archie Stimpson enlisted in the Royal Navy at age 15, he lived in Barrow in Furness at the time and he was on submarines out in Jutland during WWI. They destroyed a lot of German ships. He stayed in until he was 33 years old.

In WWII two of my Uncles, Bert and John, were in the Army, and Uncle Tom was in the Fire Service, driving the big fire lorries.

We lived in Marcham during the war, I was fourteen years old then and I remember once when a big bomb dropped. Everyone was supposed to go down the air raid shelter and we all did, but my dad didn't go. He liked to stay in the doorway of the house so he could see what was happening.

I remember my mum coming in one day and saying there were call up papers for my dad. He thought he had done his bit in WWI and was getting on, so when the Second World War started he wasn't planning to enlist again. He said they must be for my brother, who was about the right age for enlisting, but sure enough it was his name on the papers and my brother's arrived soon after, so I think that was a bit of a shock to him.

Alan Clack's Memories of 1944



Alan Clack's memories of the D Day year as told to us

I was 9 years old in 1944. There was a lot going on that year.

My mum and dad had a lodger called Ted Heybourne, who we all called Uncle Ted. He had been a soldier during the first world war and held the Military Medal. He was a GPO engineer when we knew him and drove around in a green van. Uncle Ted often let me go out with him for a ride around in that van and sometimes we went over to RAF Brize Norton where he serviced the telephones.

When we went on to the base he would hide me beneath the seat and then I would peek out and look at all the planes lined up there with the gliders, all painted black with white stripes on. We knew the duty guard on the gate anyway, as he used to work with my dad at Pearl Assurance.

My brother Gordon and his friend Ray Brooks, who were 14 years old at the time were mad on aircraft and one day they heard that two Austers (observation aircraft) had landed in the field behind the woods in Northleigh and they scorted off all the way up there to see them.

I remember one day going down Cuckoo Lane and all the bombs for the aircraft being stacked up all along just waiting to go off and be loaded on.

Another thing I remember is the air raid shelters around town, there was one on Church Green and another outside Midland Bank in Market Square and how some of the buildings such as the Masonic Hall were used for military purposes.

The place was alive with soldiers, especially Americans and we got invited by the Americans to a big Christmas party in Langdale Hall. It was quite a do!

I hope my story is enough to be of interest.

Diana Baskervyle-Glegg

1

Since the eightieth anniversary of the D DAY Landings is upon us, it is fitting that we should commemorate it in some way. The D Day Landings have been called the most momentous event in history and a masterpiece of planning. They have also been called a nightmare scenario, but if the ends justify the means, casualties there will be. On 3rd September 1939 Britain declared war on Germany because Hitler refused to withdraw his troops from Czechoslovakia. By 1943 the allies had liberated Italy and North Africa, and Josef Stalin had decreed that the time was ripe for a second front.

2

Frederick Morgan oversaw the planning, assisted by my husband Lieut. Col. John Baskervyle-Glegg, and others. A rehearsal for the Landings took place at Slapton Sands in Devon. This rehearsal went badly wrong and there was loss of life. Seventy three thousand troops from the UK. And twenty four thousand Canadians, as well as thirty five thousand Americans, as well as Poles, Czechs, New Zealanders and Australians crossed the Channel. The Germans sent eighty three thousand troops in Panzer divisions. In command of the German army was Field Marshall Erwin Rommel and Field Marshall Von Rundstedt. A number of warships, destroyers and trawlers were in the convoy, and amphibious tanks, armoured cars and jeeps provided transport. The troops went ashore in landing craft on five beaches:- Sword, Gold, Juno, Ouisreham and Omaha.

The Germans were well prepared for the onslaught, and had opted to build the Atlantic Wall, a series of coastal defences stretching from the South of France to Norway, which would have presented a formidable challenge to the allies. In spite of the fact that the Germans lacked the resources to complete the wall. At Cherbourg there were no port facilities, so temporary harbours were built known as 'Mulberry Harbours' - traces of which I am told, still remain. These gave vital support to the allies, but nevertheless they met with fierce opposition from the Germans;

beaches were heavily mined as well as being littered with obstacles, known as 'hedgehogs'-stakes driven into the ground to impede progress. Sir Winston Churchill, our wartime Prime Minister, was alarmed at the thought of the casualties on the beaches, and of course he was right. There were over 10,000 casualties and over four thousand killed, presumed dead. The casualties were brought back to English hospitals but the dead were buried in military cemeteries in Normandy.

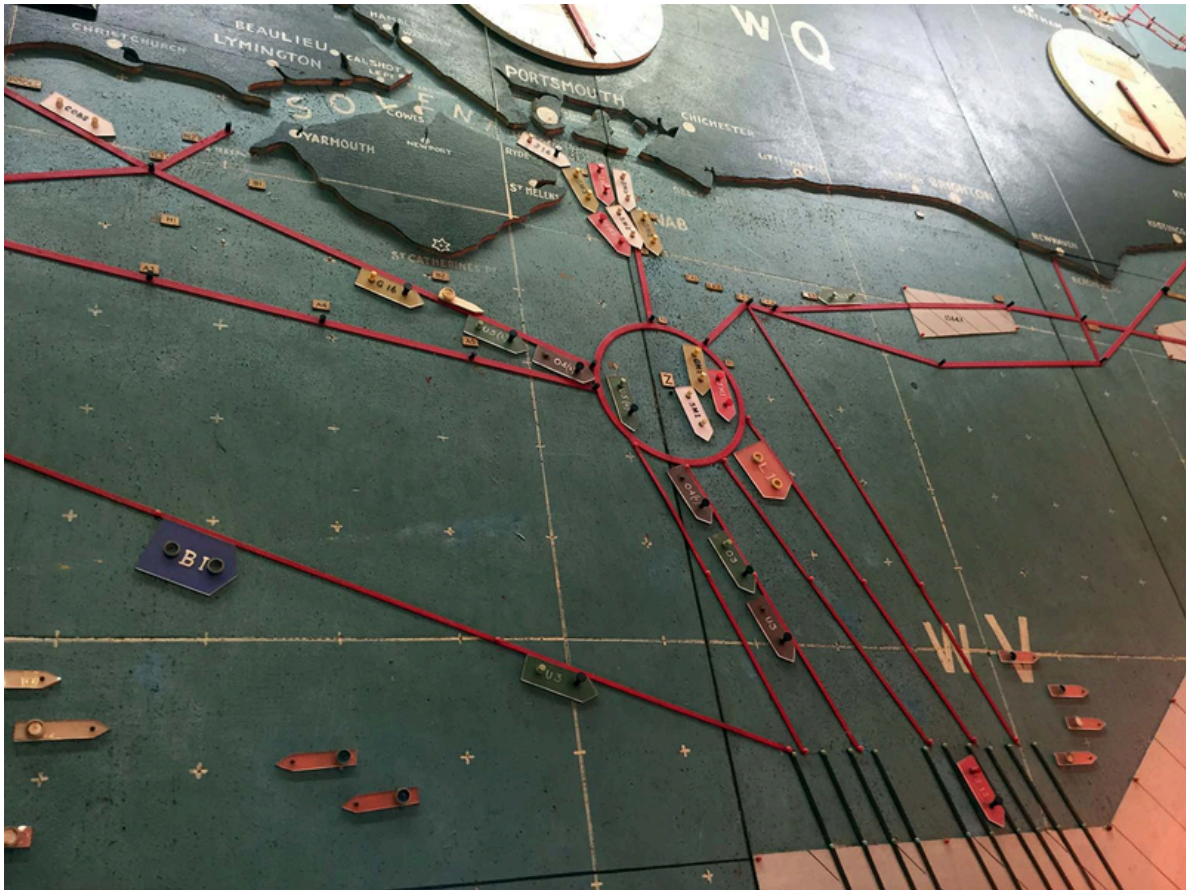
5.

Having reached the cliffs behind the beaches (heavily guarded by the Germans) the troops climbed them with the aid of ropes and ladders. Behind lay fields, heavily guarded and flooded by the Germans, which meant that the troops had to wade through them, knee deep in muddy water. The goal of the allies was to reach Caen, eight miles away, by the end of the day, but in fact they did not reach Caen until 21st July. There were German snipers lurking in the undergrowth, waiting to pounce and shoot, and there were towns to capture such as Ste Lo, Bayeux, Falaise Ste Maire de L'Eglise and Arramanche, before they reached Caen, eight miles away.

There was barbed wire to cut through and thick hedgerows to burrow their way through. Meanwhile, thousand of civilians were trapped in the towns, in fear of their lives. The morale of the troops was low, exhausted by their efforts, but improved by re-enforcements sent by parachute. Giles Milton, in his book paints a harrowing picture of the suffering, the cruelty of the killings and woundings, the dead bodies lying in the fields, mourned by their loved ones who knew that they would never see them again. Indeed it was a high price to pay for freedom, and the numbers themselves tell the story of the meaning of war. Eventually the soldiers reached two crucial bridges - Ranville and Benouville - and destroyed another five. These bridges crossed the river Orne and the Caen Canal.

7 On July 2st the troops reached Caen, but they only partially captured it, so my sources tell me. I noticed, driving through Caen many years later, that the town was entirely composed of modern buildings - it had been utterly razed to the ground by allied bombings. The next step was to reach Paris and to liberate the rest of France, which they did by the autumn of that year. Allied troops were then engaged in liberating the Netherlands, which had endured great hardship, especially in shortage of food. They then crossed the rivers Rhine and the Elbe and pushed on towards Berlin, which had been blockaded by the Russians advancing from the east.

8 There are veterans, some of them now over one hundred years old, who remember the Landings and recount their stories. By May 1945 Germany had capitulated and there was peace in Europe once more. Hitler committed suicide in his bunker. There remained the trial of the Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg.



D-Day planning map, used at Southwick House near Portsmouth.



The sight of a low-flying Allied plane sends Nazi soldiers rushing for cover on a beach in France, before D-Day June 1944. The aircraft was taking reconnaissance photos of German coastal barriers in preparation for the June 6th invasion.



Coast Guard Flotilla 10 tied up along with British landing craft, preparing to sail the English Channel and invade Nazi-occupied France. These landing craft landed U.S. troops on Omaha Beach.



Czech hedgehogs deployed on the Atlantic Wall near Calais.



Gliders are delivered to the Cotentin Peninsula by Douglas C-47 Skytrains. 6 June 1944.



Allied forces push through the breakers toward Omaha Beach.



Aerial view of part of the Allied force off the coast of France, on D-Day, 1944.



Meeting of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), 1 February 1944. Front row: Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder; General Dwight D. Eisenhower; General Bernard Montgomery. Back row: Lieutenant General Omar Bradley; Admiral Bertram Ramsay; Air Chief Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory; Lieutenant General Walter Bedell Smith.



A-20 bombers make a return visit to the Pointe Du Hoc coastal battery on 22 May 1944.

(Photo credit: Regional Council of Basse-Normandie / U.S. National Archives / Library of Congress / US Army Archives)

