

Welcome to a special D-Day 80 podcast by Blind Veterans UK.

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On 6 June 2024, the nation commemorates the 80th anniversary of the D-Day Landings in Normandy – the most decisive turning point of the Second World War.

Eighty years on, we are honoured to share the extraordinary first-hand experiences of five of our veterans who were there, serving across the Navy, Army and Air Force.

Risking their lives for freedom and peace, each one played a critical role in what is still the largest seaborne invasion the world has ever seen.

Here are their stories...

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**John** was 23 when his unit, the 7th Armoured Division of the famous Desert Rats, was called back to England especially for D-Day.

He remembers:

“In June of course 1944, we went to the Normandy Landings. We were in closed camps in Felixstowe, down in England and it just prior to the Invasion Day. We boarded the landing crafts at Felixstowe. We sailed through the English Channel overnight and then laid anchor off the beaches in the morning of D-Day.

“There were approximately 130,000 troops actually landed in Normandy in the Landings. Of course, they couldn't all disembark on the first day. Some of us had to lay to for some time before we could get to shore. We were under fire from the Luftwaffe Air Force, but it was an epic sight actually to see so many ships, one had the feeling you could almost walk from one ship to another and get to the shore. There was actually over a thousand craft in the channel.”

When John's unit eventually landed in Normandy, he clearly remembers driving up the beach.

"I can remember when it our time to land to come in, we landed on Gold Beach. We managed to get right in and there was a ramp that went down at the front and we could just drive our vehicles onto the ramp. The engineers had cleared the pathway up the beach of mines and they had it marked out with tape.

"There was what they called a beachmaster on the beach and this was a officer that had a megaphone and his job was to take the troops off the beach as quick as possible because we were under fire and we'd have this megaphone and we managed to get up off the beach without any casualties although the beach was still under sniper fire, visible in artillery range, but we managed to get up and the forward troops had cleared the Germans for a few miles, with the exception of snipers and we ended up at a place called Bayeux. We were at Bayeux for a quite a number of weeks until there was a final big battle at a place called Falaise."

John served throughout the war, but when it was finally over, he didn't speak about it to his family and friends back home, wanting instead to just get on with his life and try to forget.

"A lot of young people possibly read books on war and they read about battles where we defeated this person, that person, but wars do no good to anybody. All they leave behind is misery and grief."

But years later, as John was losing his sight due to age-related macular degeneration, he travelled back to Normandy with a group of D-Day veterans.

Seeing the thousands of graves inspired him to write his wartime memoirs.

“So many of them were young lads. Some of them were aged 18, 19, 20. And I always thought to myself afterwards, how lucky I was. These poor fellas never knew the joy of... parenthood, living a long life as I've been privileged to... that their life was cut off and I could only say to them, if I had the opportunity to do so, thank you.”

So, using our specialist equipment, and with support from our local staff and volunteers - as well as John's family - he finally put pen to paper during the pandemic - at the age of 100.

His book was published in 2022 – and quickly sold out.

Now age 103, he's busy working on his second.

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Like John, blind veteran **Harry**, was also in his early 20s when he was sent to join the D-Day operation.

The pilot officer arrived on the south coast the day before the off. Then, on the morning of D-Day, he was tasked with collecting senior army personnel and flying them to strategic points to prepare for the invasion.

He remembers hearing an update on the aerodrome's tannoy.

“We were starting to taxi out when the tannoy on the aerodrome went. One of the officers tapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘Cut your engines, please. I'd like to hear this announcement.’ It was saying that the invasion had taken place and the landing had been achieved and everything was going satisfactorily. And so that we went off to various aerodromes and kept dropping off an officer in each of these places.”

Over the following days, Harry flew back and forth to Normandy, taking officers there and bringing home the walking wounded.

He also went on to witness a sight he'll never, ever forget – mass graves and starving inmates at the recently-liberated Belsen concentration camp.

"Belsen camp [Nazi concentration camp] had just been found actually at that time, about four days before we went. There were still a lot of inmates, hideously thin, wandering around in their blue and white pyjama things.

"It wasn't very nice at all. Mass graves. The sergeants put up notices: '150,000 buried here and 80,000 in this grave'."

Over the course of the war, Harry flew 23 different aircraft for a total of 2,231 hours, of which 517 were operational.

And this is despite his fear of heights...

"It's a funny thing because I can't stand heights. I'm terrified on the top of the ladder, but the first flight I took never worried me. As long as the plane's moving, I'm moving."

Harry lost his sight later in life. As he turns 104 years old just before the anniversary of D-Day, we feel honoured to be able to give him the support and equipment he needs to continue living an independent and happy life.

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While Harry saw D-Day from the air, two of our Navy veterans, Thomas and Bob, were on the choppy waters, escorting American soldiers across the Channel.

**Thomas** was stationed in Plymouth on D-Day. Then, just 18 years old, he was sent to France with the American Army on a huge barge which had been converted into an oil tanker for refuelling landing craft.

He remembers:

"I was in the Navy. I was on LBO, Landing Barge Oil, that's the largest, biggest barge on the Thames, they converted it into an oil tanker.

"We supplied oil to any ship or craft that wanted oil. These little wooden crafters would pick the troops up from the troop ship and then move into the beach, and that's when they'd run out of petrol. They used to come alongside and get filled up.

"That's what we were doing when we landed in France with the American army. I went along to the different beaches - Omaha, Utah, Gold, everything."

As the barge sailed from beach to beach, Thomas witnessed many unspeakable horrors, not least the bodies of young soldiers floating in the sea.

In addition to this, as the barge was full of oil, it was at huge risk of blowing up.

In fact, when Thomas met the late Queen Elizabeth at the D-Day commemorations in 2019, she referred to the LBO as a "floating bomb".

He was surprised she knew so much about it.

"I was impressed with her knowledge because you don't often hear those ships being mentioned. You always hear about other ships, but never the ship I was on..."

Thomas, who's now 98, finds our specialist equipment and support is making a real difference to his life.

More than anything, he hopes never to see a repeat of D-Day.

“I wouldn’t want any youngsters to go through that. What makes it worse is the youngsters going into those wars. I was 18 when I went to D-Day.”

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Fellow navy veteran, **Bob** was also just 18 years old when he was sent to Normandy.

Having served in the Merchant Navy in the Atlantic, his job as a DMS gunner was to escort American soldiers to Utah Beach, and then return to pick up the British.

Bob remembers getting on very well with the Americans – and feeling sorry for them when they were seasick - particularly one.

"It was a very choppy, windy day and the sea was rough. Consequently, some of the poor soldiers were a bit seasick. One, I remember, while he was being ill, his helmet fell off and went into the sea.

"He was a bit concerned because there was no spare for him, so we gave him one of ours.

“What worried me was that the chap with the English helmet on stood out a bit from the others. I didn’t like that, but it was too late to do anything about that. Off they went, with our well wishes”

But most unforgettable was the sight of a hostile plane heading straight for them....

“We dropped anchor, and an airplane came into view from our right. It started heading across the convoy, and of course all the ships with gunners started firing. And then it got within range of my gun. I had an

American soldier beside me, helping me with the magazines and that, and I started firing at the hostile plane.

"It kept coming in and, eventually, when it was almost immediately above us, I could see my tracer bullets passing through the plane. Then, suddenly, it burst into flames.

"It spiralled out of control and swung over and crashed in France. Must have been a few hundred yards in because we heard crashing, going down.

"Of course, the American soldiers were delighted and we proceeded on through to our spots where we were anchored so we could discharge them to the beach they had been assigned to."

When they arrived at Utah, the American soldiers disembarked and Bob remembers feeling worried for their safety, especially the lad with the British helmet as he stood out so much.

Sadly, he never found out if they made it home.

In 2015, Bob revisited the Normandy beaches and was overwhelmed at the reception he received from locals and visitors alike, who came up to thank him and shake his hand.

Now 99, he's severely vision impaired and, although new to the charity, says he's already finding our support and equipment incredibly helpful, particularly the talking watch.

"The watch is wonderful really. I've been uncomfortable in bed, wondering if I should wake up - because I can't see the time. But now I've got the watch. I can look at it in the night and see I have plenty of time. So that's a great help."

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And finally, we share the story of Peggy, who worked as a linguist during the war for the Women's Royal Naval Service - the WRENS.

On the night before D-Day, Peggy was stationed in Dover. Then just 22, she was alone on duty in the direction-finding tower. Her job was to intercept and translate radio traffic from the German Navy and Luftwaffe.

Peggy's husband-to-be, Geoff, was a prisoner of war at the time of D-Day so she was desperate for the invasion to be a success so that he could finally come home.

This also made her feel frustrated that she wasn't allowed to know what was happening... In her diary on 6 June 1944, she wrote:

"On watch at 11pm, one o'clock came then three o'clock. Sergeant and Woodhouse both in slacks obviously prepared to stay the night then Lieutenant Gray arrived and an N.O from Newhaven and Lieutenant Woods. It was obvious that something was in the wind but as mere watch keepers we were told nothing of it. Which peeved me considerably.

"As though we could possibly do any damage, assuming we wanted to while stuck in the watch room. Finally, we did gather that the invasion was expected. The aircraft at 2am and first troops at 5:30. When relieved, I did linger but by 4:30 could find no excuse to remain. I thought of Geoff at the end of my watch rather like this. "They are on their way, my darling, even now each minute they are drawing nearer to you, to set you free." Found all my room out of my bed, Sue and Hilda rather emotional.



“Here, however we saw nothing except a small convoy of landing barges and about 5:45 we went to bed. But of course we did not sleep well. News of invasion given at 12, issued at 9:30am. Landing in Normandy, Le Havre-Cherbourg-Caen. Monty with them. Got up to see another convoy go by, troopship this time. It was a fine sight and I would not be anywhere else at this time.

“Even if we were further up the coast, we would only see departures, not France. It is terrible to think what is happening so near us. I suppose it is the nearness, and the newness that makes it seem worse than Italy.”

Happily, after the war ended, Geoff did come home, and they went on to marry and have a daughter.

Peggy says her work during the war was so secret that her parents passed away without ever knowing what she did.

Now age 102, it's our privilege to provide her with all the sight loss support and equipment she needs.

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We hope you've enjoyed this commemorative D-Day 80 podcast.

We're extremely grateful to the D-Day veterans who took part.

Blind Veterans UK supports ex-Servicemen and women of every generation, no matter how or when they lost their sight.

If you'd like to read more first-hand accounts of D-Day, find out more about our work, or make a donation in honour of our D-Day heroes, please visit our website at [www.blindveterans.org.uk](http://www.blindveterans.org.uk)

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