



D-DAY HEROES: 80th ANNIVERSARY TRIBUTE

By **Marco Giannangeli** DEFENCE EDITOR

IT WAS IN 1940, as they witnessed the shambolic withdrawal from the beaches of Dunkirk, that British commanders first began to plan their return to French shores. In the end, it would take almost exactly four years before the Allies, which by then included the United States, could successfully mount D-Day, the largest amphibious landings in history, and begin to liberate Europe from the Nazi jackboot.

By May 1941 most of the Continent had been conquered by Adolf Hitler.

While it had staved off a German invasion Britain was, to quote Chief of the Imperial General Staff Gen Sir Alan Brooke, "hanging on by our eyelids".

D-Day was made possible by two momentous events that were to change the path of the war.

In June 1941 Hitler broke his non-aggression pact with Joseph Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union.

Within the year, 200,000 Wehrmacht troops would be killed, 726,000 wounded, 400,000 captured and 130,000 incapacitated by frostbite.

And in December, 360 Japanese fighter planes launched a sneak attack on the US Navy's Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbour.

In solidarity with Tokyo, Hitler declared war on the US. It was to be one of his gravest miscalculations.

Winston Churchill "slept the sleep of the saved" after President Franklin D Roosevelt formally joined the war, but American forces were untested.

In September 1939 the US ranked 17th in combat power, behind Romania.

Though FDR had agreed to prioritise the war in Europe over Japan, the question was how?

US commanders shared Gen George S Patton's "violent attacks everywhere with everything" approach, favouring a strike on Fortress Europe as soon as possible.

Churchill was more cautious. Britain had already been expelled from the Continent three times – at Dunkirk, Norway and Greece – and he was reluctant to risk a fourth with a hasty cross-Channel attack.

While the build-up of US forces in Britain under Operation Bolero began in April 1942, it was decided that US troops should first gain combat experience in Africa and Italy.

Because this could be done soon, it would also assist Stalin by diverting

The long-awaited return to France



ALLIES: Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin had hoped to invade Europe in 1943

German resources from the Eastern front at a time when increased Allied bombing was making it difficult to replace troops.

The European invasion was set for 1943, and then pushed to May, and finally June 1944. In January, experts used midget submarines for a secret sortie to Normandy, to ensure its sands would support the weight of heavy armour.

Any invasion would be heavily defended, of course. Germany had around 50,000 troops dug in along the Atlantic Wall, a 2,400-mile line of obstacles includ-

ing 6.5 million mines, thousands of concrete bunkers and pillboxes containing heavy and fast-firing artillery, and tens of thousands of tank ditches.

To gain every advantage, the Allies would have to deceive the Nazis into believing they would take the shortest and most obvious sea crossing, from Dover to the Pas-de-Calais.

Under Operation Bodyguard and Fortitude South, double agents delivered false information and a fictitious First US Army Group was created in England. Inflatable

tanks and dummy landing craft made from scaffolding tube, wood, canvas and empty 40-gallon barrels were positioned to trick the Germans by exaggerating the number of men and tanks. In fact, a lack of real landing craft meant plans to land troops in southern France simultaneously – to divert German forces – were abandoned.

So successful was the deception that Hitler delayed redeploying forces from Calais to defend Normandy for nearly seven weeks, for fear of a second landing.

WHEN it came, D-Day and the Normandy campaign would involve more than 1.5 million troops – of which 160,000 landed on the beaches on June 6 – 11,000 Allied aircraft and 7,000 ships and boats.

These included amphibious Duplex Drive Sherman tanks, flame-throwing Churchills and bunker-busting AVREs.

A further 1,500 aircraft flew 13,000 American soldiers and 7,000 British paratroopers for air drops behind enemy lines.

Churchill had one more trick up his sleeve. A week before D-Day he sent shock waves through the establishment by ordering, as self-appointed defence minister, that he should personally witness the landings from HMS Belfast.

Ultimately, he was outranked by King George VI, who in a letter on June 2, implored: "Please consider my own position. I am a younger man than you.

"I am a sailor & as king I am the head of all three services.

"There is nothing I would like better than to go to sea but I have agreed to stay at home; is it fair that you should then do exactly what I should have liked to do myself?"

Their gallantry must never be forgotten

THE IMMENSE bravery displayed by tens of thousands of British and Allied servicemen on D-Day makes me feel both proud and emotional in equal measures.

Part of those feelings come from the fact that my late father, Eric Ashcroft, was one of those who took part in the landings on June 6, 1944.

He and other participants have made me realise just how terrifying it must have been running up one of the five chosen Normandy beaches into a murderous enemy fire.

If there is one man who epitomises the gallantry of so many on D-Day, it is Company Sergeant Major Stanley Hollis.

That's because, of the 155,000 courageous Allied servicemen estimated to have taken part in the D-Day landings, he was the only one to be awarded the VC for his actions that day.

With his crooked teeth and quiet modesty, CSM Hollis was an unlikely war hero. But his actions, which saved the lives of many comrades, are

COMMENT

By **Lord Ashcroft**

PHILANTHROPIST, AUTHOR AND POLLSTER



deserving of his place in history. Showing Yorkshire grit and determination, CSM Hollis, then 31, was very much a soldier's soldier and, in two separate incidents, showed outstanding courage.

In the first, after running up Gold Beach, he was fired at from a pillbox by a machine-gunner at close range.

His response was to race forward firing his Sten gun and then to throw a hand grenade at the enemy. He killed two German soldiers and took others prisoner.

Later that day, in the village of

HEROIC: Stanley Hollis was awarded the VC

Crepon, his company encountered enemy soldiers armed with machine guns and a field gun.

CSM Hollis was put in charge of a party tasked with attacking the position, but as he pushed forward he was hit by a bullet that grazed his right cheek.

In subsequent heavy fighting, he and his men killed two enemy gun crew, then seized the field gun before CSM Hollis freed two comrades who had been trapped in another building.

When CSM Hollis, of D Company, 6th Battalion Green Howards, was awarded the VC later that summer, part of his citation for the award stated: "Wherever the fighting was heaviest, CSM Hollis appeared and in the course of a magnificent day's work, he displayed the utmost gallantry." As for my father, Eric Ashcroft, he was serving in the summer of 1944 as a young officer with the South Lancashire Regiment.



In fact, his CO was shot dead at his side as they progressed up Sword Beach.

My father was wounded by shrapnel, fighting on until ordered from the battlefield, but he survived his injuries.

D-Day, the start of "Operation Overlord", remains the largest naval, air and land operation in history.

More than 4,400 Allied troops were killed on D-Day alone – and more than 5,000 were wounded.

In the ensuing Battle of Normandy, 73,000 Allied forces were killed and 153,000 wounded.

It is quite right that, 80 years on, the valour of these courageous servicemen is still recognised far and wide.

Their gallantry must never be forgotten.

● 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.