

Heroes Return 2



Heroes Return 2 programme

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Foreword

Sixty-five years ago on 6 June 1944, the largest invasion in history took place when allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy to liberate Europe from German occupation.

D-Day marked the beginning of the end of the Second World War, which culminated in allied victory in Europe in May 1945 and in the Far East in August.

To commemorate the events leading up to the end of the war, the Big Lottery Fund has set up the Heroes Return 2 programme, which funds veterans – and their spouses and carers – to revisit the places where they served and remember the sacrifice made by their fallen friends and comrades.

I was privileged to accompany a large group of veterans to Normandy to mark the 65th anniversary of D-Day and was able to see at first hand the positive value of this initiative. The Royal British Legion is proud to be associated with this excellent programme.

This booklet tells the stories of some of the veterans whose visits have already been funded by BIG. I hope it will inspire other veterans to apply to the Big Lottery Fund and make their own journey.

My very best wishes to everyone involved in this programme and to all those veterans eligible to make a 'Heroes Return'.

**Group Captain Ralph Ashenurst RAF (Retd)
Director of Membership and Regions
Royal British Legion**



About the Royal British Legion

The Royal British Legion provides financial, social and emotional support to millions who have served and are currently serving in the Armed Forces, and their dependants. Although the needs of the Armed Forces family have changed over the years, we are still there to safeguard their welfare, interests and memory.

The Legion is the nation's custodian of remembrance, ensuring that people remember those who have given their lives for our freedom. The Legion is also recognised as the guardian of the military covenant between the nation and those who serve in the armed forces.

For more information visit:
www.britishlegion.org.uk

More about Heroes Return 2

By November 2009 Heroes Return 2 had paid out £4.95 million for 7,588 veterans, spouses and carers to go on commemorative trips.

Heroes Return 2 is open for applications until January 2011 (travel before the end of December 2010). For more information, turn to page 18 of this booklet or visit the Heroes Return page on the Big Lottery Fund website at: www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/heroesreturn

Fred Knapp's story...



Fred Knapp, 84, from Neyland, Pembrokeshire went to Arnhem in September to revisit the site of one of the most daring wartime operations – to free the occupied territories of Europe from the clutches of Nazi Germany.

September 2009 marked the 65th anniversary of Operation Market Garden, a planned military thrust by the Allied Forces in Holland, which aimed to bring an end to war in Europe by Christmas 1944.

On 17 September 1944, thousands of paratroopers were dropped behind enemy lines near the Dutch towns of Eindhoven, Nijmegen and Arnhem. The aim was to secure eight key bridges so that the Allied army could advance rapidly northwards, turn right into the lowlands of Germany and bring an end to the war.

After 10 days of bitter fighting, the operation ended with the evacuation of the remainder of the 1st British Airborne Division from the Arnhem area.

In 1944, Private Fred Knapp was a keen 19-year-old member of the 11th Battalion, the Parachute Regiment. He was among the second wave of paratroops dropped into an area eight miles from Arnhem where the Allies were desperately trying to hold the vital road bridge made famous by the film, *A Bridge Too Far*.

“As we floated down from the transport aircraft,” recalls Fred, “we found ourselves being fired at by German troops from the nearby woods.

“Bullets were flying around us and we were completely helpless. Our kit bags were suspended below us on a rope and they contained everything we needed to go into battle, including our rifles.

“As I neared the bottom of my descent, suddenly a bullet cut through the rope and I lost the bag and my rifle so when I hit the ground I had nothing to fight with. But I stumbled across a Sten gun and I was able to shoot back.”

Gradually, the paratroops got together and fought back so effectively that the group managed to capture a number of Germans. Then came an astonishing 10 days of grim fighting to defend an ever-decreasing perimeter from the encircling Germans.

“Even though the Dutch Resistance had warned of strong German SS units in the area, the landings went ahead,” Fred says. “Things were very difficult. Our radio operators told us they had been issued with the wrong crystals for the radio receiver, so were unable to communicate with either HQ in England or the troops fighting at the bridge. It was a bit of a hash up to be honest.”

Under mortar and machine gun fire, the Paras were frustrated when RAF supply drops fell into enemy hands.

“Things were going badly wrong and we were running out of everything. Finally, we were ordered to make our way to the river. In the fog and the darkness, white tapes had been laid to guide us to a section of the river bank where an evacuation was to be attempted.

“By the time I got there, it was getting light and the Germans threw everything at us. There were just a few flimsy boats left and we were out of ammunition so we had no option but to surrender.”

It was the end of the fighting for Fred, but only the beginning of nine long months in captivity following a gruelling journey to the south of Germany.

That period came to a somewhat surreal end on 8 May 1945 – Victory in Europe Day – when the group walked out of their prison camp and into a town full of Russian troops. But soon afterwards, they found an American unit and were on their way home.



Ian Forsyth's story...



Among veterans who have returned to the Normandy battlefields with Heroes Return is Ian Forsyth, 85, from Hamilton, Scotland.

A fresh-faced 17-year-old when he joined up in 1941, Ian Forsyth trained as a wireless operator with the 19th Hussars. On board a Churchill tank, he was on reconnaissance with the 11th Armoured Division that landed in Normandy and fought in France, Belgium and the Netherlands and over the Rhine into Germany.

Three of Ian's own tanks were destroyed and he lost many comrades and friends. While he escaped serious injury, the mental scars remain. A heart-wrenching encounter dramatically brought home the full horror of the war – the day Ian arrived at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

"It was early April 1945 and our division had stopped near to the villages of Bergen and Belsen. We'd seen a lot of German activity in the immediate area, with a great many vehicles and people on the move. After two or three hours we were given the go-ahead to progress the three miles up the road.

"The first thing that hit you was the stench; an awful greasy smell. We were completely unprepared for what we found. At this time the camp was still under German control and they had a garrison inside with guards standing right in front of us. As we arrived, there were high-level discussions going on about surrender."

Bergen-Belsen had started out as a prisoner-of-war camp and by 1945 housed around 60,000 people. There were no gas chambers at Belsen; this was a starvation camp. Prisoners were slowly robbed of their lives, their bodies incinerated to discard the evidence.

In the months before liberation, thousands of Jews from other camps had been re-housed at Belsen as the German front collapsed. Food supplies were low and conditions appalling. There was no running water, and typhus and cholera were pandemic. It was partly for this reason that the Germans agreed to surrender. In the following weeks, about 10,000 people were buried in mass graves, and shocked audiences saw the footage in cinemas around the world.

"When you saw the people inside you wanted to help but we had been ordered not to," says Ian. "We would have fed those poor souls, but we learned later that would most likely have killed them.

"There were people lying down and at that time it didn't even occur to me that they might not be alive. The people who had survived would just stare out at you dressed in their striped clothes.

"In war you witness first-hand the depths to which humanity can sink. I was thunderstruck by what I saw – it was the first time that I realised exactly why we were fighting the war. On that day, I saw something which I did not believe could have been true.

"When we passed nearby villages after we left Belsen, we tried to find out more about how this could be allowed to happen, but people said they knew nothing, which was impossible.

"That day changed me forever. I will never forget what happened there and the sights that I saw can still make me weep."



"In war you witness first-hand the depths to which humanity can sink"

John Cumming's story...



Royal Navy veteran John Cumming, 87, from Ards, Northern Ireland, visited Normandy in June 2009.

The trip was made particularly poignant when on a visit to the D-Day museum in Arromanches, Normandy, he saw the picture of the HMNS Sumatra – a Dutch cruiser that supported the boats of British soldiers as they landed on Normandy's Sword Beach.

"When I saw that photo of the Sumatra, it made me think about the sacrifices of all the mates I served with on that old ship and all those young men who gave their lives – it made me feel proud to have served my country," says John.

It was an emotional return for John, who joined the Royal Navy in 1940 at the age of 18. After serving on the HMS Volunteer for four years, he was drafted on to the Sumatra as the build up to D-Day began.

"Our ship was manned by both Dutch and British sailors and there was a great camaraderie on board," says John. "I joined the crew in April 1944 and we lay off the coast of Scotland for over a month. It was clear we were waiting for something, but we didn't know what.

"It made me feel proud to have served my country"

"Then on 4 June, we got our orders to set sail for France – the D-Day operations were underway. We arrived off the coast of Ouistreham, code named Sword Beach, on the evening of D-Day.

"I can still remember my feelings of fear and excitement. We were bombarded by heavy German artillery from the shore and our ship was a sitting target for their attacks. Sumatra was one of 30 old warships and merchant vessels whose job it was to scuttle our ships so they were all resting firmly on the bottom of the sea in a line. The ships created a temporary breakwater, so that the inshore waters would be smoother for the soldiers as they jumped from their boats.

"We could see the army boys as they struggled onto the beach up to their waists in water, and we watched in horror as many collapsed on the beaches and died there.



"It was sheer luck that our ship wasn't hit and all my pals survived, but it makes me so sad to think of all those men who gave their lives on that day – so I came back to Normandy to remember the sacrifices they made."

Visiting the cemeteries again was one of the hardest parts of John's trip. "There was a very quiet, sombre atmosphere that moved you to tears, especially when I saw the graves of people from towns in Northern Ireland, lads as young as 16 whose lives had barely started but who were willing to sacrifice them for the cause.

"When I think about the terrible loss of lives and the slaughter that happened on that day I feel so much sorrow. I pray that it never happens again."



Heroes Return

Robert Shaw's story...

In 1943, aged just 17½, Robert Shaw from Royston in Hertfordshire joined the Royal Navy and served as an able seaman for the duration of the Second World War. During the Normandy D-Day invasion in 1944, he was part of a 13-man crew on board a landing craft tank responsible for offloading tanks onto the beaches.



On 6 June 1944, Bob's landing craft tank navigated its way through the small, overcrowded and chaotic waters to land at Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer beach to offload the six tanks on board.

Because the tide was out, they had to wait until nightfall for it to come back in again, so they were stuck on the beach watching out for booby traps.

One of the worst things Bob remembers was seeing British infantrymen clambering down rope ladders on the sides of troopships, plunging into the sea – and drowning.

"The weight of their kit was so much that they couldn't keep afloat," he says. "It was a terrible sight."

Just as they were ready to leave a message came through to Bob. "We were just setting off at high tide and were about 150 yards from the shore. The skipper understood the message at once – we were to return to shore to collect 250 German prisoners that had been captured during the fighting that day. On the journey back to Portsmouth, German planes were dropping bombs all around us and we were lucky not to be hit."

Peter Thompson's story...

Peter Thompson from Dorking, Surrey remembers D-Day well. It was his 19th birthday and his mother had baked him a cake – only he was not at home to enjoy it, as he was a crew member aboard landing ship tank HM LST-304 which took troops, vehicles and supplies to Sword Beach, Normandy.



When they landed, what they saw was more horrific than anyone could have imagined.

"The beach was already a mess," says Peter. "We had been told that we would land on a section that had been cleared and swept for mines. But when we landed there were dead soldiers, exploded lorries and tanks all over the beach. They all had to be pushed to the side to clear a path to keep the troops going. To see the carnage was horrendous.

"You weren't allowed to help anybody – those were the orders. If someone was drowning you could not help them. If we had stopped to help, we would have been sitting ducks. It was very sad and upsetting. It is something which no one should have to see, particularly at such a young age."

And what happened to the cake his mother baked him for his 19th birthday? Well, it arrived late and was a pile of crumbs, but Peter and his fellow crewmen happily ate all of it with their hands.

Harry Parker's story...

Harry Parker DFC, from Rotherham, Yorkshire, used his Heroes Return grant to return to Poland and Denmark, where he flew on bombing raids as a Flight Engineer with RAF Bomber Command 635 Squadron, based at RAF Downham Market in Norfolk. He joined the RAF as soon as he could in 1941 at the age of 17¾.



The 635 Squadron was a pathfinder unit and Harry's Lancaster served as the master bomber, leading the way on four of the 54 bombing raids he flew on.

On one raid Harry's Lancaster was badly shot. While attempting to land at RAF Woodbridge in Suffolk with only two of the four engines functioning, the third engine failed. The Lancaster crashed in a field, stopping 50 yards from a white, stone cottage. The pilot and Harry were injured and the wireless operator was killed. Mercifully, help was at hand. "After we'd crash-landed a woman came out from the cottage with her best china to offer us cups of tea until more assistance arrived," says Harry.

At the Downham Market base, Harry shared a hut with two other crews. "Sometimes you'd just close your eyes and when you opened them you'd realise one of the crews hadn't come back. On one particular raid 97 aircraft were lost. More crewmen lost their lives on that raid than they did in the entire Battle of Britain."

Richard Morgan's story



Richard Morgan, 85, from Wallasey, Merseyside, travelled to Singapore and Thailand thanks to Heroes Return.

Richard joined the Merchant Navy in 1941 and trained as a gunner with the Royal Navy on HMS Queen Charlotte. He served on a number of ships – not only British, but also Dutch and Norwegian.

In 1942 Richard went to Singapore (which had fallen to the Japanese) to evacuate troops, mainly Australians. His ship was followed by two others carrying civilian casualties, including women and children, and embassy staff. Both civilian ships were sunk by the Japanese and most people on them were killed.

“We were very lucky,” says Richard. “We made it to Fremantle on the west coast of Australia. The troops from Western Australia were so glad to be home after more than a year in Singapore that even before we reached port they jumped over the side and swam to shore.”

After dropping more troops off in Melbourne and Sydney, Richard's ship headed back to England via South America, the Falklands and the Canary Islands.

Crossing the Atlantic without an escort was perilous. Their course took them through a sector where German U-boats were notorious for their sudden

attacks on convoys. But Richard's luck held and his ship got back to England safely.

While Richard was in Singapore, his mother had received various telegrams saying that he, his brother and his father were missing, even though this wasn't the case. After the war both Richard and his father returned home safely. But the family lost touch with Richard's brother, who had chosen to transfer to the Australian Army and live in Australia after the war.

“I could see the war had changed my brother,” says Richard. “He was badly shook up. He had been on three ships that had been torpedoed and lost a lot of friends. He was lucky to get out alive through the flames and burning oil. But losing touch with him was really hard for my family.”



“It was a cruel war, which affected many troops psychologically. Of course everyone was glad to go home, but after being in such close quarters with other men and being involved in intense fighting, it was a huge change in lifestyle. And other than a demob suit, one pay cheque and a train ticket home, there wasn't much support.”

“It was a cruel war, which affected many troops psychologically”

Jack Fowler's story...



Jack Fowler, 88, from Lowestoft, Suffolk was a prisoner-of-war in the Kinkasaki prison camp in Taiwan – one of the worst in the Far East. He was awarded a Heroes Return grant to go back to Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan with his wife and daughter.

When King George VI inspected Jack Fowler's regiment – the Royal Suffolks – before he left for war, his youthful looks made the King suspicious.

"We were all standing in a line and as the King walked along it, he came across to me and he said: 'Surely you are too young?' He then called over my Colonel, who told him that if they sent away the men who were too young they would lose half the regiment. The King then looked at me, put his hand on my shoulder and said: 'I thank you all'."

Jack was a Private with the 4th Battalion of the Royal Suffolk Regiment, when he was stationed in the Far East. But his tour of duty came to a quick and abrupt end when Singapore fell to the Japanese. On 15 February 1942 Jack was captured.

"Most of the regiment were sent to work on the railways, but I was sent to work on the docks repairing crates," says Jack. "I was then moved between different prisoner-of-war camps and spent three years at Kinkasaki in Taiwan."

The notorious Kinkasaki prison camp was a copper mine in which the POWs were made to work under terrible conditions in blistering heat in confined spaces underground. Roof collapses were common and often deadly. Diseases such as malaria, dysentery, and beriberi (caused by lack of nutrition) were prevalent.

For three-and-a-half years Jack and his fellow POWs cut through rocks, wearing nothing but loincloths and rags bound on their bleeding feet. The mixture of sweat, copper and acid tanned their bodies as they worked 10 hours a day filling bogies with ore. At the end of the day, bed was a two-foot wide piece of planking in an open hut, prone to flooding, lice and rats.

"There was nothing to save us from the toiling and the sweat, but the grace of illness" recalls Jack. "We welcomed disease – the vomit and the pain. There was every excuse for dying, but few for hanging on."



"Many 'fell asleep'. We put our comrades in a box and dug a shallow grave. The rain would wash away the soil for us to cover again the next day."

"For those left behind, there were brutish things to bear; it was mighty difficult to force yourself to live. It was hell on earth – it really was. What kept us going? One excuse for living was to finish the job."

Eventually in August 1945 after three-and-a-half-years, Jack was liberated. The men who had survived devised a makeshift Union Jack and flew it on a pole.

Jack sees his trip to Taiwan as an act of homage.

"Those of us who came home left many friends behind. I'll be remembering those who were not as lucky as me, the ones we left sleeping on a distant shore."

"There was every excuse for dying, but few for hanging on"



Harold Dudman 1923-2009

Sue Ahsan visited Normandy for the 65th anniversary commemorations of D-Day with her parents, Harold and Lesley Dudman. She was expecting it to be an emotional experience, but she never imagined quite how emotional it would be.



“ My father Harold Dudman landed at Sword Beach in June 1944, as part of the REME 11th/29th Armoured Division. He was very excited by the prospect of returning to Normandy 65 years later, and we arranged a trip with his old comrade Harry Hart and his daughter Pauline, who were returning to visit the grave of Harry’s brother Bill, killed during the invasion.

Harold, 86, and Harry, 89, were like two excited little boys setting off from London on 4 June. There was a wonderful atmosphere on our bus, with a number of old soldiers and their families, serving soldiers and members of the British Legion. Everyone got along very well and we felt like we’d known them for ages. The veterans got a wonderful reaction from the Normandy people, young and old, who all wanted to shake their hands and thank them. Some people on the pavements saluted as we drove by.

The weather dawned warm and sunny on 5 June and we set off early to visit Ranville War Cemetery. We watched a re-enactment of the parachute drop which began the Normandy invasion, followed by a service of remembrance complete with marching bands.

We then went to Pegasus Bridge where there was a carnival atmosphere and had lunch at the Café Gondrée – the first building in France to be liberated. My dad was wearing his old regimental tie and was thrilled when some serving soldiers from his regiment came over, shook his hand and chatted with him.

Our next stop was totally unscheduled, yet turned out to be the most poignant moment of our trip. Unplanned, we visited Sword Beach. My dad had twice before visited Normandy but had never recognised any parts of the beach, yet when we reached this particular stretch, he instantly knew it to be the exact point where he had landed in 1944. He could recall so much from that day and told us a lot about it which I had never heard before. It obviously meant a great deal to him.

That evening dad decided to prepare for the following day and went to his room early. Sadly, he did not wake up again and passed away at 3am on 6 June – D-Day.

Mum and I were obviously in a state of shock. While making arrangements for returning dad to England, we decided to attend a ceremony at Arromanches. The mayor presented D-Day veterans with a badge as a gift from the people of Normandy and mum received dad’s badge.

We have no regrets at having made the trip. In many respects it seems that destiny played its part, and that things were actually meant to happen this way. Of course, we miss dad dreadfully, but we shall always have such great memories of how happy he was on that last day and how thrilled he was, at last, to be able to find ‘his beach’.

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Applying to Heroes Return 2

Through the Big Lottery Fund's Heroes Return programme Second World War veterans from the UK, Channel Islands and Republic of Ireland can apply for travel and accommodation costs to visit the places where they saw active service. They can also receive funding to take part in an official commemoration in the UK.

Veterans who fought with, or alongside, British forces in World War Two, and who are resident in the UK or the Republic of Ireland, are eligible to apply for funding. War widows and widowers of veterans are also eligible, and carers and spouses can receive funding to travel with veterans too.

Heroes Return 2 is open for applications until January 2011 (travel before the end of December 2010). Grants between £150–£5,500 are available depending on the number of people taking part and the destination.

The first Heroes Return scheme launched in 2004 to mark the historic 60th anniversary of D-Day. The initiative awarded £16.6 million to over 39,000 veterans, spouses, widows and carers to fund commemorative visits to Second World War battlefields, cemeteries and other significant places across the world.

For more information about Heroes Return 2 visit www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/heroesreturn or ring the Heroes Return application helpline on **0845 0000 121** or email general.enquiries@biglotteryfund.org.uk

We've also created a blog to document Heroes Return. Read it at: www.heroesreturn.org

"Heroes Return is an excellent programme. It gives the brave men and women who served our country in the Second World War the opportunity to return to the places they saw action and commemorate their fallen friends and comrades. I am really pleased that National Lottery money is supporting so worthy a cause."

Kevan Jones MP, Under Secretary of State for Defence and Minister for Veterans

"We owe the valiant men and women who served in the Second World War a great debt of honour and gratitude. This programme gives these heroes the chance to return to the places where they saw service and pay tribute to their friends and comrades who made the ultimate sacrifice. I think this is a magnificent use of National Lottery money."

Gerald Howarth MP, Shadow Defence Minister

"I am delighted with the success of the Big Lottery Fund's Heroes Return programme. The scheme means veterans and their loved ones have the opportunity to revisit areas where they served in battle. Enabling veterans to go back and commemorate where they fought is an important and poignant gesture to recognise the astonishing sacrifices these servicemen and women made during World War Two."

Nick Harvey MP, Liberal Democrats' Shadow Defence Secretary

"This is an important and poignant time for older veterans as they take stock of their life experiences and sacrifices, in a period of remembrance and anniversaries, in particular of the Second World War. This publication cements the very welcome support that Heroes Return has given them in enabling them to revisit that past."

Gordon Marsden MP, Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Veterans

