

Exercise Tiger Remembered

75 Years after one of the US forces' worst ever days, Laurie Bolton marks a sad but important anniversary

IMAGES COURTESY LAURIE BOLTON

Exercise Tiger was a rehearsal for the US forces about to embark on Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Europe, known to all as D-Day. It turned into a disaster, the worst loss of life since Pearl Harbor. The debacle was kept secret during the war and for some time to come, but Laurie Bolton has a personal reason to keep its memory alive, along with some dedicated Brits. She shared her story with us.

April 28th this year is a very important day, as it marks 75 years since Exercise Tiger. Laurie explains what took place that day at Slapton Sands in Lyme Bay, Devon.

"Planning for D-Day began in earnest in November 1943, when the Slapton Sands area was totally evacuated for practice assault landings for Utah Beach. The rehearsals were a joint American and British military operation and were going to take place over several weeks. These exercises used amphibious landing craft and LSTs (Landing Ship Tanks) capable of carrying several hundred men, trucks, and

tanks, to deploy troops and equipment onto Slapton Sands.

"A convoy of eight LSTs set sail the afternoon of 27 April 1944, from the ports of Plymouth and Brixham, unaware they were on the wrong radio frequency to be informed of enemy activity. Their winding route to and across Lyme Bay then back to Slapton Sands, simulated the length of time it would take to make the journey to Utah Beach on D-Day. In the darkness, four German E-boats, armed with torpedoes discovered the poorly protected convoy. The LSTs were fully loaded with hundreds of sailors and soldiers who were dressed in full combat gear, as well as ammunition, tanks, trucks, and vehicles, all with full petrol tanks.

"Just after 2am, three ships were torpedoed. LST 507 was set ablaze then sank, LST 531 sank within six minutes, and LST 289 managed to limp back to Dartmouth. The stench of fuel was heavy in the air and on the surface of the sea. Hundreds of men were trapped below decks as the

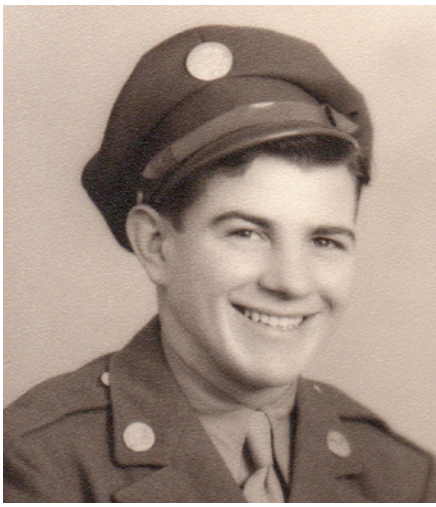
ships and sea burned. 639 American soldiers and sailors died that night of injuries, hypothermia, or drowned from incorrectly fitted life belts. Many more men lost their lives during Exercise Tiger than on Utah Beach. After their ordeal, survivors were told under threat of court martial not to speak of it prior to the invasion. Those uninjured went on to take part in the D-Day landings."

Laurie's connection is particularly personal, as her uncle died during Exercise Tiger.

"My uncle, Louis Archer Bolton, was the third of six children. My father was his older brother by 18 months, and they were very close. My father joined the US Navy in 1942, and my uncle enlisted in the US Army in 1943. He was assigned to the 607th Graves Registration Company, 1st Platoon, and had attained the rank of Sergeant. His platoon was going to be responsible for burying the dead on Utah Beach, and those who fell as the front lines advanced. In April 1944, he was 19 years old, a newlywed, with no children, and by



Ken Small with Laurie Bolton in front of the memorial he created: a Sherman tank lost to the sea during Exercise Tiger



Left: Laurie's uncle, Sgt. Louis A Bolton, who died at Slapton Sands
Right: Louis with his young bride Wilma



all accounts, as told to me by my grandmother and my father, was a very well-liked fellow with a great sense of humor. I was born on his birthday eight years after he died, so I have always asked about him ever since I was a young girl."

Laurie found out about Exercise Tiger in 1994 when she saw a documentary about the incident. Why did it take families like hers so long to understand what had happened?

"At the time of the tragedy, the survivors from all eight ships in the convoy were ordered under penalty of court martial, not to speak of the incident ... not just at the time, but ever. Of course, there were no official reports then, due to the secrecy of the planned invasion in six weeks' time. Family members were notified in early May 1944, that their loved one was simply "missing in action" with no other information. In August 1944, they were notified that indeed their son or husband was killed in action, but only with a vague description of "during operations in the English Channel". The survivors kept their silence for over 40 years. Once the late Ken Small established the Sherman Tank Memorial in 1984, the survivors began to open up and make their way to Slapton Sands to see Ken and tell their story. Ten years later, in 1994, television documentaries began to be made about Exercise Tiger, and that is when my family discovered the true facts surrounding my uncle's death. Sadly, most of the parents of the soldiers and sailors who died never found out what really happened as they had all passed away by that time, including my grandparents."

A monument to those who lost their lives in Exercise Tiger had been raised in 1984 by a local man, the late Ken Small. When Laurie realized her uncle was involved in the disaster, it was a comfort.

"This memorial is so important to the family members and the survivors, as it is an acknowledgment of the tragedy and recognition of the 639 lives lost. It is also a tangible place for us to come and remember our loved ones ...especially, for those

whose bodies were never recovered, including my uncle's, because we have no grave to visit. We are so grateful to Dean Small, and his wife Sarah, for continuing his father's legacy. It is my privilege to be an Honorary Director of Exercise Tiger Memorial, Ltd., along with Dean, who is the Director.

"I found out about the memorial Ken established in 1994, and it was my first time ever in England, which I had always wanted to visit. I wanted to go there and thank him on behalf of our family. While there, I stayed two nights at his B&B, The Cove Guest House, which gave me a further opportunity to visit with him. I presented him with a small plaque with a photograph of my uncle engraved with a note of thanks.

Laurie now travels back to the UK annually for Exercise Tiger memorial services. It adds to her affinity with the UK.

"My maternal grandmother was born in Manchester, England, and my paternal ancestors all came to America from England in the mid 1600s. I feel very much at home whenever I am in the UK, and I now have wonderful British friends I am close to! I come each year to represent those family members and survivors who cannot be there. It has been my honor, in past years, to escort survivors and family members to the memorial site in Slapton Sands and to Normandy. I will be doing the same this 75th anniversary year, escorting 16 family members from the USA.

Laurie regularly liaises with families, survivors and veterans who experienced Exercise Tiger firsthand.

"That aspect is so rewarding! Since the establishment of our website, www.exercisetiger.com so many family members have found us. They share their feelings of loss and stories of their uncle, father, or brother. That also gives us the opportunity to provide specific answers to questions about their loved one, and to create a page with a photo in the Honoured Dead section of our website. The survivors have shared their stories in writing and on film, which are posted on our website. It is so very important for future generations to hear firsthand about the tragedy.

"For the veterans, it has been a healing process to relieve them of the burden of secrecy they carried for so many years. In addition, it is an acknowledgment of the

horror they experienced, which was never recognized at the time until Ken Small established his memorial. Many survivors told me that Exercise Tiger was "their D-Day". For the families, it brings comfort to know their loved one's sacrifice has been recognized and remembered. They can come and see their loved one's name at the memorial site, look out into the distance of the English Channel, hear the soothing sound of the sea, and be comforted knowing they are near to where their loved one left this earth.

"It is my honor and privilege to be there to acknowledge the soldiers and sailors who made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom, to remember the uncle I never knew, and how much he meant to his family. The knowledge that he and the others who died will never be forgotten, brings a sense of peace and comfort.

British people as well as Americans who live in the UK also help to keep the memory of Exercise Tiger alive, to honor those who lost their lives, and also educate the next generation about what happened.

"The Royal Tank Regiment Association has been fantastic in holding a memorial service each year to remember those who died in Exercise Tiger, which is always attended by local citizens. Those citizens who attend will always remember, and we Americans acknowledge, the sacrifice they made when they were evacuated from their homes and farms for the cause of freedom. The survivors, who are now in their mid-nineties, and family members are so grateful for this annual memorial service. Thankfully, grandchildren of survivors, and those who perished, are now becoming aware and involved, and they will carry the remembrance of Exercise Tiger forward. ★

A Memorial Ceremony at Slapton Sands took place on April 28, 2019. Read about it at www.theamerican.co.uk. To learn more about Exercise Tiger, and to find out how you can keep the memory alive, check out www.exercisetiger.com.