



**The threat they faced : Field Marshal Rommel with soldiers of the 21st Panzer Division, part of Germany's 'Fortress Europe' defenses**

D-Day, June 6th 1944, which we commemorate every year, celebrates the 'beginning of the end,' in Churchill's words, of the tyranny of fascism and Nazism in World War II. Sadly, in 2014 we are compelled to reflect upon the hideous issues that continue to crop up across the globe. Syria is a massive ruin after three years of civil war. Since the Second World War country after country and region after region has found itself engulfed in internecine conflict or war. As this goes to press Boko Haram, an Islamist extremist sect, is wreaking death and destruction in Nigeria.

D-Day, June 6th, 1944, and the weeks that followed saw staggering carnage in Nazi-occupied France. They were as important in world history as the events of 1066. Indeed, the Overlord Embroidery, which adorns the walls of the D-Day Museum in Portsmouth, is modelled after the Bayeaux Tapestry and represents the free world's salvation in the face of the horrors of a Hittlerian empire. The Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944 was the largest deployment of an expeditionary

# D-Day 70th: Lest We Forget

Carol Gould remembers those who gave their lives to liberate Europe

force in human history and meant the future of mankind was in the balance. Dwight Eisenhower, the Allied Supreme Commander, had a chilling speech in his pocket prepared for the eventuality of defeat. Had he and Bernard Montgomery, the commander of the invasion's ground forces, failed we would not be fretting over the future life of *Strictly Come Dancing* or spending endless media hours discussing who would succeed David Moyes at Manchester United. We would not be lionising celebrity chefs or waiting anxiously for news of the Beckhams' latest house move. Had the men of Normandy 1944 failed we could have been plunged into a Thousand Year Reich. Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin and their military commanders did not allow this to happen. In recent years friends raging at me at dinner parties have roundly condemned FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt for being 'anti-Semitic' and 'card carrying Communists' but I will never shrink from defending them as guardians of freedom in the darkest age modern man has ever known.

Interestingly on a pilgrimage to Portsmouth - a city from which thousands of Americans departed for their ultimate sacrifice - in 2013, the young English cab driver did

not know it was 69 years since the invasion of Normandy, the largest armada in 835 years, had unfolded. It should be taught in schools so that its significance to free nations will never be forgotten.

On these trips I often meet the dwindling contingent of British D-Day veterans who gather on June 6th to remember the thousands of their fallen comrades-in-arms. In 2009 I met a British D-Day veteran who was still furious with the United States even after sixty-five years. Having detected my American accent, he fulminated about Roosevelt not entering the war early enough and imposing a huge debt upon Britain that it only finished repaying in 2008.

What I found interesting was his observation that America wasted no time in going to war in Afghanistan but that in 1940 it left Britain to stand up to Hitler alone for two terrible years. He was not willing to talk about this to my video camera, but said he needed to get it off his chest, sixty-five years of rage. He was not moved by the fact that over 9,000 young Americans lie under crosses and stars at Omaha Beach. Reasoning with him that the United States invaded Afghanistan because it had been attacked on September 11th, 2001 made no difference. He



PHOTO ROBERT CAPA

The dangerous dash to the beach on D-Day

was determined to paint America as almost criminally negligent in its refusal to come to Britain's aid as soon as war was declared in 1939. This is an accusation I have heard for the thirty-eight years in which I have lived in Britain. Watching the film *The Gathering Storm*, one is acutely aware of the total lack of preparedness in Britain and Europe in the Wilderness Years as Hitler marched across the Continent and the Channel Islands. (When I was researching my book, *Spitfire Girls*, I discovered that Germany was training future Luftwaffe aces at flying clubs for many years before the outbreak of World War II because the Treaty of Versailles had forbidden German militarisation.) The only individuals other than Winston Churchill who had a clear understanding of the Hell the Führer was about to perpetrate on humanity were the Jehovah's Witnesses. No one listened.

I always attend the annual service held in Portsmouth Cathedral to commemorate the anniversary of D-Day. On one of these occasions the Chaplain of the British Army gave the address and recounted a trip he had taken with his young children to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He said he had in recent years been asked if the

huge loss of life on D-Day had made sense. He said the unspeakable atrocities in the camp, in which Jehovah's Witnesses and political dissidents among others had been incarcerated alongside Jews, would have become our daily life had the Allies not triumphed on D-Day and in the subsequent battles.

Another veteran was moved to tears as I tried to film him telling his story. He began to sob talking about the death of his Commanding Officer and I ended up gripping his hand with one of mine whilst holding my video camera with the other. All of the octogenarian veterans I met live the Normandy Invasion as if it were yesterday. Their grief is real and searing.

The grim tally of deaths was staggering: 435,000 killed, wounded or missing in action on both sides in just the Battle of Normandy alone. As I walked around Portsmouth I could sense the presence of the tens of thousands of young men who never came back to this coastal city. An RAF fly-past had dropped one million poppies and they kept appearing for days - on the windowsill of my guest house, on the beach, on the ledge of the ATM machine, on the tracks of Southsea railway station. As I watched them blow in the wind

I realised each one represented a dead serviceman or woman. I bent down to pick one up but it seemed to get its own life and pull away from me. I then tried another but it pulled away: as if to say, 'I don't want to be separated from my buddy.' In 2004 I went to Omaha Beach and looked out at those seemingly endless fields of crosses. Somehow these poppies were even more poignant.

The ghosts of those brave and painfully young men of June hover over Britain, Europe and the free world as we go about our easy lives. In the wake of the raging conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East and Africa we are reminded that extremism is still in our midst and that tyranny can come to our shores. May we never forget the sacrifice of the men of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy. May we always be proud of the dynamic and free society in which we live and be ready to defend it.★

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