

'In a tight corner, you look on the bright side'

A D-Day survivor, Harry Billinge has devoted his life to ensuring his fallen comrades are never forgotten. The spirit that saw him through those dark days can inspire us all today too.

By **Joanna Moorhead**

Harry Billinge is gazing out to sea, but the waves he's looking at in his mind's eye aren't the ones licking the Cornish beach below us today; rather they are crashing onto the sands of Normandy on D-Day in 1944. The people emerging

out of the swell are young men just like he was on that June morning. 'They were my friends,' he says. 'We were all in it together. We trained together. We fought together. We did our best together.'

He turns, and fastens me with sharp, tear-filled eyes. 'But,' he says, shaking his head sadly, 'I'm afraid we didn't come home together.'

Harry, though, did come home. And while his fallen colleagues paid the ultimate price in order to free Europe from the clutches of the Nazis, the cost to Harry has been lifelong. Now 94, he never managed to get over the horrors he saw on D-Day. Many men died beside him, some even in his arms. After the war he was treated for what we now call PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), but despite long months in therapy, nothing made a real difference.

'Eventually the doctor said to me, "Harry, we can't help you. You've got too good a memory. You're never going to forget".'

In that moment, says Harry, he realised the doctor was right; and what he had to do was devote his whole life to making sure his fallen colleagues were always remembered. 'I've done my best for the men who were lost. But don't call me a hero. The real heroes were the lads who never came home.'

Every single year since 1944, Harry has made the pilgrimage back to Gold Beach in Normandy where he landed, having sailed from the Thames Estuary on

a merchant ship. For many years he collected for the British Legion Poppy Appeal. But as the decades rolled past, something bothered him: while other countries involved in the D-Day landings built memorials to that fateful and pivotal moment of the Second World War – the largest seaborne invasion in history – Britain failed to set up a permanent monument to those who died in the campaign.

When a project to build a Normandy Memorial was launched in 2016, with the Prince of Wales as its patron, Harry decided to join forces with the trust and became one of its star fundraisers. He spends three days a week sitting with his collection tin near the market in St Austell, where he lives. Incredibly, he's collected more than £30,000 for the Trust.

Today, though, there are also other frontline warriors on Harry's mind – the courageous essential workers and medics who are engaged in the battle against Covid-19. Harry, a man revered for his own heroic actions, is full of empathy: 'In this war, NHS staff are where I was on D-Day; they're in the boats crossing the Channel,' he tells me on the phone.

And in a patriotic rallying cry, he exhorts us all to follow the Government's instruction to stay at home, for example. 'It's about doing our duty: that's what we did during the Second World War. For a lot of people today it's a steep learning curve. We've got used to doing what we want to do, and this is about having to do what's right. It's about being selfless. We soldiers understood that all those decades ago.'

I first chatted to Harry before social distancing measures, in the house where he and his wife, Sheila, have lived for more than 50 years, and all around us are framed documents and photographs marking milestones in a life that's been dedicated to remembering his fallen friends, including a thank-you letter from Theresa May, acknowledging his fundraising efforts.

In June 2019, the then UK Prime Minister joined French President

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GLORIOUS MEMORIES

From left: Harry and Sheila on their wedding day; Harry collecting his MBE earlier this year; back in the German town of Goch, where in 1944, Harry helped remove the Nazi flag from the town hall. 'That was what it had all been about'

◆ Emmanuel Macron on Gold Beach to lay the first stone of the £30 million memorial that Harry has waited almost a lifetime to see. He was there on that day: 'It choked me up, I don't mind telling you. My heart was very full that morning.' The opening of the memorial, scheduled for September, may be delayed as construction has been temporarily suspended by coronavirus restrictions but, whenever that day comes, Harry hopes to be back to see the vast structure unveiled. Created by architect Liam O'Connor, it will have the names of the fallen carved into its pillars, and will be a place for reflection and quiet contemplation for generations to come.

For Harry, the events of that morning had been a long time in the preparation. He was born in Aldgate. 'I'm a proper cockney,'

he tells me proudly. 'You get people these days who say they live in London and I say where, and they say Croydon. And I say, London? That's Surrey...'

His family moved from the heart of the City to Kent and he was sent to school in Bromley. His dad was a career soldier who'd joined the Army in 1905 and fought in the First World War, marrying his mum in 1916. Harry was 14 when Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, and already an Army Cadet. His older brother Bill was 17 and signed up that day; Harry knew that if the war continued long enough, he'd join him.

His dad was working in communications and based in Kent. Bill, a pilot, was missing in August 1943 when Harry volunteered for active service

(happily, the family discovered a few weeks later that Bill was alive and well). It was a tough time for his parents, he recalls. 'My mum was upset to have a second son going to war while another son was missing. But I said, "I'm sorry, I'm doing it – call it my duty, if you like". All I know is that I knew there was a job to be done; I knew it was important and I knew I had to do it.'

He trained in Scotland, Yorkshire and Lancashire, mostly beside the sea and on

beaches: 'We all knew what was coming.'

It's hard to believe the slight and wiry Harry is in his nineties; his mind is still razor sharp, he doesn't miss a beat, and he's funny and witty in equal measure. 'We knew that we were headed for France,' he says. 'And we knew we wouldn't need our passports.'

For three weeks he waited aboard a merchant ship docked in the Thames; the weather that spring was bad, and timing played a huge role in the success of what would be the largest-ever seaborne invasion in history. The voyage across the Channel was filled with camaraderie and

jokes. 'I've always been a popular bloke, I've always had a lot of friends, and we were chatting the whole time. The men were saying to me, "Say a prayer for me, Harry". And I did. We all knew we could be going to die that day; life was very dodgy. We were in a very tight corner, and we knew it. But as always in life, you look on the bright side. That's the only way to get through.'

The thing he'll never forget about that day was the noise. 'It's impossible to describe; it went on and on. I jumped off the landing craft into knee-high water, and ran up the beach. But the Germans were ready and they weren't giving up: some men were being blown out of the sea, and that was the end of them. How anyone survived that day was a miracle.'

There were more desperate scenes to come. 'A 22-year-old man with a three-week-old baby at home was blown up by a bomb, and he died in my arms. Six decades later I made contact with the baby, by then a grown man, and told him what a wonderful person his dad was, as well as about his final moments. It meant a lot to him.'

Harry and his squadron slept where they could – often in fields – over the weeks following D-Day, and ate what they could find. And he did his job, which was to detonate explosives.

'I've killed many a man,' he says. 'I was there to blow things up – bridges and buildings. But I never wanted to hurt anyone. My country taught me to kill people – but afterwards you have to live with it, and that's what I realised I couldn't do.'

After D-Day he and his squadron advanced through France, Belgium, Holland and Germany; and there, in a town called Goch, he helped remove the Nazi flag from the town hall: 'That was what it had all been about.'

By VE Day, 75 years ago this month, he was in hospital in Kent suffering from a problem with his legs – a result of difficult living conditions. But he remembers the celebrations. 'I could hear the cheering – it sounded as though everyone had gone mad,' he says.

But the real legacy on his health was psychological, not physical. 'I couldn't sleep at night: I'd go out walking in the early hours and return at dawn and sleep for a couple of hours from exhaustion.'

After that came the treatment for PTSD, and the doctor's admission that there was little medicine could do.

After the war Harry trained as a hairdresser, and then moved to Cornwall at the end of the 1940s, where he met Sheila, a fellow hairdresser. They've been married for 65 years and have three children, two grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. 'They're always telling me they think I'm wonderful, but I tell them I'm having none of it. I don't want them to be proud – I want them to be thankful. And they are.'

Being 'still here' so long after the seminal event of his life, and the date when so many lost theirs, is a constant surprise to Harry. 'I'm so grateful, though, that I'm still here, because I can remind people what it was all about.' On his collection tin the words say this: 'If you love your freedom thank a veteran not a politician' – and that's exactly what Harry believes. An optimist by nature, Harry is confident that today's heart-rending crisis will pass too. 'The War seemed like the end of the world; and for many of my friends it was the end of the world. But it passed; everything passes, in the end.'

And in this unexpected 21st-century hour of need, he urges others to honour those who've toiled tirelessly for their fellow citizens. 'Just as I've worked to make sure we never forget the debt we owe to the soldiers who fought on the Normandy beaches, let's make sure we never forget the debt we owe to the NHS.'

When he received his MBE from the Queen earlier this year, he told her he'd be heading to France to see the Normandy memorial 'God willing, if I'm still alive' – and he and Sheila, 85, show few signs of slowing down. 'If you do that, you're dead,' he says. 'I'll keep going for as long as I can.'

He and Sheila get out when they can; when they went to the cinema for the movie *1917* they were given complimentary seats. 'We went along and they said, "Harry, you get in for free". They wouldn't take any money from me.'

Looking back over his long life, he says the most important advice he ever received was from his dad. 'He told me: keep your head down, and your mind open. Never be afraid. If fear takes over, you've lost it. You've got to stay with it. That's what I always did – that's why I'm still here.'

HOW YOU CAN HELP

'Harry Billinge has been an absolute inspiration to us and to many thousands of others,' says Julie Verne of the Normandy Memorial Trust. 'We know how important it is to Harry and to all Normandy Veterans finally to realise the promise they made to their friends who never made it home, that their sacrifice will never be forgotten. Seeing this memorial completed is their last duty to the fallen.'

To support Harry's fundraising, visit normandymemorialtrust.org/donate. Cheques can also be sent to: The Secretary, The Normandy Memorial Trust, 56 Warwick Sq, London SW1V 2AJ.



RHYME AND REASON
With poet
Rob Aitchison,
author of
Longest Day –
one of Harry's
favourite poems