



The Jewish Chronicle

April 7, 2009

## **A final farewell for our D-Day heroes**

By James Martin and Yaakov Wise

**The 60th anniversary in 2004 was set to be the last. But an 11th-hour government change of mind means veterans will travel to Normandy on June 6 one more time.**



**Troops establish themselves on the beach after making their way through low water from landing craft**

Co-ordinating the landing on Juno beach in Normandy were officers and men from British Combined Operations, including a young Leading Aircraftsman, David Teacher, who, now 85, lives with his wife of 66 years, Nancy, in Salford.

Mr Teacher, a retired garage proprietor, is vice chairman of the Bolton and District Normandy Veterans' Association and a former chairman of Manchester Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen.

Thanks to an unexpected decision by the British government to follow the US lead and back financially a 65th D-Day commemoration, he will be among the Lancashire veterans to return to the beaches and remember their friends and colleagues who died.

Mr Teacher was born in Hastings and brought up both in England and Mandate Palestine, where part of his family had settled. When he returned to England he joined the RAF and trained as a driver-mechanic. While based in Scotland in

1943 he obtained a special “unofficial” weekend pass so that he could marry his childhood sweetheart at Prestwich’s Holy Law Synagogue.

Juno beach was five miles wide and stretched to either side of the small fishing port of Courseulles-sur-Mer, France. Two smaller villages, Bernières and St Aubin, lay to the east of Courseulles. The coastline had been fortified by the Germans and bristled with guns, concrete emplacements, pillboxes, fields of barbed wire and mines.

From June to August 1944, Mr Teacher helped to direct the Canadian assault troops who stormed ashore, racing across the wide-open beaches swept with machine-gun fire to hit the gun positions. In fierce hand-to-hand fighting, they fought their way inland, securing a critical bridgehead for the allied invasion.

The victory was a turning point in the Second World War and led to the liberation of Europe and the defeat of Nazi Germany.

“We slept in the sand and for the first two or three weeks we were under constant fire from German guns,” said Mr Teacher.

Jewish soldiers were told of the dangers of being captured, as they faced being put on cattle trucks to the concentration camps in Poland. But David Teacher was lucky. Now he regularly returns to Normandy to visit the war graves and pay his respects to those who died in the operation.



**David Teacher: helped to co-ordinate the landings on Juno beach**

Leslie Sutton was just 18 when he was called up to the RAF, and he remembers events so clearly it might have been yesterday.

The 84-year-old, who lives in Ilford, joined the service in 1942, the same year in which one of his three brothers was killed.

“My brother Ronald died in the air during the Cologne bombing raid,” recalls Mr Sutton.

“I was lucky and privileged to serve. I was in a ground crew regiment and we were training in the Isle of Man for six months before we headed over to France.

“There were five or six Jewish boys on our base. I was fortunate that one of our cooks was a gentleman with the surname Bloom. He served me extra portions.” Mr Sutton, talking at the Jewish Military Museum in Hendon and wearing his wartime medals, smiled as he spoke.

Talking about the days leading up to the momentous D-Day landings, he said: “My unit didn’t know what was happening until when we got on the ship from Chichester to Omaha Beach.

“When we reached Omaha we climbed up some cliffs and then cleared an area to allow planes to land and re-fuel,” he said.

Mr Sutton, who helped to liberate a women’s camp in Germany at the end of the war, did not understand the full horror of the concentration camps until later, when he was responsible for “transporting VIPs” — British soldiers who were observers at the Nuremberg trials in 1945 and 1946.

He is unequivocal about what the war means to him. “I went in a boy and came out a man.”

Mr Sutton is unlikely to travel to France for the 65th anniversary commemorations of D-Day. He said: “If there’s something going on here I will attend, but wherever I am, I will remember very clearly the events of 65 years ago and the sacrifices we made for our country.”

Another Jewish ex-serviceman, David Butterworth, was involved in “D-Day minus one” after flying into France on a Horsa glider on June 5 in preparation for the start of the landings the next day. As a 20-year-old in 1942, he was a wireless operator and part of the Down Ampney 271 squadron, based in the Cotswolds.

At his home in Southgate, Mr Butterworth, 86, said: “Our camp was closed on June 4 in preparation for our mission the next day.

“Our role was to drop parachutists and gliders into Normandy, as well as transferring vehicles, so the soldiers could capture the coast.”

Looking through his log book, he recalled the “hundreds of hours” he spent flying back and forth to his base in order to re-fuel and pick up more men. His squadron left their base at 22:37 on June 4 before dropping off 30 paratroopers and gliders at Gonneville along the Normandy coast.

By 04:00 they were back at their base, ready to bring over more men.

“I was never scared of death. Even when both our wings were clipped by ground fire, I never felt any fear. My only concern was that if we were shot down, that my death would be a quick one.”

D-Day, said Mr Butterworth, “still matters enormously. I hope that the government continues to pay veterans the respect we deserve, by hosting official commemorations.”

Mervyn Kersh, now 84, joined the 17 Advanced Ordnance Depot in 1943. At his home in Cockfosters, he described the dramatic events which led to his role in the Normandy landings.

“Our commanding officer assembled all 800 of us and told us that 10 of our officers would be sent as the first reconnaissance unit landing on D-Day. Sadly, a torpedo hit the advance party, and they were all killed except one.

“We had to re-group and arrived from Gosport on June 8, where our role was to get the tanks and vehicles off the vessels and on to dry land. My job, as technical clerk, was to ensure we never ran out of supplies.

“When the Mulberry harbour (a temporary bridge) was erected about a week later it meant ships could unload without tenders, so we could get vehicles out to the corps more quickly.”

He recalled the liberation of Bayeux in mid-June, 12 miles in-land from the Normandy coast, and his joy at attending a military synagogue service there with Allied servicemen, “many of whom spoke in Yiddish”.

Mr Kersh served in Japan and later, Egypt, where he spent most of his time “in Palestine without permission”.

He added: “I would like to go out to Normandy for the commemoration. If I can get it organised it would be nice to go one more time.”

### How Obama made it all happen

- The D-Day commemoration marks the anniversary of the Normandy landings, which were the first operations of the Allied Invasion of Normandy along the north coast of France. Over 130,000 troops landed on D-Day in an invasion that lasted until mid-July 1944. In 1994, France hosted the 50th anniversary, and 10 years later, the Queen invited veterans to Buckingham Palace for the 60th. Even the Normandy Veterans’ Association believed that would be the last such event.
- However, an official commemoration for the 65th anniversary was only confirmed a few weeks ago when US President Barack Obama announced plans to send an American delegation to Normandy, with the British government quickly following suit.
- Letters have been sent to all Ajex branches informing veterans that they are able to apply to go to Normandy for the June 6 event. Veterans have until the end of April to apply.
- The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women (Ajex) hope that at least 50 ex-servicemen will apply for lottery funding to pay for them to take part in the 65th anniversary events.
- Jeff Borsack of Ajex said: “Because this is an official commemoration there will be funding from the Lottery to send people on the trip. Although fewer survivors are able to go this time, there’s an increase in costs for veterans’ carers.”

Those wishing to apply should contact Mr Borsack on 020 8202 2323.

- The Jewish statistics: According to Ajex historian Henry Morris, who wrote *We Will Remember Them*, there were “approximately 92 Jewish men who died on D-Day and in the Normandy landings”.
- Not every serviceman identified himself as Jewish, often because of fears of being captured and sent to a concentration camp. Many Jewish servicemen removed or “lost” their identifying dogtags for this reason.
- One young British Jew who died was Private Norman Vine of the 6th Airborne Division, shot down parachuting into France on D-Day aged 20. Another, Captain Lionel Lee — who was awarded the Military Cross after serving with the Royal Armoured Corp — died aged 27.