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Interview – The D-Day Veterans, Alfred Neesham and John Montgomery

From *The Journal* (Newcastle, UK), May 10th, 1994.

A friendship welded in hell

By **Matt Jones**

Moments of heroism in the D-Day film *The Longest Day* are recalled whenever Tyneside war veterans Alfred Neesham and John Montgomery talk about their roles in the great invasion.

The two old soldiers have known each other since they were teenage bricklayers in pre-war Benwell, Newcastle, and today they live near each other in Kingston Park.

But the experience that bonds the two men more than any other is the part they played in the allied assault on Normandy in June 1944, an event dramatised in the 1962 Hollywood epic starring John Wayne and Robert Mitchum.

On the morning of June 6, Alfred, a Lance Corporal in the Royal Army Medical Corps, was dodging mortar and machine gun fire on the beach at Arromanches, while paratrooper John was securing the area around the famous Pegasus Bridge, several miles inland.

Both men had left Britain at 10pm on the night of June 5, 1944: Alfred by ship from Portsmouth and John from a secret airstrip somewhere in southern England – he is still not sure where it was.

“Through the night I thought of home, wrote letters to my wife and played cards for the little money we had. It was a pretty nail-biting time,” said Alfred.

When his landing craft, LST 30, hit the sand at 5am, the 24-year-old unarmed medic came face to face with what he remembers as “hell on earth”.

“I’d be telling lies if I said I wasn’t frightened,” he said. “There was heavy shelling and gunfire and the beach was mined. Our only defence was the red cross on our uniforms.

(more)

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D-Day Veterans/Page 2/...

“But we didn’t think about ourselves. Our job was to pick up the wounded and take them back to the ship. We also treated Germans. They were human beings, too, and I suppose they would have done the same for us.

“At the time I was too busy to realise that it was a historic day. We were young and daft and it was too noisy to think. But afterwards I’ve often wondered how a brickie from Benwell ended up as a nurse in Normandy. Who knows how the army thinks.”

John – “Monty” to his friends – had been fighting for three hours before Alfred landed on the beach at Arromanches. One of the first allied soldiers to set foot in France for four years, he was less afraid of the battle to come.

“When you jump out of an aeroplane, you are so hyped up. When you hit the ground, feel your legs and realise that you’ve landed in one piece, you think you can take on the world. You’re frightened of nothing,” said the 73 year old.

John was dropped from an RAF Stirling and touched down in the middle of the designated landing zone near the distinctive church in the small town of Ranville.

But fellow paratrooper “Taffy” Evans was less fortunate. He crashed through a greenhouse in a garden in the town, an accident he walked away from that was later depicted in the Oscar-winning film.

“We accepted that the invasion was a job we had to do,” said John. “I had been in the Paras for two years before D-Day. There was a certain amount of apprehension, but we were super fit and took it in our stride.”

One of the men who jumped with John was actor Richard Todd, who later relived the events of June 6 when filming *The Longest Day*. “Toddy was our intelligence officer and was based at our field headquarters near the café at Pegasus Bridge,” remembered John, who was 23 at the time.

Of the 90 men who leapt into the darkness with him, only 60 reached Benouville, the town they were to capture. And by 9pm that evening, when they were finally relieved by the seaborne forces, only nine men were able to walk out of the town.

“There was so much bravery,” remembered John. “Some men should have been given VCs as big as dustbin lids.”

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