

Sarah Meyrick looks at the diary entries of a D-Day chaplain

SEVENTY-FIVE years ago, the Allied forces were preparing for the largest seaborne invasion in history. The scale of the operation is staggering. By the end of D-Day (6 June 1944), 156,000 British, American, and Canadian troops had landed in Normandy. By 4 July, that figure had reached a million.

Accompanying the Allies were a significant number of chaplains. As Field Marshal Montgomery famously said in a speech in All Saints' Cathedral, Cairo: "I would soon as think of going into battle without my artillery as without my chaplains."

For Montgomery, the son of a bishop, Christian values and patriotism went hand in hand. He believed that soldiers who were alert, tough, enthusiastic, and trained to kill could achieve anything provided they had faith in God and were properly led.

His Chaplain-General, the Revd Frederick Hughes, like Montgomery, had served in the First World War, and shared his vision. Speaking on the BBC Home Service on 15 June 1944, he observed: "Many, many thousands of men went forth for righteousness' sake and for no other reason. The chaplains were asked, and strongly asked, to make our men as Christian as we could."

CHAPLAINS, unarmed, accompanied every division and unit, on land and sea, and in the air. While it is unclear how many took part in the Normandy landings, 3692 British chaplains served in the Second World War (in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East, as well as Europe), of whom 2869 were appointed to Emergency Commissions during the war. Ninety-six chaplains lost their lives in the war, 21 of them in Normandy between June and September 1944.

The part that they played was to administer the sacraments, conduct services, and help with morale. In practice, many chaplains assisted at regimental aid posts behind the front, carrying wounded soldiers, cleaning wounds, and fetching supplies, besides ministering to the wounded and dying.

Some of the stories of these men are well-known. The Revd Leslie Skinner, a Methodist minister, was the first British chaplain to land on Sword Beach with the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry (Features, 6 June 2014). His diary, *The Man Who Worked on Sundays*, paints an unflinching portrait of the reality of ministry under fire. He made it his duty to record precisely the burial site of each of the 153 men of the regiment killed in action during his time as their padre. He was well-known for retrieving the body parts of men who had died in tanks, so that their comrades did not have to encounter their charred remains.

Another was the Rt Revd Mark Green, later Bishop of Aston, who landed on 7 June with the 27th Lancers, and won the Military Cross for rescuing wounded men under heavy artillery fire. Then there is Padre George Parry, killed on 7 June after parachuting into Normandy with the 6th Airborne Division. His story was made into a radio documentary when a journalist stumbled across his suitcase in a junk shop (Features, 23/30 December 2016).

Many more fascinating accounts



ALAMY

American soldiers on Omaha Beach recover the dead after the D-Day invasion, June 1944, by US Army Signal Corps photographer Walter Roseblum

Burials at high tide, June 1944

are recorded in *No Guns, Just God's Glory* (OREP, 2018), by the Revd Dr Tom Wilson, who has attempted to record the stories of all the Allied chaplains killed in Normandy. He has a full list of the British and Canadian casualties, thanks to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, but the United States list remains incomplete. "Padres were a steadying influence on the men," he says. "Going into combat is a scary business. But they were highly respected because they were relatively low rank, and so not part of the administrative structure."

THE chaplains who received the most respect were, unsurprisingly, those who trained with the men and worked alongside them. They did not always get it right; one of the earliest casualties was the Revd

Derrick Williams, whose pre-invasion sermon to the men in his care on the night of 5 June was judged to be so inappropriate that he took his own life in shame.

The majority of the chaplains, no doubt, quietly got on with the job, and did not attract any particular attention. When I was researching *The Restless Wave*, which tells the story of a chaplain who served on D-Day, I was lucky enough to be given the unpublished memoir of one such man: the Revd Harry Treble. Born in 1906, Treble was Vicar of Epping Upland, in Chelmsford diocese, when he volunteered to serve as a chaplain.

"When Dad was in his mid-eighties, I commissioned him to write his memoirs, little thinking he would," his son Frank says, who until then knew next to nothing about his

father's wartime experiences. "But, sure enough, one day he surprised me with 120 pages, written on the back of his Church Commissioners Pension printouts, in longhand and with barely a crossing out."

Harry Treble was 35 when he joined up. "He told me he felt guilty at having been too young for the First World War and too old for the Second," Frank says. After various postings in Britain, Harry was deployed to D-Day, attached to a unit of medics and orderlies to serve on Sword Beach.

"It became . . . boring for the men, who had nothing to do except check their equipment and familiarise themselves with the one part of D-Day they were responsible for, after they got there, if they did," Harry wrote of the days beforehand. "Tension increased and the Padres were busy taking services, counselling and keeping up morale. In fact, there developed a mini Religious Revival, prompted by fear, which evaporated when the . . . dangers of D-Day were over."

HARRY conducted a "well attended" service of holy communion on the freighter while crossing the channel. "When we set sail and got into the Channel, the sight was unforgettable. As far as the eye could see, the sea was covered with vessels of all kinds, all making the in the same direction. Nothing can stop us now!"

The landing did not entirely go to plan, however, as, somehow or other, Harry ended up on Juno Beach with the Canadians rather than at his intended destination. Eventually, he made his way to the village of Lion-sur-Mer and the field

dressings station. For the next few days, his unit worked around the clock, frequently under fire from the enemy. "We dealt with the badly wounded, friend and foe alike, and a captured German [doctor] worked with us until he was evacuated to the UK," he wrote.

One distressing factor was that the proposed burial site at Hermanville near by was unusable as it was full of German mines. "Consequently, the countryside was full of graves which . . . would [have to be moved] after the war."

"For weeks after, the Bay of Seine washed up on the tide bodies of men who had been drowned, and, owing to being buffeted on rocks, were devoid of heads or limbs and in some case were just torsos. We knew that many men had been lost on the American Omaha Beach. My batman every day for weeks gathered them up at high tide for burial."

"There was no means of identification, even of sex, and their clothing had perished in the sea. I assumed they were military personnel, though some might have been civilians. Once I buried some German POWs. I knew no German, but I gave them what I would for our own men."

THE Battle for Normandy continued into September 1944, and Harry's diary with it. He recorded regular Sunday worship, and endless burials. Then there is a twist: Harry moved with his unit to Bernay, where he met the young Jeannine Lefevre. To the horror of her family, she had recently become a Protestant, and wanted to attend his church parade.

"Despite his non-existent French and her schoolgirl English, they appear to have understood each other sufficiently to arrange to get married — and wasted no time about it, either," Frank says. His mother, he adds, was 16 years Harry's junior, and entirely unprepared for parish life in Essex. "[The story is] that when Jeannine stepped off the boat train, she was hardly dressed in the traditional vicar's-wife garb, of the time, of twinset and tweeds. She sported a very *Parisienne* two-piece suit complete with a bright pink beret."

There is a coda to the story. Many years later, the schoolboy Frank found himself sitting next to "Monty" at lunch on Speech Day.

"It is a regret that I didn't have the self-awareness and confidence to explain the genesis of my being," he says. "Something on the lines of, 'Actually, Field Marshal, I am a product of your Normandy invasion. My father was a chaplain in your army, landed on D-Day itself, and, subsequently, when garrisoned inland at the town of Bernay, met my mother, Jeannine, a French civilian. On cessation of hostilities, he returned there directly from Germany, and married her."

"Every year, thanks to the generosity of my grandparents, we had holidays at Lion-sur-Mer, the beach where Dad had disembarked. There, when making sandcastles, my sister and I occasionally dug up some of your leftover bullets."

The *Restless Wave* by Sarah Meyrick is published by Marylebone House at £9.99 (Church Times Bookshop £9).



The Revd Harry Treble as a Forces chaplain and in retirement