

# HE WAS A GIANT AMONG GIANTS ON D-DAY

The Fraser clan were proud to erect a new memorial to Lord 'Shimi' Lovat, who led the Commandos ashore on Sword Beach, says **Virginia Fraser**



There were 200 of us at Ouistreham on Sword Beach – Fraser family and clan, French and British dignitaries, a Scots Guards piper, standard bearers and a few veteran French commandos. We were gathered in Normandy to unveil a bronze statue in memory of my father-in-law, Brigadier Lord Lovat, Commander 1st Commando Brigade, and all those who served under him, including 200 Free French.

The statue is in a small memorial garden, no bigger than the German bunker that stood on the spot 70 years ago. There, at 6.50am on June 6 1944, "Shimi" Lovat led his men into battle on D-Day, all of them buoyed by his personal piper, Bill Millin, playing *Highland Laddie* and *Scotland The Brave*.

The unveiling took place last month. In an ideal world, it would have happened on the precise anniversary, but the garden is small and today will play host to the Queen, President Obama, Chancellor Merkel, Prime Minister Cameron and President Putin as they pay tribute not just to Shimi and his men, but to all of those who gave their lives.

It is a magnificent spot – the garden well-tended, the sands golden – and, on the day we gathered there, the sea glimmered. As the veil was gently drawn from the statue, a Fraser cousin read those famous lines from the Commando prayer: "Teach us to give and not to count the cost/ To fight and not to heed the wounds/ To toil and not to seek for rest... We will remember them." There wasn't a dry eye among us.

I had been very keen that the young be included in this gathering of the clan. And so 35 scampering Fraser children, dressed in tartan trews and kilts, along with the family terrier, a tartan ribbon in his collar, all stood still at that moment.

I pictured Shimi, on the eve of D-Day, then 32, addressing his troops after prayers. The service was over, and the men had been

kneeling on sodden turf in driving rain in a Hampshire field. "I wish you all the best of luck in what lies ahead," he had told them. "This will be the greatest military venture of all time; the Commando Brigade has an important role to play and 100 years from now your children's children will say, 'They must have been giants in those days'."

Our thoughts also turned to a generation of tough, brave young men, only a little older than our scampering children. They had leaped into those icy seas on D-Day, sometimes out of their depth and unable to swim, bowed down by their mountainous backpacks. They had fought their way up the beaches, seeing friends being blown to smithereens around them. Operation Overlord had begun. These indomitable young men had come to liberate Europe.

As 24th Chieftain of Clan Fraser, Shimi – MacShimidh to give him his Gaelic title – was born into leadership. It was in his genes (David Stirling, his cousin, founded the SAS). Resilient, tough, charismatic, he believed in public service and in serving his country, but he also had a literary, almost poetic bent. Commanding and dashing, he exuded confidence that instilled courage in those around him.

"The handsomest man to cut a throat" was how Winston Churchill once described him. He had the best posture of anyone I have met. Ian Rank-Broadley's sculpture captures it brilliantly. We chose Ian for the commission because he is first and foremost a military sculptor, with real knowledge and understanding of fighting men and women. His work at the Armed Forces Memorial in Staffordshire is remarkable.

Shimi's leadership qualities were tested to



Simon Lovat (Shimi's grandson) and Arlette Gondrée and Corporal Oakes from The Scots Guards; top, the statue and Lord Lovat in 1942

the limit on D-Day. The mission of 1st Commando Brigade – or 1st Special Service Brigade, as it was known in June 1944 – was to break through German defences on the eastern side of Sword Beach. At lightning speed, they were to fight their way four miles inland to Pegasus Bridge over the Caen Canal, and bring reinforcements to the 6th Airborne Division, relieving the glider-borne troops who had taken the bridge at dead of night.

Shimi and his commandos arrived just after the appointed hour of midday, to the swirl of pipes. He famously apologised for being two minutes late. The bridges were crucial; at the push of a detonator, the Germans could have destroyed them. With the Allied supply lines cut, the invasion could have foundered.

Plunging into further battles, Shimi was nearly killed four days later by Allied shrapnel and was given the last rites by Father René de Naurusis. His last words as he handed over his brigade were: "Take over the Brigade and not a step back; not a step back!"

Members of the de Naurusis family joined us at the unveiling ceremony. Afterwards, Arlette Gondrée, whose family owns the café beside Pegasus Bridge, hosted a lunch for us all. Her parents helped those who resisted the German occupation and, as a young child, she lived with an acrid smell of skin, cordite and blood as the wounded were carried in secret on to the kitchen table.

She remembers D-Day vividly; playing in the garden beside the canal, hearing Millin's bagpipes as they came ever closer. The French had been so traumatised by the Occupation but it dawned on her, even at the tender age of five, that this was an extraordinary moment. Perhaps the end of hunger was in sight.

Her father started digging up the champagne that he had hidden from the Germans – 1,000 bottles in all. As Shimi arrived, during a lull in the crossfire, he was offered a glass. He thanked his host profusely but declined, explaining he was at work.

Arlette's café has become her personal shrine to D-Day. She is the keeper of her own archives, photos and memorabilia; her walls are covered with photos of the heroes she admires so much. Hers is a sacred mission: to explain to young visitors what sacrifice a whole generation made for the freedoms we enjoy today, and to keep their memories alive. And it is thanks to her, and the community of Ouistreham, that the statue of Shimi is standing so proudly today in the memorial garden on Sword Beach. But it was one small boy in Los Angeles who ignited the project.

I was in California with my eight-year-old grandson, Roscoe, and we were watching *The Longest Day*, the Hollywood classic that tells the story of D-Day (Peter Lawford plays Shimi). Roscoe expressed a wish to see where his great-grandfather had landed.

In May 2013, we trooped off to Normandy and met Arlette Gondrée. She immediately told me that Leon Gautier, president of the 4th Commando Association, a Free French fighter who landed with Shimi, wanted the Fraser family to raise money for a statue of Shimi in time for the 70th anniversary celebrations. So, too, she added, did the people of Ouistreham.

Time was very short. We had only eight months before the sculpture had to be in the foundry. With the help of family, friends and clan members, we managed to raise the five-figure sum required for the commission. Over five, or was it six, trips by ferry to France, I first persuaded the local mayor to give his blessing, then chose the spot for the plinth, and made other arrangements, including making sure that Leon Gautier could be there at the unveiling.

Four weeks before the planned date there was a huge lurch to the Right in the local elections and the mayor was ousted. In fear for our carefully laid plans, my sister-in-law and I rushed over once more to meet the new incumbent, Monsieur Bail, just 28. All was well, he reassured us, but he was distracted. Ouistreham was planning something far bigger – the 70th anniversary commemorative visit of so many world leaders.

Today, Shimi will be standing guard alongside them, facing three-quarters towards France and a quarter back to Britain. I couldn't have had him turning his back on us. Nor us on him, and the many like him who on D-Day gave their lives so we could have ours.

Lord Lovat (1911-1995) died at Beauty, Inverness-shire