



LORD LOVAT

'PIPER, WOULD YOU MIND GIVING US A TUNE?'

THE LORD AND HIS FAITHFUL PIPER

► Sword Beach had been selected as the landing zone for the elite commandos, led by one of the most flamboyant characters to participate in D-Day. Simon Fraser was better known as the 15th Lord Lovat, a colourful Highland chieftain. Just 33, he was commander of the 1st Special Service Brigade. Only Lovat would have the chutzpah to wear a monogrammed shirt under his battle dress. And only he would have the verve to go into battle with a Highland piper at his side. It was 8.40am when the commandos hit Sword Beach. Lovat's bagpiper, Bill Millin, leapt off the ramp just behind his lordship and landed in waist-deep water. The commando in front of him was hit in the face by shrapnel.

Lovat seemed immune to the danger, turning to Millin and asking him to play *Road To The Isles* on his bagpipes. The conversation was so bizarre and unexpected that Millin

would later recall the exact words in interviews. 'Would you mind giving us a tune?' asked Lovat. 'You must be joking, surely?' said Millin. 'What was that?' asked Lovat. 'Well what tune would you have in mind, sir?' 'How about *Road To The Isles*?' 'Now would you like me to walk up and down, sir?' 'Yes. That would be nice. Yes, walk up and down.'

As shellfire exploded and mortars thumped into the dunes, Millin strolled up and down the beach blasting his pipes. He would later learn from captured Germans that they didn't shoot him because they thought he was mad.

Lovat was in his element, chuckling wildly as his men crushed the German defenders. No sooner was the beach secure than the commandos had another task: to relieve John Howard's men still holding out against the Germans at Pegasus Bridge five miles away.

It was a highly dangerous advance, as Cliff Morris and his troop were to discover. 'Suddenly we ran into trouble,' he wrote in his diary. 'Heavy machine-gun fire from the woods sprayed around us, making us get down and pinning us to the ground.' One of

his lads, known as Young Adams, poked his head over the ditch. 'He received a bullet through the neck and was grievously wounded.' Bleeding profusely, he had to be abandoned once the German position had been knocked out. 'Not a nice feeling,' wrote Morris, 'but orders had to be obeyed.'

As the commandos advanced from Sword, the British troops on Gold Beach, ten miles to the west, were in trouble. They were being targeted by hundreds of German defenders hidden in bunkers and machine-gun nests.

But help was at hand. As the exposed infantrymen struggled ashore, so did an army of mechanised vehicles: amphibious Shermans, Crocodile tanks (fitted with flame-throwers) and armoured bulldozers. Among the men driving these extraordinary vehicles was Robert Palmer, the 28-year-old commander of a Sexton self-propelled gun – a vehicle that looked like a tank without a turret.

As he advanced off the beach, a salvo of enemy mortars slammed into the five tanks in front of him, turning them to fireballs. In an interview conducted by one of the Imperial



recalled by 19-year-old diary. 'It's them Edwards. He into cheers. 'Sh expressed our j 'yelling things li you've got a real

Wally Parr em time to see the 'He was wearing pullover, a green

Parr stepped i a salute. 'Well before asking a appeared second addressing Lovat very pleased to s

'Aye,' replied you.' Then he g we are two-and

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In doing so, he had made a key D-Day. By the e of Nazi-occupie

'D-Day: The Sol out now in paper

War Museum's sound archivists in 2000, when Palmer was in his 80s, he recalled what happened next. 'Sergeant!' shouted one of his men who had spotted a concealed German bunker. 'Quick! You've got the best gun nearest to that! Put it out of action!'

Palmer knew his vehicle would be next to be hit. He had no option but to attempt to destroy the bunker. His Sexton was a sluggish beast that weighed 35 tons, but if driven hard it could travel at more than 30mph. Now, he issued his men with a daring plan. 'When I say "Go", go. Put your foot down.' His idea was to drive toward the bunker at top speed, before slamming the Sexton to a halt. The gun was to be swung to 45 degrees and fired. If they got the correct angle, they might just put a shell through the gun slot. Palmer revved the engine before charging forwards. As he approached the bunker, he hit the brakes and gave the order to fire. The first shell crashed on to the edge of the aperture. 'A fraction high,' yelled Palmer. 'A fraction to the left.' The second shot was a bullseye, passing directly inside the bunker and exploding with

devastating consequences. 'If we'd practised it all the morning, we couldn't have got better than that,' said Palmer. 'It was marvellous.'

THE CHARGE OF THE BIKE BRIGADE

Among those advancing inland was a troop of commandos led by a London bruiser named Stan 'Scotty' Scott. He would later record an interview with the National Army Museum, in which he set out the vital role of his men. Equipped with fold-up bicycles, he gathered a group of his hardest-hitters and made a dash for Pegasus Bridge in a welter of fire – enacting their own version of the Tour de France. 'There was five of us,' he said, 'like yellow jerseys going first.' Other commandos were also racing towards the bridge, but Scott and his lads were out in front, cycling through the village of Le Port – still full of German snipers – before pressing onwards to the bridge.

Soon after, the main body of commandos arrived, with Lovat leading. It was a moment