

Letter from Scotland

Could we do it again today ? Could we land 150,000 troops on the beaches of northern France and sacrifice 4,400 soldiers, all on one day? It amazes me what my parents' generation were able to do 75 years ago. But it wasn't just a "normal" war. It was a monumental struggle between good and evil, and it was war on an industrial scale.

The D-Day commemorations have reminded us of just what a huge national effort was involved, from the shipyards and munitions factories, to the mines and farms. And what sacrifice was required from individual families – loved ones killed and wounded, long separations, air-raids, rations, the confusions and disciplines of war time.

Every family has a story to tell of those dreadful days, like my mother working in a hospital in Manchester during the blitz, or my uncle serving as a young medical officer in the 8th Army.



"Lest we forget." Commando Memorial, Spean Bridge
Scotland had a special role as a training ground for the D-Day landings. At Inveraray Castle on Loch Fyne, some 250,000 soldiers were taught how to land on the beaches. At Achnacarry Castle in Lochaber, the Royal Marine Commandos were taught how to parachute into enemy territory and attack from behind the lines.

At Castle Toward near Dunoon the techniques for landing tanks and supply lorries were practised over and over again. And all around us, on almost every beach, there are the remains of anti-tank bollards and machine gun posts, the concrete signs

of the fear of invasion.

The drama of veterans returning to the Normandy beaches this week has brought a sudden halt to the normal news of Brexit negotiations, the Conservative leadership race, Labour party woes, under-funded public services and climate change preparations. The memories of 75 years ago have given us a salutary overview of where we are now. And isn't it sad, that half the voters of England and Wales want to walk away from the Europe they did so much to save from the Nazis just a generation ago ?



Trump blimp in The Meadows in July 2018

Don't worry, the Brexiteers assure us, Britain still has a staunch ally in the United States. But President Trump's visit did little to improve the "special relationship". At one point he said any trade deal would include American access to NHS contracts, only later to rule that out. He blundered into British domestic politics by praising Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage and picking a fight with the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan. And of course he claimed not to notice the demonstrations against his visit, including one in Glasgow and

another in Edinburgh.



Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage speaking at the EU Election Launch at the Corn Exchange Edinburgh

As a famous climate change denier, President Trump would not have noticed the Extinction Rebellion activists would chained themselves to the outer wall of The Scottish Parliament this week in protest at the lack of detailed plans to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2045. It was a point also made by the parliament's environment committee. But, hey specifics are not what politicians do well. It's electorally dangerous to suggest banning cars from city centres or refusing oil exploration licences, or imposing a carbon tax. It's easier to hope that new technology and changing habits will do the trick.

There was bad news for Scotland this week from the Indian Himalayas. A climbing party of eight and one of our leading mountaineers Martin Moran are all feared to have died in an avalanche on the 6,400m Nanda Devi. Martin Moran and his wife Joy run a mountain adventure centre in Strathcarron and he's famous for completing the first winter round of the Munros back in 1984/5. We await further news from India.

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press of Charles Rennie Mackintosh's "masterpiece" Hill House in Helensburgh. It's been completely encased in a huge gauze box to allow the building to dry out. Apparently the harling used by Mackintosh to finish his castle-style house has trapped so much rain water underneath it that the stonework is damp and leaking. It's going to take The National Trust three years and £4.5m to dry the place out. I'm not a fan of Mackintosh but his buildings are not having much luck at the moment. His Glasgow School of Art has twice gone up in flames. I really wonder if it's worth the trouble saving either of the buildings.

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Lewis Chessman

Finally, how could anyone not recognise one of the famous Lewis Chessmen ?

Perhaps it was too obvious for the Edinburgh antique dealer who bought it for £5 in 1964 thinking it was just another piece of ivory carving. He passed it on to his family who have only now realised it is worth around £1m at auction. "It's a little bit banged up," says the auctioneer but it's definitely one of the missing five pieces from the four sets of chessmen found on a beach in Lewis in 1831 and dating from the 13th century.

We are all a little bit banged up at the moment, so I wonder if we would be recognised as the same Great Britain that defeated the Nazis 75 years ago.