

# Cyril relates his D-Day story

Cyril "Dickie" Bird is 100, a recipient of the Military Medal and Legion D'Honneur, and a proud alumni of the 5th Royal Tank Regiment (5RTR). He lives in Edinburgh with his wife, Liz.



Cyril Bird MM With Regimental Tie, Beret and Medals

On the 6th of June 1944, around midday, Cyril set sail for Gold Beach in Normandy. He did so as part of the Allied invasion of northern France, legendarily named the D-Day

landings.

To have participated in the D-Day landings is to have been a record breaker, is to have been a hero, and is to have been a part of history. The landings remain the largest amphibious assault in military history. 175,000 troops stormed the beaches or landed behind enemy lines.

Such credentials don't sit easily with Cyril, who was known as "Dickie" throughout the war due to his surname. When he spoke to us [Poppyscotland and Legion Scotland] about his experiences, the theme that dominated his memory was fear.

"I was frightened, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world. We were all aware that we were part of history and I kept going for my crew. We knew what we had to do."

After the war, Cyril was told by an Army doctor, that he was bomb happy, which today would be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Cyril's unit landed on Gold Beach at midday. In the morning, Royal Marine Commandos had broadly cleared the beaches. Cyril and his unit were joining the battle to provide heavy weaponry to the fight.

Gold Beach was one of five sites of the Allied invasion on D-Day. Targeting Gold and 4 other beaches, the Allied invasion sought to begin the pursuit to reclaim France. D-Day eventually acted as the launch pad for the reclamation of Europe and subsequent victory on the 8th May 1945, a date known as Victory in Europe (VE) Day.

But Normandy wasn't the beginning of Cyril's war. He had joined the Army in 1941. His father, a career soldier, had falsified his birth certificate, and that of Cyril's younger brother, Geoff, so that they could join the war effort before legally allowed to.

Cyril began Army life at the Armoured Fighting Vehicle School at Bovington in Dorset, where all tank crews are still trained. 6 months later, following the completion of his training, Cyril was posted to 5RTR and soon set sail for Egypt, leaving port at Greenock.

It was here that Cyril joined the Desert Rats, an Allied fighting force in northern Africa. Cyril and his 5RTR colleagues fought their Crusader Tanks and were present in battle for the first Allied victory over the Germans and Italians at the Battle of El Alamein.

The Battle of El Alamein, whilst in history a decisive victory that marked the end of Axis rule in Africa, was bloody. More than 23,000 troops were killed or wounded on both sides. But from there, it wasn't long before Cyril's war took him to Italy. He fought through Salerno, ending up at the River Volturno, which lays at a midpoint between Rome and Naples. It was here that 5RTR, after a year and a half of fighting, were returned to the UK for some rest and recuperation.

Upon their return to the UK in December 1943, 5RTR were re-equipped with Comet tanks. They were based in Shakers Wood in Norfolk, which exists still as a military heritage site. Whilst stationed here, Cyril went around England collecting new Comet tanks, and undertaking extensive training. They were still unsure as to where they would be going next, but it was clear that a momentum was beginning to build. In the minds of the boys of 5RTR, something was coming.

"We didn't know where we were going next, but we knew that we wouldn't be in Shakers Wood forever. There was talk of heading south to the coast to the port where vessels would depart, but the destination was all speculation."

"We spent a lot of time training, getting used to our new tanks, and as a driver I travelled around the country collecting them and bringing them to our unit. But there was

some downtime too.”

Speculation soon gave way. On the 5th of June, Cyril and his crew boarded a landing craft, launched in the Channel, and headed for Gold Beach, near Arromanches, in rough weather.

“We weren’t inside the tank. We were on the mess deck all the time. You only mounted the tank an hour or two before you landed. We made sure everything was working. I remember very clearly when we rolled off onto the beach. It was very frightening. But the tank worked beautifully.” Cyril then quips, “regrettably”, to the backdrop of his kind laughter, his wife’s laughter, and ours.

Many might imagine that driving a tank up a beach towards significant enemy resistance might require a focus on enemy location, and you’d be forgiven for picturing brute force, loud explosions, and an oily, smelly, claustrophobic cockpit. But Cyril dispels that myth.

“In an operation like that, you are focussed on communication. Communication with your crew, and with the squadron of tanks that you are advancing with. A fear is that our communications fail. I am proud to say that for the whole operation, our communications were immaculate.”

5RTR advanced through Gold Beach, leading the line behind Commandos from the Royal Marines. On the first day of Operation Overlord, 10,000 Allied troops were injured. Cyril wasn’t one of them, but it wasn’t long before his time came.

Cyril was wounded in Normandy when a shell exploded in close proximity. Shrapnel lodged in his back, and in his legs. This forced Cyril’s return to the UK, where he was treated at Taunton military hospital, followed by a convalescent home in Bournemouth.

These were short stays, for Cyril rejoined his regiment three months later in Holland, and they soon liberated Ghent, a port

city in Belgium with a population of 335,000 inhabitants. This was shortly before Cyril's involvement in the infamous Operation Market Garden, an airborne assault on Arnhem. Cyril was wounded again, with shrapnel striking his jaw, resulting in a loss of some teeth. It was here that his Military Medal was won.

Cyril continued to fight through the rest of the war. He fought in Ardennes, which was dramatised in the globally successful Spielberg TV show *Band of Brothers*. Following this, Cyril was involved in the liberation of Germany, and arrived in Hamburg on the 8th of May 1945, known as Victory in Europe Day. He remained in Germany for a year, returning home to the UK in October 1926.



Cyril Bird Legion d'Honneur Medal Presentation

# D-Day

But it is D-Day that he recalls most forthrightly. The comrades lost – he has visited all their gravesites across the world – and the fear he felt, the fear that's never left.

"I suffer with anxiety neurosis. This was commonly called 'being bomb scared'. I remember coming home and I would be at the cinema, or I'd be at home, and suddenly I'd be soaking wet, shaking with fear. I would think 'what the hell is wrong with me?', but I wasn't the only one. After a day or two, or sometimes an hour or two, I find the beauty in this. Without speaking, we'd hold hands and know that..." Cyril stops speaking to gather himself.

Cyril's wife, Liz, picks up and says "He was very close with the other guys..." At which point Cyril twinkles, and reels off names of fallen comrades. "Harry Bragg, Vick Vale, Roger Thrope, the guys who didn't come back. We've been back to their graves. They were all kids. We were all kids. We were all civilian kids with uniforms on. I don't think I am consciously proud of what we all did, but I am still proud of being a Desert Rat. We were the best Armoured Fighting Unit in the British Army, or any Army at that. We fought across Europe, right the way to Germany. We went all the way."

**Dr Claire Armstrong OBE, CEO of Legion Scotland, said:** "Cyril Bird is a behemoth. I had to look this one up, not a word I would ever use so would be better to replace with a more familiar adjective, a gentleman, and we are exceptionally proud to count him as a friend. Cyril has battled the consequences of war for eight decades, but, in his own words, he 'wouldn't have missed it for the world.' That is a dedication to service that must receive an eternal thanks. His contribution to the future of Scotland, of the United Kingdom, and of Europe, is a contribution that we reflect on, and that we pay a boundless tribute to.



"We look forward to welcoming Cyril to the Usher Hall, with our partners at Poppyscotland, on the evening of the 6th of June, where over 1,000 people will join together to pay tribute to his Service, and to the Service of his generation."

*This story was provided by Legion Scotland who conducted the interview with Cyril and his wife.*

## Scotland's Salute

Scotland will commemorate the 80th anniversary of D-Day at Edinburgh's Usher Hall this evening.

The event, named *Scotland's Salute*, has been jointly produced by Armed Forces charities Legion Scotland and Poppyscotland.

The event features music from a range of military bands, including musicians from His Majesty's Royal Marines Band Scotland, from across the Royal Regiment of Scotland, the Pipes and Drums of the Royal British Legion Scotland [Legion Scotland], and will feature civilian musical performances from the Military Wives Choirs and the Scottish singer Amy Hawthorn.

The event will also feature first-hand testimony from surviving Scottish D-Day veterans, who will be present, as narrated by former MEP, journalist, and voice of the world-renowned Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, Alasdair Hutton OBE TD.

Royal Marine veteran, Invictus Games medallist, TV presenter, and Strictly Come Dancing quarter finalist, JJ Chalmers, will compère the evening, guiding the audience through bespoke VT footage, music, and a narrative of Scotland's involvement in the lead up to, and on the day of, the Normandy landings.

<https://www.usherhall.co.uk/whats-on/scotlands-salute-tribute-d-day-80th-anniversary-concert>