

# Letter from Scotland

**Scotland played a major part in preparing for the Normandy Landings 80 years ago.**

We had the wide open spaces and the beaches for military training, far from the vulnerable cities of southern England. This week the leaders of the free world gathered to remember the heroic events of those days in early June 1944 when 130,000 troops and 7,000 vessels mounted the largest seaborne invasion in human history.

A year before, Lord Mountbatten called a hundred senior commanders and military specialists to a meeting in Largs on the Ayrshire coast to begin planning the operation. In the months that followed thousands of soldiers would undergo training on the beaches and in the hills of Scotland.



The struggle continues. Commando Memorial, Spean Bridge, Lochaber.

This week we've been hearing how the temporary "Mulberry" harbours were developed at Garlieston on the Galloway coast.

The Duke of Argyll's castle at Inveraray become a training centre for troops of many nationalities: British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealanders, Americans, Free French, Polish, Czechs and Dutch. Up on the Morayshire coast. Lord Lovet was training his Commandos who would lead the assault on Sword Beach.

It's difficult for us to imagine the huge national effort that was required to defeat the Nazi. It's like contemplating the size of the universe. Yet our parents or grandparents did it. They would be somewhat depressed to learn that we have a war in Europe yet again and the world is once again a dangerous place.

So as another of our "peace-time" elections rolls on, it's not surprising that this week both Conservative and Labour parties have been talking about defence. Both have pledged to increase defence spending to 2.5 per cent of national income, up from 2 per cent. Rishi Sunak also wants to introduce National Service which would see 30,000 training places in the armed forces for 18 year-olds. Sir Keir Starmer has promised to replace the aging nuclear-armed submarine fleet based on the Clyde and, yes, he would be prepared to press the nuclear button.

I find it depressing that they don't promise much on how to prevent wars happening in the first place, like boosting the power and finances of the United Nations, or re-joining the European Union, which is one of the most important peace projects to come out of the Second World War, tying our economies together.

It's also difficult to imagine the effort required to rebuild Britain after the war. But somehow the new Labour government did it, under the quiet leadership of Clement Atlee, who had as much charisma as Keir Starmer. We have to hope if Labour is elected, they will find the strength and the policies to do it after 14 years of austerity.

In Scotland, the opinion polls are still looking good for Labour. One, a particularly large one by You Gov, interviewed 50,000 people across Britain and 5,000 in Scotland. It suggests that Labour are going to win by a landslide, bigger than any of Tony Blair's. In Scotland it predicts Labour will win 34 seats, the SNP just 17 (down from 43), the Conservatives 5 and the Liberal Democrats just 1.

The SNP leader John Swinney came a little unstuck during a "four leaders" TV debate on Monday when he couldn't answer directly if he was in favour of new oil exploration in the North Sea. The SNP have been trying to explain ever since that each application should be treated on its merits and judged against strict environment standards – which all opposition parties, Green, Red and Blue, say are weasel words. "Transition" has become a very flexible word when it comes to climate change.

The commemorations in Normandy have been a useful interruption to the general election campaign, reminding us that politics is only a part of our national story. Next week, Scotland's men's football team go to Munich to play Germany in the opening game of the European Championships. Nothing could better illustrate the peace dividend in our part of Europe. The 200,000 strong Tartan Army will be going to Germany to cheer on our team but also to celebrate our common humanity.