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FORMER ROYAL MARINE JOE CORLESS REMEMBERS GUERNSEY LIBERATION DAY

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Imagery and video is available to download with this story at <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/Imagery>

A Normandy Veteran from Bridgend in South Wales has been reminiscing about his Royal Marines World War Two service on D Day and his part in the Liberation of the Guernsey, 75 years ago.

Joe Corless, 94, grew up in Devon and joined the Royal Marines in 1943, having told the recruiting sergeant he was of age, when in fact he was only 16 at the time. He and his school friend had cycled to Plymouth from their home in Torquay and within a few months were undergoing military training at what is now the Commando Training Centre at Lympstone, near Exmouth.

"The Camp at the time was the main Training Depot for the Royal Marines and after passing out I was sent to join a Royal Marines Beach Battalion," said Joe. "We moved all over the country, doing a lot of training in the Welsh Black Mountains as well, before I qualified as a Landing Craft Coxswain.

"We formed up as a Landing Craft Flotilla and were in action in June 1944 on D Day. I was 18 by then and the day after on 7th June 1944 I had my 19th birthday, there was no cake for me that year."

Joe's Flotilla operated around Normandy and the D Day beaches for quite a while before eventually returned to Calstock near Plymouth, where his Landing Craft were fitted out and repaired. He was looking forward to VE Day, which they knew was coming, and a celebration, something they had not done in long time.

"But we were all told to pack our Kitbags and get ready to Liberate the Channel Islands. We crossed the Channel once again and on 9th May I was heading in to the Harbour at St Peter Port on Guernsey, ready to drop off a naval team who would set up the British Headquarters in the town. It all went smoothly for us, because the Germans had signed the surrender on a destroyer in the Harbour earlier in the day."

"I remember how pleased the Islanders were to see us. They were so enormously happy and relieved. There was no fighting and it seemed very peaceful, it was a very friendly welcome as I recall."

Over the next six weeks Joe and his Landing Craft helped out where they could; ferrying supplies and food from the ships in the Harbour and the large Red Cross ship that had been on hand for everyone. He also was used to move the large amount of German soldiers who were laying down their arms and ammunition. They were taken out to prison ships which would eventually take them on to prisoner of war camps in Le Harve in France and back in England.

“The Germans were friendly as well, they were equally relieved not to have fought it out and had been there for nearly five years, so they got to know a lot of the Channel Islanders. We had one moment where we were heading across Guernsey to get to the south side of the island, as we were walking along we saw a group of about 40 fully armed German soldiers coming toward us.

Our corporal in charge quickly got us to dodge into a churchyard as they passed by. Moments later their officer came along on a cycle, and dropped some papers from under his arm. We picked them up for him and he ask us in English if we’d read the German letter. None of us did, so he explained that it is the surrender order, which he was going to read out to his men who were heading down to the Quay. It was a lucky encounter.”

Joe has never forgot how nice the people of Guernsey were after their five years of occupation and one of his friends had special thanks to one family who they encountered.

“We got on well with the Guernsey people, in fact my mate Jim got friendly with one of the girls and her family invited him to their home. He would go there for meals and everything, and for a few years after her parents would send Jim crates of Guernsey tomatoes to give to his mother, they were so friendly and pleasant.”

Royal Marines Brigadier Jock Fraser, Naval Regional Commander Wales and Western England said:
“Time spent with Joe Corless is always a humbling experience. I have been privileged to hear personally from Joe his understated account of courage and service from the Normandy beaches on D Day to the Liberation of the Channel Islands.

“Although we cannot be with Joe today in Guernsey as planned, we will all have Joe’s remarkable story in mind as we reflect together on the freedom won through the sacrifice of his generation. Joe and fellow veterans – we salute you.”

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Notes for Editors:

Photos will be available to download from <https://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/Imagery>.
