

“ALWAYS ^{BE} STRONG”

INTERVIEW WITH MERVYN KERSH



This Jewish veteran describes his experiences serving as a soldier in the British Army, from Normandy to the liberation of Bergen-Belsen

Mervyn Kersh pictured during his army service in 1944

WORDS: TOM GARNER

Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was one of the most horrendous discoveries made by British armed forces during WWII. Approximately 60,000 people, the majority of them Jews, were found in starving and mortally ill conditions while thousands more bodies lay unburied around the camp. It was an event that horrified the world as one of the most appalling symbols of Nazi brutality.

Belsen’s liberators were profoundly moved, and for one British soldier meeting the survivors had particular resonance. Private Mervyn Kersh was a 21-year-old Jewish Londoner who had been advancing across Western Europe ever since he landed in Normandy in June 1944. A member of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC), he had been liberating occupied towns and cities for months, but Belsen was a different proposition.

Over 75 years since his service, Kersh is a tireless volunteer who has been nationally recognised for raising awareness of the horrors of WWII. He describes how he survived the Normandy Campaign, tended to the survivors of Belsen and how he coped with antisemitism in his own army.

“Hard times”

Born in December 1923, Kersh grew up in a household where current affairs were regularly discussed. “We knew war was coming and I used to listen to conversations between my father and uncle,” he says. “From the time of the Spanish Civil War they argued about Germany and Italy’s intentions. I remember Czechoslovakia being handed over and then there was Austria. When Poland was invaded we were completely unprepared and when war broke out I was still at school.”

Kersh knew about the growing threat of antisemitism in Nazi Germany: “We were aware of the ill-treatment of minority groups but not the scale of it. I didn’t know the true extent until 1942 when somebody escaped from the Nazis. The message was brought to Britain and reported in a newspaper, which I’ve still got a copy of.”



Above: British and Commonwealth troops organise boxes of ammunition and supplies on a Normandy beach



Above: British soldiers hand out cigarettes to liberated French civilians in Pont-Audemer, Normandy



Starving Holocaust survivors queue for food at Belsen after being liberated by British forces

Kersh was evacuated several times during the Blitz. "I kept a record of every single air raid and they were hard times because we were in the thick of it," he says. "I was evacuated with a school because my uncle was a teacher there, although I learned nothing apart from

Below: Mervyn Kersh discovered this Wehrmacht map at the requisitioned headquarters of the 21st Panzer Division in Normandy



perhaps about girls! I came back but then my mother had an operation and I had to leave and go to Exeter. My education dropped and by the time I went to college I was called up in 1943."

Conscripted into the British Army, Kersh was a keen recruit. "It was almost inevitable, although there were ways you could get around it. You could get a reserved occupation but I wanted to be in the army," he says. "My big brother had already been in the RAF from the beginning of the war and my sister was a nurse, so as the baby of the family I was now doing my bit."

Sent to Scotland for training with the Black Watch, Kersh already knew some rudimentary soldiering skills. "I had had some military training in the Jewish Lads' Brigade, although we used sticks instead of rifles. However, I knew about marching, map reading, field craft, Morse code, being obedient and things like that. They were happy days, despite the hardship. I'd left London in the hot sunshine of June and arrived in Scotland in deep snow! It was a bit of shock."

During training, Kersh underwent various interviews and tests to define his particular role but he accidentally found himself being placed in the RAOC. "I was given to understand that I might go in the Royal Engineers because I liked map drawing. I was following the Eastern Front on a huge map that I'd drawn but when it came to it 1,000 of us were called out on a square and told to go to points A, B, C and D. When I got to the point I was told to go to, it turned out it was something called the RAOC. I'd been listed from the Ordnance Survey in the Royal Engineers to the ordnance stores. By then, it was too late to do anything about it."

Kersh could also have been promoted but he declined the offer. "After initial training I had been put forward for promotion but out

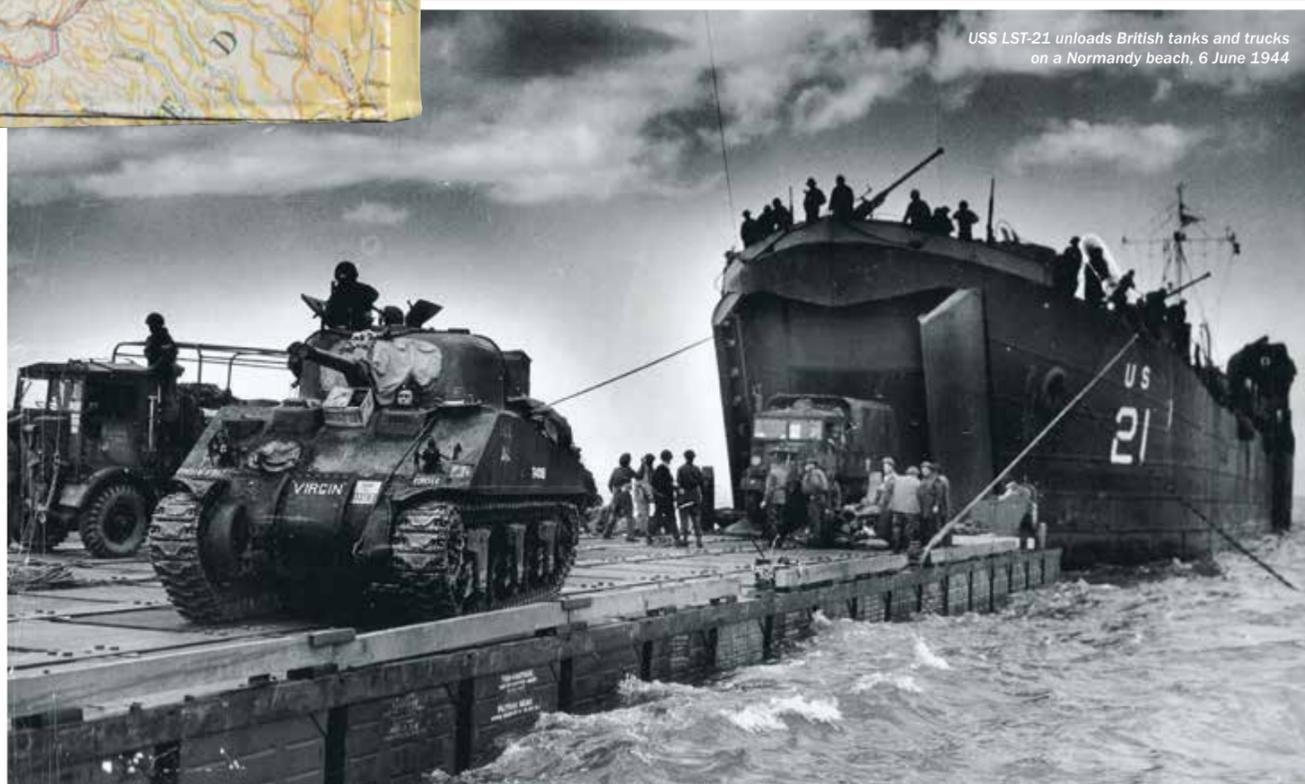
of political correctness I chose to stay with my comrades – something I've regretted ever since! I reached the giddy heights of private but I did become an acting sergeant much later during my last days in the army."

Apart from training, Kersh also had to contend with institutional antisemitism in the army. During his evacuation to Devon, he had earned a reputation as a talented schoolboy boxer and used this to prevent physical assaults. "When I went in the army, the first thing I did – and wherever I went – was let them know I was a champion boxer and nobody ever laid a finger on me. I was verbally abused and also had problems with officers and NCOs at times but nobody beat me up, like they did with other people."

Despite escaping violent attacks, Kersh could not avoid subtler forms of discrimination. "Antisemitism wasn't everywhere but it certainly existed and I had it from time to time," he says. "In Lancashire we were with another unit commanded by a sergeant major at a depot where they were teaching us. I found I was on duty – including fire pickets – wandering around the camp keeping an eye open. I did this night after night, weekend after weekend, and really had no time off."

"I challenged the sergeant major one time and asked why it was always me doing the duties but he just said, 'I have to count the 30th, 20th or 15th soldier out of the door for duty and it always seems to be you.' That obviously wasn't a coincidence but I couldn't argue and call him a liar because he was the sergeant major. I was very demoralised at that stage and really in a bad state. Because of the war, I decided not to desert and so I carried on and put up with it."

USS LST-21 unloads British tanks and trucks on a Normandy beach, 6 June 1944



ROYAL ARMY ORDNANCE CORPS

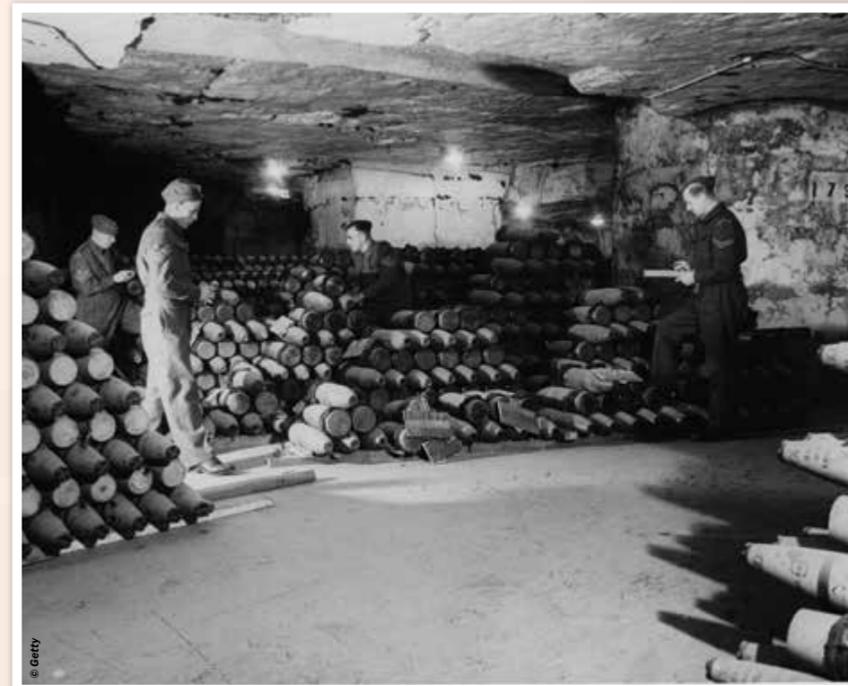
The British Army's supply and repair corps had origins dating back to the 15th century and undertook many logistical roles alongside its main task of issuing ammunition

Soldiers check the issue of six-inch shells in one of the huge bays of the RAOC's underground arsenal, May 1944

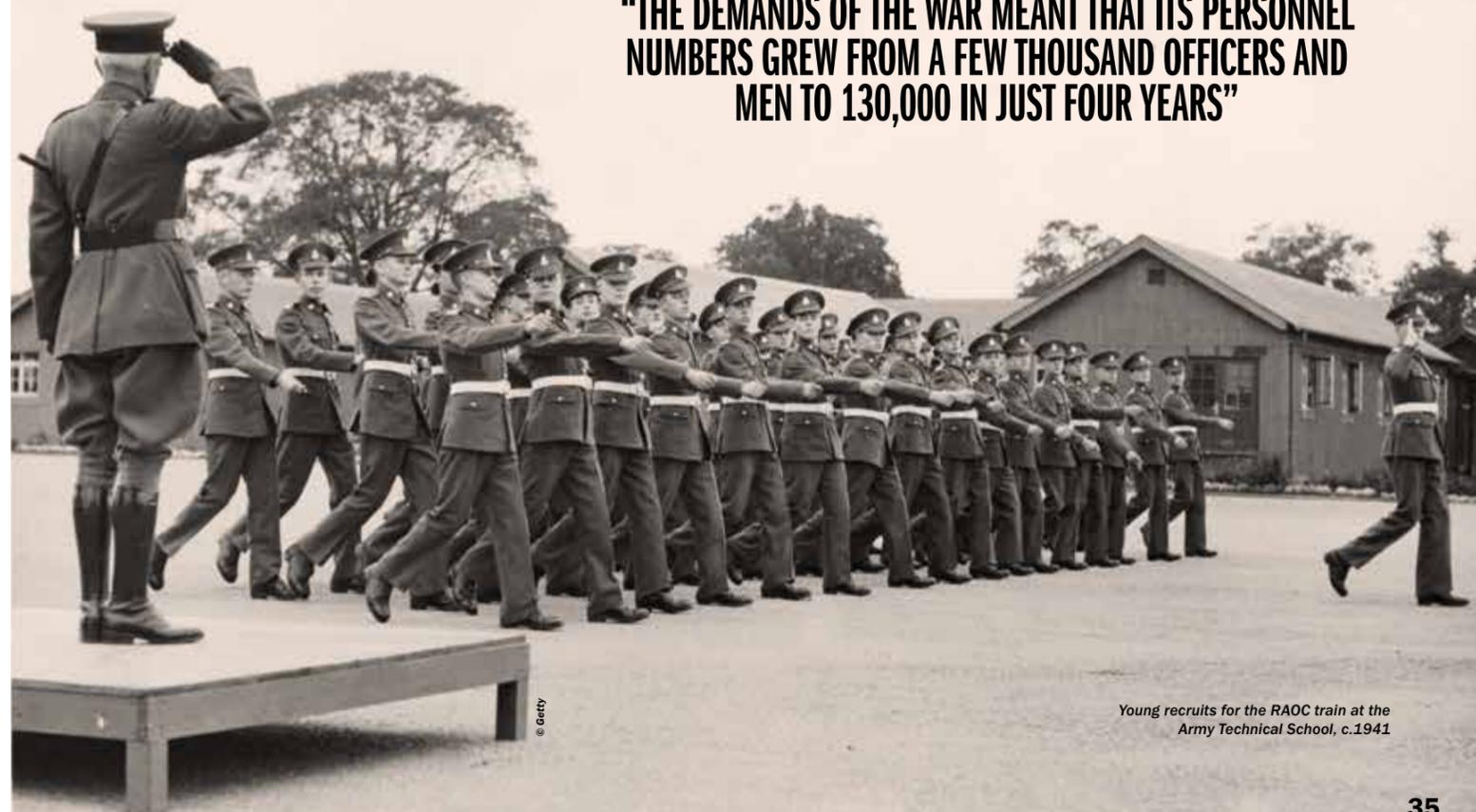
Tasked with supplying weapons, ammunition and equipment to the British Army, the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) had medieval origins. First set up as the "Office of Ordnance" in 1414 during the reign of Henry V, Britain's system of logistical supplies went through various incarnations before it became the RAOC in 1918. The importance of artillery during WWI had vastly increased the role and numbers of ordnance personnel and the RAOC was given its "Royal" prefix in 1922.

The RAOC were initially responsible for ammunition, clothing and other general surplus but their remit began to include army vehicles during the 1930s. Unlike other corps, the RAOC was divided into companies rather than battalions before 1945 and became famous for its bomb disposal work during WWII. The demands of the war meant that its personnel numbers grew from a few thousand officers and men to 130,000 in just four years. The RAOC's responsibility for equipment and vehicle repairs was largely transferred to the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) in 1942. However, vehicle storage (which was Kersh's job) was a task that was transferred over from the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC).

After WWII, the RAOC took over the RASC's supply role in 1965 and largely undertook bomb disposal duties during the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland as well as the Falkland and Gulf Wars. It was eventually merged with the Catering, Pioneer and Transport Corps to form the Royal Logistics Corps in 1993.



"THE DEMANDS OF THE WAR MEANT THAT ITS PERSONNEL NUMBERS GREW FROM A FEW THOUSAND OFFICERS AND MEN TO 130,000 IN JUST FOUR YEARS"



Young recruits for the RAOC train at the Army Technical School, c.1941

Preparing for Normandy

Now assigned to the RAOC's vehicle companies, Kersh's job was logistical work in army vehicle parks. "We had to see that units at the front had every vehicle that they wanted and where they wanted it. We made sure that no unit would be short of vehicles of any sort from British depots. There were hundreds of different types, from Sovereign bicycles to 48-wheel tank transporters. I learned to drive by driving around in those."

From December 1943, Kersh and his comrades began making preparations for what turned out to be Operation Overlord. "We were forming a new unit within another unit to get organised. People joined us all the time and we were getting to know how to work in practice and not just theory. We did this knowing we were going to be in the 'Second Front', wherever that was. In December 1943 nobody knew where although we gradually moved further south as a frontline unit. We ended up

not far from Brighton where we were briefed, although apparently not everyone was. We were told where we were going, not the location, but relative to other units."

Kersh's unit had formed into the RAOC's 17th Advance Vehicle Company as part of 17 Advance Ordnance Depot (17 AOD). With plans to land on Gold Beach on D-Day+5, 17 AOD was given new equipment. "We were kitted out with everything we needed and things we didn't need such as a French phrase book. It gave us lovely questions but nobody told us how to understand the answers! Some of the questions were also irrelevant, things like asking where the museum was, because it was a pre-war travel book.

"We also got emergency rations, which were a marvel and included water purifiers and a little folding cooker with matches. One of the things was a tin of vegetable soup that heated automatically when you opened it. I thought it was a marvellous idea that would take off

after the war but I've never heard of it since. You additionally received a big bar of white chocolate that was so hard you couldn't bite or break it. All you could do was lick it, which of course made it very messy."

Kersh almost got into trouble with his superiors because of the rations. "When we got to Gosport I was arrested for not eating any meat in the rations. An outside infantry officer came in and charged me with trying to make myself unfit for service overseas. I explained that I didn't eat meat, was eating all I needed and that I intended to go. The meat wasn't kosher and I normally lived quite happily on vegetables, milk and cheese. It didn't bother me or my brother when we were in the forces – I was very dark and thin but fit as a fiddle."

Although 17 AOD were supposed to sail to Normandy on D-Day+5 their deployment was moved forward because of a tragic incident at sea. "We had an advance recce party under Colonel Gore who were going on D-Day+2.

When they left us we knew D-Day was about to begin or had already begun. We moved off that day down to Gosport and it was very moving going down with people waving and shouting 'God bless you!' and that sort of thing.

"Colonel Gore suddenly appeared and told us what he was doing in England after he'd already gone to France. The advance party and whoever else was on the same boat was the only vessel that was sunk that day. It had been torpedoed and they were all killed except for Gore because he was on deck and was thrown into the sea. He managed to get back to England and asked for replacements. That's why we went on D-Day+3 as opposed to D-Day+5."

“Get ready”

Under these inauspicious circumstances, Kersh sailed for Normandy on the night of 8-9 June 1944 on a 14-hour night voyage. "I didn't know where I was apart from that I knew I was on a boat," he says. "At dawn, a sailor

“THE SEA WAS SOLID WITH BOATS AND IT WAS AN AMAZING FEELING TO SEE SO MANY OF THEM WITH THE BIG SHIPS IN THE DISTANCE”

woke me up and told me, 'Get ready and have something to eat because you might not get any more for a while.' I then saw the other vessels around me, which I hadn't known had been there all the time. The sea was solid with boats and it was an amazing feeling to see so many of them, with the big ships in the distance. They were firing inland and the Germans appeared to be firing back at them.

"This didn't bother me as we got closer and I didn't really feel any fear until we got quite

close [to the beach]. Then I realised, 'What's going to happen when I land?' I was in a tracked vehicle and didn't even get wet when we landed. I didn't know which sector or beach it was because we went at such short notice."

Kersh remains unsure which beach he landed on but 17 AOD quickly met the local population. "We went up the beach to the top of a cliff and were greeted by French people with drinks, kisses and flowers. We were told to move on because there were other people behind us so we went on. The next thing I remember is that I was in a three-tonne lorry and not in the tracked personnel carrier, although I don't know when I changed vehicles."

The company's immediate task was to find a suitable place for use as a vehicle park. They soon found an ideal location: "It was a chateau with huge grounds for 1,000 vehicles, which is what we were looking for. It turned out to be the 21st Panzer Division headquarters! The engineers were going through the building,



German soldiers surrender to Allied troops at Ravenoville on 9 June 1944, the same day that Mervyn Kersh landed in Normandy

LIBERATION ROUTE EUROPE

Liberation Route Europe is a remembrance trail and foundation. It works with government organisations, universities, museums, veterans' societies and tourism organisations in Western Europe and Poland to bring together national perspectives on the liberation of Europe during WWII. Through shared experiences and understanding, the foundation commemorates WWII in order to create a unified awareness of the importance of freedom.

For more information on its aims and activities visit: www.liberationroute.com



Two Allied soldiers gaze across a decimated and rubble-filled cityscape during the campaign to liberate Caen

AJEX

The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women supports the Armed Forces Jewish Community. It ensures that the immense contribution of British Jewish veterans is not forgotten through its three pillars of Welfare, Remembrance and Education. For more information visit: www.ajex.org.uk



including toilets, piano stalls and artificial books, to look for small bombs. We had to wait while the engineers cleared all that and as soon as we got in I put up a requisition noticeboard.”

Kersh’s plan was immediately undone by a superior officer. “An infantry colonel then drove up and asked what I was doing there. I told him I had requisitioned the chateau for Colonel Gore. He asked, ‘Is the colonel here?’ and I said, ‘He’ll be here in a minute, sir.’ He said, ‘He’s not here now. I’m here, I’m a colonel, you’re a private – get!’ So that was it, we had to start looking for somewhere else although we couldn’t find anything. We found a ditch instead!”

17 AOD eventually found a suitable vehicle park and were heavily engaged in supplying the frontline troops. “My colleague Jack Cotter sorted the vehicles coming in on the beach and later on the Mulberry harbour, which I never saw. He sent them on to me and I saw that they were parked and passed on to anyone who wanted them. It was a busy time and there were no limits on the hours or days.”

Despite working in logistics, Kersh was close to the front line. “You could hear the battles going on, including shells bursting. We didn’t know which way they were going – you could hear the shells but couldn’t see them. There would be a whining overhead and then a ‘Klomp!’ They were fired from both directions but we had the infantrymen coming back asking to replace vehicles of all sorts. I never had to say that we hadn’t got one.”

Kersh was also lucky that the Luftwaffe bombed other Allied targets. “German planes didn’t dare come over in daylight but when they flew at night they made for the beaches. They machine gunned and bombed the boats because they were coming in for weeks on end. Luckily, they didn’t bother to bomb us, which was very good because I wouldn’t be talking now!”

Free French forces line up their Sherman tanks while waiting to go into action at Vesly, Normandy, 6 August 1944. Kersh worked in a huge vehicle park during the Normandy Campaign



Respite at Bayeux

Among the chaos, Kersh witnessed the devastating Allied bombing of Caen during 8-9 July 1944. “I was able to see the bombing from a few miles away. You could see the planes coming in the sky and I’ve never seen so many aircraft at one time since. When the bombs came down they looked like heavy rain or snowflakes – it was as thick as that. Of course, when we tried to get through Caen afterwards we couldn’t because of the damage and rubble. We had to go around it in the end. It was a shame that a French city had been bombed rather than just removing the Germans.”

“WHEN THE BOMBS CAME DOWN THEY LOOKED LIKE HEAVY RAIN OR SNOWFLAKES – IT WAS AS THICK AS THAT”

17 AOD continued to supply vehicles in Normandy for the next few months, and during some rare time off in early September 1944 Kersh attended a Jewish service in Bayeux for Rosh Hashanah. The celebration of the Jewish New Year was symbolic, especially because the town was the first to be liberated. “A notice went up asking any Jewish personnel to attend a service if they were free. I made myself free and went, although it was a three mile walk. We had been going through thick mud due to the heavy rains of July and then it got very hot. The ground had turned to powder so as you walked clouds of white dust went up. It was like walking through the sea and when I got to Bayeux I was completely white! At the service were about 200 personnel: Americans, Canadians, British and others. I must say that the military services

I attended were very moving and to the point. It was also a break for me, and a moving break at that.”

During other breaks, Kersh interacted with civilians. “I used to go to the farms with a boy from Liverpool and we practised our schoolboy French. For my part, I went to buy milk and eggs, which I was living on. We forced ourselves to speak French to each other as well as the villagers and spent many hours with the local farmers. We both improved and were able to speak French accurately, although not fluently. It was many years later that I learned I spoke French in a provincial Normandy accent – it was similar to Geordie or Cockney!”

“Rampaging murderers”

Once the Allies broke out of Normandy, 17 AOD swiftly advanced across France. The French warmly welcomed their liberators. “They were very friendly and grateful. Wherever we went they put on parties and dances for us. These were free and I even had a girlfriend, although her mother used to walk about four or five yards behind us and we were never left alone.”

The French jubilation reflected the terrible occupation they had endured. “I didn’t think of the Germans as soldiers and still don’t – they were rampaging murderers. If someone invades a country one after the other they’re not soldiers but cowards. I heard from the French what the Germans had got up to. They weren’t nice people and it was not just Hitler, it was millions of Germans. If individual Germans had been against invading, stealing from and killing other people they could have fired over their heads instead. Their soldiers fought with enthusiasm even when we were near Germany. When the Allies were crossing the Rhine they resisted and killed as many as they could – none of it was easy.”

When 17 AOD entered Belgium, Kersh met Jews who had survived the German occupation.

A British soldier listens to the story of a liberated prisoner about the horrors of the concentration camp at Belsen



"I was about 20 miles from Antwerp when I saw a couple of Jews coming in who were dressed in traditional garb. I told them who I was and they were amazed because they didn't think there were any Jews left alive except them. They'd been hiding in a wardrobe most of the time and only very rarely came out for exercise. They'd been hidden in a non-Jewish home and had to share the rations of their hosts who were on tight rations as it was. However, they shared them with these two men and they survived."

After Belgium, 17 AOD advanced into the Netherlands and reached as far as Nijmegen during Operation Market Garden. By March 1945 they were ready to invade Germany, which Kersh recalls as a triumphant moment: "We went into Germany across the Rhine and that was beautiful. We went from being the 'British Liberation Army' that was liberating Europe to the 'British Army of the Rhine', which was occupying enemy territory."

Helping Belsen survivors

After entering Germany, Kersh developed an ear infection and was sent to a military hospital while his unit moved to Hamburg. On 21 April 1945 he was sent to Celle in Lower Saxony to a former SS barracks while he waited to be collected to re-join 17 AOD. While he was waiting at this holding unit he encountered liberated Polish slave labourers who were being fed by the British. "The Germans forced young Polish girls to go down Celle's salt mines without any protective clothing. They were covered in salt, burns and were as skinny as anything because they'd had very little food. They were in a terrible state and the Medical Corps had to take care of them."

The Polish slaves were just a prelude to what Kersh encountered shortly afterwards. Bergen-Belsen concentration camp had been liberated by British forces on 15 April 1945, and in early May Kersh encountered survivors at nearby Hanover Railway Station. "I ended up a few miles near Belsen, although I wasn't allowed in. This was a week after it had been liberated but the British started burning it down to stop a typhus epidemic. The people who were able to walk were coming out and they were hoping to get to Hanover Station, which was a central hub in Germany. They could meet up with people there and get some news about their families, neighbours and friends. They wanted to know about the outside world because they had been completely cut off. They didn't know what was going on or how the war was going. It was very, very moving."

Distressed by what he saw, Kersh attempted to feed the survivors with what he had available. "I gave them the chocolate I had and over the next few days I was giving them chocolate from my comrades. They were delighted and I thought it would be good for them. It was only much later that I learned that giving chocolate to people who had hardly eaten for years meant that their stomachs couldn't cope with it [but] I didn't know that at the time. I just saw the delighted faces of people who hadn't seen chocolate for years and I was also trying to get them other foods."

While he distributed food, Kersh also had many conversations. "I spoke to hundreds of survivors although I couldn't talk to them in

"I WAS PROBABLY THE LAST PERSON IN EUROPE TO KNOW THAT THE WAR WAS OVER!"

detail because I didn't speak their languages. They were mostly Eastern European while one or two were from France or other Western countries. We had to find someone who could speak English, although I managed a few words here and there and used gestures more than anything.

"They wanted to talk about what they were going to do now the war was nearly over. They were all determined to go to Israel except one man who planned to go to South America. He wanted to marry a Catholic girl and have non-Jewish children so that they wouldn't have to go through what he had experienced."

Meeting the Belsen survivors reinforced Kersh's view that an independent Jewish state should be established. "It was very moving and made me more of a Zionist. It made me determined that we should have our own country that we could move to if we wanted to. It would be a refuge, which it has proved to be."

Having met liberated Jews across Western Europe, Kersh took great pride in defying the Nazis' antisemitism by provoking passing Germans. "I wore a little [Zionist flag] lapel badge and loved going up to the Germans, particularly soldiers who had lost their unit. They were trying to get home and I'd go up to them or columns of prisoners and say, 'I'm a Jew' and loved looking at their amazed faces. It was very satisfactory."

Kersh was meant to move on to Berlin after his time in Lower Saxony but received word from 17 AOD to return to Britain in preparation for deployment to the Far East. He was en route to Belgium when VE Day was declared on 8 May 1945. "The Far East wasn't my idea of fun but I got in a military train that was boarded up. I was in pitch darkness and there was nothing to do for 30 hours so I slept for most of the time. I had to change at Bruges and when I got out there I was told the war had ended the previous day. I was probably the last person in Europe to know that the war was over! It was definitely an anti-climax."

Raising awareness

The war against Japan ended before Kersh could be deployed and he instead spent six months serving in Egypt before he was demobbed in January 1947. He went on to mostly spend his career in the clothing industry as well being actively involved in AJEX – the Association for Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women. Now a recipient of the Légion d'honneur from the French government, Kersh also acts as an ambassador for several remembrance charities and frequently travels back to Normandy with school groups.

Speaking to schoolchildren and groups about his WWII experiences has been major part of Kersh's volunteering for the past five years and even the Covid-19 pandemic has not stopped his efforts. "I've been speaking to various schools, clubs and organisations for the last few years and more recently by

Charles de Gaulle, commander of Free French forces, makes a triumphant entry into Bayeux, the first French town to be liberated by the Allies, 14 June 1944



INTERVIEW WITH MERVYN KERSH

Zoom to the Continent, including Belgium, the Netherlands, France and also the United States and Canada.”

During his talks to children, Kersh emphasises that aggression should always be resisted. “My main message is: ‘Always be strong.’ Young people should be aware of how wars begin, which is often because bullies, like Nazi Germany, look for supposedly weak countries. Bullies only attack people they think are weak so people should remain strong, armed and ready at all times so that no one will attack you.”

When Kersh makes return journeys to Normandy he is always mindful of how fortunate he was to survive. “I often go and am pleased to. I attend the services and when I go to the cemeteries I’m always relieved and moved. I’m able to come away and leave whereas unfortunately the other soldiers aren’t who stay there.”

Despite the passage of time since Kersh advanced across Europe and saw the Holocaust first-hand, prejudice sadly still exists across the world. In Britain, antisemitism stained the reputation of the Labour Party when an investigation officially uncovered discrimination in October 2020 under the leadership of the then party leader Jeremy Corbyn. For a proud veteran such as Kersh, the findings were upsetting although he stresses that the majority of British people are not antisemitic. “I mix with a lot of non-Jewish people, mainly through veterans’ organisations, and they all take me as



Mervyn Kersh holds a Jewish Star of David Remembrance Cross as he attends a ceremony at Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial above Omaha Beach, 4 June 2019

© Alamy

I am – for me. I get on very well with non-Jewish people but obviously when Jeremy Corbyn came to power people had second thoughts about what was going to happen in this country. If he had become prime minister then I would have been inclined to move or leave the country.”

A Point of Light

As part of the 75th anniversary commemorations for VE Day in May 2020, Kersh became the 1,368th recipient of the UK’s Points of Light Award for his volunteer work. He received a personal letter from Prime

Minister Boris Johnson, who remarked: “I am lost in admiration for your tireless efforts and delighted to hear that new technology has allowed you to continue your mission despite the coronavirus restrictions.”

Kersh, who has previously met Johnson as well as other political leaders such as Theresa May, David Cameron and Ed Miliband, remains humble about his achievements: “It was very nice to receive the award. There was no money or property that came with it I’m afraid, no castles or anything like that! I just got a certificate, which is all I needed.”

VIGILANCE

BY MERVYN KERSH

*It is good to remember how we felt in time of war;
To feel all the hatred for the misery and gore;
To relive our thoughts and feelings at the evil that we saw;
And still be determined to prevent it all once more.*

*Remembering, means we don’t forget, and have not fought in vain;
Recalling what could once more be if we forgot the pain;
It means that we still heed the signs from some oppressive reign;
And keep our strength and will to fight, so we need not fight again.*

This poem on war and remembrance is used with the author’s kind permission

Right: Mervyn Kersh’s Points of Light Certificate awarded by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 8 May 2020

POINTS OF LIGHT

Mervyn Kersh

In recognition of your exceptional service assisting thousands of school children about the Second World War, you are presented with the UK’s 1,368th Point of Light award on the 8th May 2020.

Boris Johnson

St. James's Palace, London SW1A 1AA

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA



Mervyn Kersh and American veteran Norman Duncan attend a remembrance ceremony at the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer for the 75th anniversary commemorations of D-Day, 4 June 2019

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