

James Kirkwood

Navy D-Day veteran
Born: March 27, 1922;
Died: March 28, 2017

GLASWEGIAN James Kirkwood, who has died aged 95, survived heavy German defensive fire on D-Day 1944 as his Royal Navy landing craft offloaded Canadian infantrymen, tanks and artillery on to Juno Beach, Normandy.

Despite adverse weather conditions, difficult tides, incoming fire from the German 716th Infantry Division and strafing and bombing by Luftwaffe planes, he and his commanding officer Lt Arkley rammed their LCT 706 (Landing Craft, Tanks) on to Juno Beach to offload Canadian troops, and equipment.

1st Lieutenant Kirkwood and his comrades were also faced with German sea mines and the threat of friendly fire from their own Royal Navy warships and the Royal Canadian Navy who were pounding German positions on and behind the beach.

Landing the first wave of Canadian troops was a vital success, but Kirkwood and his navy comrades, having slammed their huge craft on to the shore on the ebb tide, were then sitting ducks, especially from one "pesky" Luftwaffe fighter-bomber which destroyed other British landing craft, killing or wounding many Canadian soldiers and Royal Navy crewmen. Only when the tide allowed the craft to refloat was LCT 706 able to pick up more Canadian troops from Portsmouth and return to land them on Juno Beach.

Mr Kirkwood and LCT 706 did the same thing almost every day for eight weeks. On June 12, Kirkwood looked to his right on Juno Beach to a small vessel a few yards away and saw a familiar figure smoking a cigar on the starboard foredeck.

It was Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who had wanted to land on D-Day but had been advised to wait six days before expressing up-close support for his troops.

On the many return trips back to

Portsmouth, 1st Lieutenant Kirkwood and LCT 706 carried German prisoners of war, fed them, gave them tea, cigarettes or even wee drams and offloaded them in Portsmouth as PoWs.

After the war, many of the surviving German prisoners expressed gratitude to the RN crew of LCT 706 for treating them with respect as fellow combatants.

At a ceremony in Glasgow City Chambers last year, Mr Kirkwood was made a Chevalier (Knight) de la Légion d'Honneur by the French government for his part in the liberation of France.

The French Consul-General in Scotland, Emmanuel Cocher, pinned the red-ribboned award on him on April 8 last year, saying: "France will never forget the gallantry and bravery veterans showed in taking part in the liberation of France 70 years ago.

The actions and sacrifice of these men, and that of so many who fell on the battlefield, was instrumental in bringing back freedom and peace in France and across Europe."

1st Lieutenant Kirkwood's D-Day mission was to ferry tanks and artillery elements of the 13th Artillery, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, who would push inland and link up with British forces landing at Gold and Sword beaches on either side of Juno Beach.

A number of Norwegian and Free French forces were with them and LCT 706 was equipped with light artillery guns which could hit the German beach defences from more than 12,000 yards offshore.

The RN landing craft also had the benefit of highly accurate photos and maps of Juno Beach taken before D-Day by daring Royal Navy divers in midgeet submarines.

James Kirkwood, always known as Jim, was born in Riddrie, Glasgow, on March 27, 1922, but his family soon moved to Dennistoun where he attended Whitehill Secondary School. After his school days, he worked for a stockbroker's firm as a trainee accountant, but according to his family he had

"innate sense of derring-do". And so he enlisted in the Royal Navy before he was due to be called up for his national service and went through training first in Portsmouth and Southampton, and later back in his native Scotland in both Inverary and at HMS Lochailort, an onshore training facility.

"Jim told me that, as a navy man, he was a wee bit shocked to be given training in hand-to-hand combat in case D-Day went wrong," his widow Isobel told The Herald.

He thought: 'Hey, I might get killed in this thing.'" He therefore decided to marry his sweetheart Ellen Wilson shortly before D-Day to ensure she would get a military widow's pension if he did not make it back.

After the war, Mr Kirkwood worked for the British Oxygen Company (BOC), a multinational industrial gas conglomerate, where he rose to become manager for Scotland and Northern Ireland.

On retirement in 1979, he returned to his youthful hobbies – playing golf at the Whitecraigs Golf Club near his home in Newton Mearns, watching cricket on the telly and keeping fit with a bit of cycling. His great passion at home was listening to Big Band music, particularly Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw and – his favourite – Bert Ambrose & his Orchestra.

His son John told The Herald: "I always remember him taking me to the Cosmo Cinema (now the Glasgow Film Theatre) on Rose Street, especially to see French films, which we both loved.

"He did not talk much about the war but when he saw the movie Saving Private Ryan, about the US D-Day landing on Omaha Beach, Normandy, it all came back to him. He was almost traumatised."

James Kirkwood died in Westacres Care Home, Newton Mearns. His first wife Ellen died in 1970.

He is survived by his second wife Isobel (Speirs), whom he married in 1973, and by his son John from the first marriage.

PHIL DAVISON

