

D-Day: 'I was the first man out of the plane over Normandy'

Richard Todd, the Irish-born Hollywood actor who fought in the Allied campaign and celebrates his 90th birthday this week, recalls how a twist of fate placed him at the forefront of the action on D-Day

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Too frail to travel to Normandy for the D-Day commemorations, the Irish-born Hollywood heart-throb who fought in the Allied campaign, will instead be surrounded by military veterans when he turns 90 on Thursday.

A group of friends he refers to as 'The Todd Squad' will be laying on a lavish birthday party at Grantham House in Lincolnshire. "They're keeping it all very secret, but I know many senior military and RAF officials are attending, as well as the three county Lord Lieutenants," he says.



Richard Todd with writer Helen Croydon: 'By luck, on D-Day I landed on the very track that led to our battalion RV [rendez-vous]'

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Trained at Sandhurst, Todd volunteered for army service in the autumn of 1939, just as his acting career was beginning to take off. After the war, he became a household name, starring in more than 20 box-office successes including *The Dam Busters*, *Robin Hood* and *Hasty Heart*, in which he played alongside Ronald Reagan. However, the role he cherishes most is the one he played in the British Army's 6th Airborne Division.

During the Normandy invasion in June 1944, his unit was put in charge of securing the east side of the beach landing areas and opening up communication routes for the rest of the Allied troops. Todd was the first to jump out of the plane.

"That wasn't my idea," he recalls, "I was supposed to be on plane number 33, but when I got to the aircraft I discovered the pilot was extremely senior and one of the most experienced there. He wanted to go in first,

because he had the creme crew. My immediate thought was: 'Oh Lord, I'm going to be the first on the ground.'"

His moment came at 0040 on Tuesday 6th June. "As I parachuted down, the noise became more overwhelming – machine-guns, shells and mortars. It was impossible to tell who anyone was. I could see shapes but didn't know if they were the opposition. By luck, the place where I actually dropped was the very track that led to our battalion RV [rendezvous]. So I had no trouble finding it. Other chaps were dropped miles away, in areas inundated by Germans. Some landed in the flooded marshes and drowned.

"I was looking back at the incoming aircraft and realised a lot were getting knocked [shot] down. If I had been in plane 33 as planned, there was definitely more chance I wouldn't have survived."

More than 600 men in the 6th Airborne Division, from the 7th Parachute Battalion, jumped from planes that night, but according to Todd, only around 160 made it to the RV. From there, they were led by commanding officer Lt Col Geoffrey Pine-Coffin towards the bridges over the river Orne and the Caen canal. "We lost a few more en route, and then even more getting from one bridge to the other. It was swampy ground, and a lot of chaps were caught out in the floods and mud."

The bridges had already been seized by a glider force, led by Major John Howard. The task for Todd and his team was to stop the German forces getting reinforcements to the beach.

"We got to Pegasus Bridge at the same moment as the German reaction opened up. There was a lot of firing and we lost another 65 men on the bridges." Exhausted, they carried on fighting for 21 hours and weren't relieved until 10pm the following night.

Eighteen years after the events at Pegasus Bridge, Todd went on to play Major Howard in the 1962 war film, *The Longest Day*, alongside John Wayne, Richard Burton and Robert Mitchum. He has strong feelings for how the world's largest single-day amphibious invasion was depicted on screen. "I think I prostituted myself a little bit with my role in that. I'm very glad I did it, but like many blockbusters, drama gets added. The set was very realistic which made it emotional, but my main gripe is that in the film, the gliders got too much kudos and not enough was given to the Paras. Too much credit went to Major Howard when the real hero of the day was our commanding officer, Lt Col Geoffrey Pine-Coffin."

But is entertainment a good way to retell history? "D-Day was so huge, so significant, never to be forgotten, it shouldn't need to be put into the cinema. Not all of us who survived that night have had chance to tell our stories. I don't know how children are taught today but they don't know enough."

Asked whether he'd like to be remembered as a wartime hero or Hollywood hero, he thought long and hard. "They are both such very different and very major elements of my life. If I had to say one – I would prefer to be known for what I achieved on the ground on D-Day mainly because not as many people know about it. I can talk about my acting but I can't really go around saying: 'Oh, by the way, I fought at Pegasus Bridge on D-Day.'" Men prefer to keep such experiences to themselves. What happened on that day is so emotional."