

SOME HAD LOST THEIR EYESIGHT, SOME HAD LOST LIMBS ... IT MADE ME THINK OF WHAT THEY HAD GIVEN FOR PEACE

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On May 8, 1945, the guns finally fell silent in Europe. Now in the run-up to the 60th anniversary of VE Day, the Mail will look daily at the effect war had on people both at home and on the Front. Today, reporter Michelle Rose talks to a war veteran about that day

Ve Day 60 YEARS ON: We look back at wartime

life at home and at the Front. Today, veteran Ken remembers

NORMANDY veteran Ken Watson was in a Belgian hospital when he heard the news the world had been waiting almost six years for - the war in Europe was over.

The region's most highly-honoured Second World War veteran remembers the joyful scenes after the announcement was broadcast around the hospital grounds.

"I was outside and all the workers in the hospital came out and were singing and dancing around," he recalled.

"I was so elated."

But his joy on hearing May 8, 1945 would officially be named Victory in Europe (VE) Day was short-lived.

"As soon as I went back into the hospital that elation disappeared," Mr Watson said.

"The hospital was full of airborne troops who had been injured in the drop on the Rhine.

"I looked at them and saw some had lost their eyesight, some had lost limbs, some were badly injured. It made me think about what they had given for peace.

"The cream of the youth of this country was lost in that war."

As the 60th anniversary of VE Day approaches, Mr Watson wants younger generations to remember the sacrifices of those who fought in the war.

The 81-year-old was last year awarded the Legion d'Honneur, France's equivalent to the Victoria Cross, for his part in the D-Day landings at Normandy on June 6, 1944.

Mr Watson, of north Hull, worked at a grocer's before he was joined the war effort in 1942.

He saw first-hand the devastation caused by a Luftwaffe blitz on Hull the year before.

Air raid alarms were a regular occurrence, as were spending hours in the family bomb shelter.

Then, at 19, Mr Watson received conscription papers for the Army.

After training, he was posted to 12 Ordnance Beach Detachment and spent the next year rehearsing beach landings in Scotland.

The unit supplied clothes and ammunition to frontline troops and was crucial to the invasion's ultimate success.

On June 5, 1944, his unit sailed into the English Channel to prepare for the invasion.

"There I saw a tremendous sight that will never be witnessed again," Mr Watson said.

"The Channel was crammed with ships of all sizes - battleships, cruisers, corvettes, destroyers, landing crafts."

The next morning, he was awoken by a heavy 30-minute salvo from battleships 'softening' the French coast for troops.

His landing craft anchored in 8ft-deep water off the French coast about 10am.

Amid heavy fire from German long-range guns and a bombing raid on the beach, Mr Watson and his colleagues swam to shore.

"I will never forget it," he said.

"I looked across the beach and it was littered with rifles, weapons and soldiers.

"I saw things on that beach I have never told anyone about."

On the beach, Mr Watson's quick thinking saved him and several comrades.

"There were still some German objects, metal tripods with a bomb on the top," he said.

Seeing a colleague about to touch one of the unmined objects, Mr Watson rugby-tackled him to the ground.

The next day, he again cheated death after breaking a strict army rule for the first time.

While saving a stack of ammunition after a German bomb exploded, he was hit in the chest by a piece of shrapnel.

"The tunic's left breast pocket was only meant for an ID card, but I had put my cigarette case in there," Mr Watson said.

"My life was saved by a cigarette case that should not have even been there."

After D-Day Mr Watson was stationed at sites in France, Belgium, Holland and Germany.

After VE Day he was recalled to England to train for a planned landing on the Japanese mainland that never came.

He returned home for good after a stint in India in 1946.

Mr Watson, who visits schools to share his wartime experiences, urged younger generations to learn from veterans.

"We have the first-hand knowledge and the experiences," he said.