



Back In Time

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Piper Bill Millin

On D-Day, as the enemy pounded the Normandy beaches with artillery and raked the sands with machine-gun fire, a young Scottish bagpiper walked back and forth at water's edge, playing his pipes. His name was Bill Millin.

That sounds like a scene from a movie, and in fact it is. The *Longest Day*, based on Cornelius Ryan's book by the same name and released in 1962, chronicled the Allied landing on a strip of shoreline codenamed Sword Beach, near the French town of Caen. Among other events on that extraordinary day, the film showed the lone piper playing traditional Scottish tunes as mortar fire rocked the ground beneath his feet and the bodies of his dead comrades rolled ashore in the surf.

William Millin was born on July 14, 1922. His father was a Glasgow policeman, and young Bill grew up and went to school in the Shettlestone neighbourhood. He joined the Territorial Army and played in the pipe bands of the Highland Light Infantry and the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders. He volunteered for commando duty and, while training near Fort William, met the commanding officer of the 1st Special Service Brigade: Brigadier Simon Fraser, the 15th Lord Lovat, hereditary chief of the Fraser Clan. They were an unlikely match—the aristocratic Lord with his own castle at Beaulieu, near Inverness, and the cheeky young piper from the streets of Glasgow—but they hit it off, and Lovat asked Millin to be his personal piper.

As June 6, 1944 approached and the Brigade prepared to go ashore on the beaches at Normandy, Lovat told Millin that for this "greatest invasion in history" he wanted the bagpipes to lead the way in the tradition of Scottish and Irish regiments of days gone by. Millin reminded his commanding officer that the War Office now banned pipers from leading soldiers into battle after losses suffered in the Great War had been deemed excessive. "Ah, but that's the English War Office," Lord Lovat replied. "You and I are both Scottish, so that doesn't apply to us." The young Glaswegian was the only piper on the beach when the Allied forces landed. He was wearing the same Cameron tartan kilt his dad had worn in Flanders during the Great War. His only weapon—other than the power of his music—was his sgian dubh, the traditional Scottish knife sheathed to his right leg.

On that fateful day, Millin stood on the bow of a

landing craft bound for France and played *The Road to the Isles* as it sailed out of The Solent. The music was broadcast over the loud hailer, and soldiers on other transports cheered and threw their hats into the air. When they reached their destination the men jumped into the icy water and waded ashore. Millin carried his pipes above his head to protect them from the salt water, his kilt floating around his waist like a ballerina's skirt. Once on the beach, Lovat called out, "Give us a tune, piper," and Millin began to play. He walked back and forth the length of the beach playing well-known songs like *Hielan' Laddie* and *Blue Bonnets Over The Border* to bolster the morale of the men who fought and died all around him. It was an emotional struggle, he said, to keep playing when men lay wounded, but later reports quote survivors saying things like, "I shall never forget hearing the skirl of Bill Millin's pipes. It is hard to describe the impact it had. It gave us a great lift and increased our determination. As well as the pride we felt, it reminded us of home and why we were there fighting for our lives and those of our loved ones."

Piper Millin played for Lovat and his men all the way from the beach to Ouistreham and on to Bénouville. At one point, under enemy fire, the Brigadier ordered his piper to pipe the troops across Pegasus Bridge, which Millin recalled as "the longest bridge I ever crossed." A spray of shrapnel damaged the pipes that afternoon, and shortly afterwards, when he'd laid them on the ground for a moment, they took a direct hit on the chanter and the drone and that was that. The last tune he played that day was *The Nut-Brown Maiden*.

Millin came through without a scratch, which seemed miraculous under the circumstances. Later on he was able to ask some German prisoners why none of the snipers had picked him off as he marched toward them playing his pipes. They replied that they had often had him in their sights, but had taken pity on him because they assumed he must be crazy. He was, in fact, referred to by many as the Mad Piper, and the name stuck. There is fascinating footage of the landing at Sword Beach and subsequent events, many featuring Bill Millin, in excerpts from Duncan Grosser's film *The Commando Years* which can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B4WZwz2C72M>.

Piper Bill Millin died in Devon on August 17, 2010 at the age of 88, and from that day forth his pipes would play no more.