

I walked along the narrow French village street whose stones had borne witness to centuries of lives lived, loved and lost. I was barely aware of the surrounding beauty and history but feeling comfort from the June sun, my head pounding from my determination not to weep. I missed him so. We had planned this trip, dreamt of it and both knew that it would be the most special thing that we would ever do together. For me it would be the culmination of the gift that had been the most significant man in my life.

When he died two years ago, it fell to me to notify everyone, arrange the funeral, comfort family members and handle the copious red tape that accompanies a death and about which most of us are oblivious.

I **had** to make this trip. It was a small way in which I could honour him. I knew that it would be tough but this was my second day and I had managed not to shed a tear. One just did not do that sort of thing. And certainly not when surrounded by crowds. I was glad of my sunglasses on that bright European day, just in case...

I was suddenly aware of a gentle hand slipping into mine. I turned, startled from my private pain. The beret-clad man tightened his hold, a smile forming as he lifted his sunglasses and asked, 'Who did you lose?'

I looked into misty grey green eyes, a tear glistening on his cheek.

I gently moved towards this beautiful soul as he struggled to lift himself from his wheelchair. I embraced the five foot nothing 96-year old D-Day veteran in the Normandy village of Bayeux, the first town to have been liberated on that day, exactly 75 years before. Still, I managed not to cry as I told him that my father and I had planned this trip a decade back but that he had died before we could make it.

I was adamant that Jimmy from Norwich should sit, to the relief of his immaculately liveried army carer.

'Only if you'll hold my hand', he insisted.

As we made our way amid the crowds walking from the 1000 year old Cathedral to the Bayeux War Cemetery, the last resting place of over 4000 servicemen and women who had paid the ultimate price in the liberation of Normandy, he encouraged me to tell him of my father's service.

Jimmy assured me that the landing forces had been deeply grateful for the air support provided by the RAF in which my dad's squadron's D-Day role had been bombing the roads and bridges to slow the Nazi advance on the coast.

He told me of his raw fear from the moment he jumped off the landing craft into the chest-deep water off Gold Beach (adding that he had been taller then), and that it had stayed with him for the full 77 days of the Battle for Normandy. He apologised

for the tears that escaped his beautiful eyes when he talked of the friends he had lost.

When we reached the cemetery, his carer advised me in his best army version of polite, that they had an assigned area. I knew that every one of the 300 D-Day veterans would be joining Prince Charles and Theresa May (ironically in her last public event as Prime Minister) in laying wreaths.

I kissed and hugged Jimmy, knowing that I was unlikely to see him again and made my way through the rows of immaculately tended graves. Most poignant were those of the unidentified, marked, 'A soldier of the 1939-45 War, Known unto to God', the phrase selected by Rudyard Kipling, whose son was lost in the Great War and who had no marked grave.

The cemetery formalities began with a recording of the actual BBC broadcast advising that the invasion had begun. The RAF band then played a haunting rendition of *The Sobbing Violins of Autumn*, the pre-arranged D-Day announcement to the French Resistance.

The cemetery service was as beautiful as the one in the Cathedral.

Just as Theresa May was reading from the Book of Micah, two war-time RAF planes flew over us at 300 ft. (no doubt breaking a zillion EU health and safety rules).

That was me finished. I finally broke down. I sobbed for my dad being gone, knowing how much this would have meant to him. I cried in gratitude for all that his brave generation had done in fighting the tyranny of Nazi and Japanese imperialism.

I was hugged and comforted by strangers around me and finally shed the tears that I had withheld upon my dad's death.

The next day, while exploring the ancient town of Rouen where the heart of Richard the Lion Heart is buried and where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake, I was overwhelmingly aware that there have always been wars somewhere and that this is likely to continue until man self-destructs, annihilating the earth in the process.