

MEMORIES OF AUGUST

Tucked in a recent obituary page of the Press Register was the death of the ‘Mad Piper of WWII’ at a hospital in the English county of Devon. Bill Millin, age 88, perhaps ‘piped in eulogy’, became part of Scottish folklore as ‘soon as he jumped into the cold French water off Sword Beach, June 6, 1944, part of the large armada of American and British forces in the invasion of Europe on D-Day’. Millin, in the kilt his father wore in WWI, was personal bag-piper for British commandoes of the 1st Special Service Brigade led by Simon Fraser, better known by his Scottish clan title of Lord Lovat.

Lovat’s unit in relief of John Howard’s glider-borne attack of the Pegasus Bridge near Caen were pivotal to protecting the left flank from potential Rommel counter-attack. As I mentioned in my book (Trumpet for Freedom), “The Commandoes relieved Howard and despite warnings, marched over Pegasus Bridge to fame and glory with Piper blowing in classical flourish. Many fell yet they continued.” Much of this was recalled by Cornelius Ryan’s ‘Longest Day’ and Stephen Ambrose’s ‘Pegasus Bridge’.

The Millin story brought me back to August of 1945 to Camp San Francisco, Chateau Thierry, France where many of us were in this redeployment camp perhaps being readied for shipment to the war-zone in the Pacific-even though we had just served in the war in Europe, ending in May of that year. Japan was fighting on and had been warned repeatedly that she must surrender ‘unconditionally’ or be destroyed. Fire bombings of Tokyo environs and military sites were on-going. Silence of their leaders was the answer...thus the first of two atomic bombs hit Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 August and 9 August respectively. WWII ended in early September. At least 78,000 died in Hiroshima, 40,000 in Nagasaki, and more would die subsequently from radiation sickness, wounds and disease. Salvation came to many that an invasion of Japan –against a fanatical

enemy- assumed more than a million in casualties. In the main there was no soul-searching or remorse by those of us who had fought Germany and Japan –a necessary war, if one can be!

August was the moment when old friend, and school classmate, Burr Smith and I met in Paris and shared experiences. My box-camera(Brownie)reveals pics in my book of moments at the Arc de Triomphe along the Champs Elysees: the long axis leading to the Arc, and a lovely moment saluting the eternal flame for the Unknown French soldier while an interested Frenchman stopped to watch. Burr's experiences were much tougher than mine but we enjoyed a mutual respect as comrades in a brutal war. We vowed to become 'great writers' someday. Burr shared with me his travels and travail with Easy Company, 506th Airborne, 101st Airborne Division, about those who fell, and those who survived. The irony here was his unit would become historically famous when author Stephen Ambrose described their exploits in 'Band of Brothers' in book, and memorable television series.

Burr was to die of cancer soon after meeting with Ambrose while he prepared his recollections. Notoriety for this fine soldier led to his CIA experience with the famed Delta Force (of Charlie Beckwith)as they prepared the attempt to free the American hostages taken by the Iranians during the Khomeini revolution of the eighties.

The August of my mind is rich with the memories of real soldiers, a proud country and a time when duty, honor and country was part of our lexicon and still resides with me. And I worry with others about the man who would be King, yet revealing an agenda bespeaking of a floundering economy, financial structures in disarray, strategic incomprehension and a failure in most aspects of a good leader. Compounding this is the theme of a true ideologue who has difficulty in explaining his religion whether Christian or Muslim, neither or both, and a social agenda that takes from the rich to give to the poor, apologetic for the 'sins of America' and finds

no recompense and projects a time to try men's souls!