

Heroes Return podcast

Hello, and welcome to the Big Lottery Fund podcast.

Big Lottery Fund: Through our Heroes Return programme the Big Lottery Fund has awarded over £25 million to more than 50,000 World War 2 veterans, widows, spouses and carers across the UK to return to where they or a family member saw service.

Remembrance Sunday gives people time to reflect on the great sacrifice our veterans made for us.

Doug Mayman is travelling back to Lucheux, Normandy in April with his daughter to retrace his steps using World War II diaries that he kept. He tells us his experience of war, and why he wants to go back to where he saw service.

Doug Mayman "I landed as a member of the 15th 19th Kings Royal Hussars ex cavalry regiment now a light fast tank regiment well trained in overland manoeuvres. Landed at Orange Beach in August 1944. And the village we were in was called Grouches-Luchuel.

We were there, it turned out, not for a short time because there were so many tanks that had been hit that the recovery vehicles took a long time to get to us, and we were there for a fortnight or more. During which time we were the only foreign people in that village and we got to know the villagers, some of them quite well. A lady in the farm let us sleep in her barn and we met several of the other villagers there.

One particular lady we met was a lady called Vera Brown, who had acted as a double agent, and she told us all about the German occupation of that village. So, part of our trip would definitely go back to that village to see if anyone remembers us. I shall certainly remember enough of it even though it's a long time ago.

So, but going back is not to gloat over memories of the war, in that I don't particularly want to think it was glorious fighting, but we had it to do. And what it will mean to me is if I can find people in the village. What will help me is that I wrote a diary every day, and I have these and that will tell me exactly where I was at different times throughout the whole of my fighting, so I'll have no difficulty refinding, even after all this time, the places where I wish to go.

At this point I feel it fitting to pay tribute to all the other members of our regiment. I think we were very lucky, contrary to what is often popular belief, we had tremendous respect for, and trust in our officers. They all led from the front. They were all excellent people and as far as my own rank were concerned, we were all conscripted and not professional fighters yet there was a tremendous amount of bravery camaraderie there. And it's because of all that I look forward to going back those areas and being not necessarily the battles of the time, but by going paying some sort of tribute to those like myself who were caught up in the war, and did their best to make sure they didn't let the side down.

Big Lottery Fund: Big Lottery Fund Chief Executive Peter Wanless talks about what Heroes Return means to him and the Big Lottery Fund.

Peter Wanless: “Heroes Return is very many people’s favourite Big Lottery Fund programme. It enables individuals who secured freedoms which all of us benefit from in this day and age. As we approach Remembrance Sunday, I always think about my granddad who participated in the D-Day landings, and when I was growing up, he used to talk to me about those extraordinary experiences. He died before the Heroes Return programme came in being. I really wish he’d had the chance to benefit from a trip of this kind.

The thanks that we get from many of the individuals who participated in this programme is incredible. I have personally received incredibly moving letters, very often handwritten in painstaking fashion setting out the emotions and the actions which people have gone through on these trips. It is humbling to receive these thanks really, because to be quite frank, it’s the least these heroes deserve.”

Big Lottery Fund: Ted Hedges, who served in RAF Coastal Command, hunting for the U-Boats targeting allied convoys talks to us about his trip back to the Azores, funded through Heroes Return.

Before he left in 1944, the Americans had started work in conjunction with our forces to build an air force base which is now an important NATO base.

Ted Hedges: “The primary task of visiting my friends, or friends left in the cemetery. It is really difficult to explain to anyone how you feel at such a time. You still see their faces; you still hear their voices, and the times that you spent together, some perhaps only a few weeks. They never die, they’re always there. And to walk round and visit each grave, that is in the cemetery today, and there are 47 graves there, is something which you need to do.

When I left the cemetery there was no doubt that I had the feeling that as long as I remember them, they were still living in memory.

I visited the cemetery three times. The last time I left in tears.

For the last ten years, in conjunction with a Canadian I have assisted in writing a book about the activities of the Fortress squadrons in the Azores and the purpose of that book was to record the very great sacrifice that each of those people made, and also that as long as there is a record of what they carried out, what they affected, then they are still living in our, us survivors memories.”

Big Lottery Fund: If you or someone you know, is interested in applying to the Heroes Return programme please contact our advice line on 0845 00 00 121, or visit the website www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/heroesreturn.

Grants covering the travel costs associated with such trips range from £150 to roughly £5,500.

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