

The first extract in the Telegraph's week-long serialisation of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's new book pays tribute to Geoffrey Appleyard and Graham Hayes

When I was growing up in Kirkaldy in the early 1960s the annual Remembrance Service brought a whole community together. Each second Sunday in November service veterans, young peoples' organisations, regular and less regular church attenders and others gathered first in our church and then at the War Memorial for a solemn ceremony.

With silence and a bugle call, and in a short open-air church service that my father often conducted, the town remembered those who had died in war. For some, memories of the Second World War were still fresh, even painful; fathers, brothers, uncles had not returned, or they themselves had suffered injury and the loss of close comrades. And we knew that at the same time all across Britain, in cities, towns and villages, similar gatherings stood as we stood, and remembered as we remembered.

Forty years on, as the remaining veterans of 1939-45 grow older and more frail, our debt to them is undiminished. And as another Remembrance Sunday draws near I want to reflect, as memories fade and these gatherings dwindle, on how much we owe that generation, and how much they sacrificed in a terrible global struggle in which many millions were mobilised and millions died, and in which Great Britain alone of the major powers fought from start to finish – and for crucial months fought alone.

Reading about that vast conflict, I was struck again and again by how often individuals made a difference; and how their courage – whether in the heat of battle or in longer struggles: in bomb disposal, behind enemy lines or with SOE in France – not only helped substantially in the long struggle against the Axis powers, but inspired others and sustained morale at home front too. A few, very few, through courage and innovation, changed official thinking on irregular operations and, by their example and by bold developments towards much more realistic training, brought a new and effective form of warfare to the fore.

Geoffrey Appleyard and Graham Hayes grew up as close friends in the village of Linton in Yorkshire in the 1920s. When war came, Appleyard was commissioned into the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC), Hayes into the Border Regiment, and together they served in the Small Scale Raiding Force: a Mountbatten creation that can be seen now as the precursor of the Royal Navy's elite Special Boat Squadron.

Their exploits in 1941 and 1942 harassing Axis forces and assets from the Gulf of Guinea to the Channel combined audacity with economy of force, created fear and uncertainty for the enemy, and served also to raise morale at home. Both won MCs, and Hayes a DSO. Neither survived the war, and by a sombre coincidence, and hundreds of miles apart, they died on the same day in 1943.

Hayes is buried in a well-tended grave in Paris. Appleyard's remains have never been found. Appleyard was born to some privilege. The son of a Leeds motor trade entrepreneur, in school he excelled at sport but worked for exams when it was absolutely necessary, doing well enough to gain a place at Cambridge.

There too he excelled, as an oarsman and a skier, becoming captain of boats for his college and leading the English skiing team to unexpected victory in the Anglo-Norwegian meeting held over the Easter vacation in 1938. To the astonishment of his sporting friends, a belated burst of study in his final term resulted in a first class degree in engineering.

Later he said that meant less to him than his skiing Blue. He then joined his father's firm, working in overalls with the mechanics on the shop floor, at first as 'the man who passes the tools', but intent on learning all he could about the mundane business of what was then known as 'motor repair'. So when Britain prepared for war he was a natural for the RASC supplementary reserve list of officers, and even before joining up he helped train hundreds of TA motor mechanics.

Mobilised in 1939, he led an RASC motor repair mobile workshop and spent the 'phony war' in northern France. When the German army broke through and the retreat to Dunkirk accelerated he was shocked by an order to destroy all the vehicles he had so carefully maintained; but he got all his men safely to the beaches and almost all of them home, though he himself was among the last to make it.

Back in England he was irked by inactivity, so volunteered for the new Commando forces. He was accepted – because of his skiing and rowing, he thought – and loved the life. Writing home he described it as '... absolutely terrific', and 'the grandest job in the army... a job that if properly carried out can be of enormous value.' His immediate superior in B troop of No. 7 Commando, Gus March-Phillipps, was a brave and charismatic officer who would have a huge influence on Appleyard's war, and – through Appleyard – on that of Hayes too.

After training in Arran, Appleyard found the action he sought, in a daring operation in which HM Submarine Tigris took him and one of his men to land in collapsible canoes south of the Loire to pick up two secret agents from occupied France. One canoe was holed on landing and the agents did not turn up until the presence of the submarine offshore was about to be betrayed by moonrise. Across a couple of miles of heavy seas, with four in a canoe designed for two, Appleyard made it back.

Aboard the submarine again, naval officers ****ounced that he 'wasn't such a bad sort for an Army man.' Lieutenant (acting Captain) John Geoffrey Appleyard, RASC, was awarded an MC. By now Hayes too was a junior officer in the Army, though by a very different route to that of his boyhood friend. Leaving his home village not long after he left school, he went to sea and spent a year on merchant ships, eventually reaching Australia and coming back around the world.

In the late Thirties he set up a furniture business but left it to join the army, first as a sapper in the Royal Engineers, then graduating via an OCTU to become an infantry lieutenant in the 1st Bn of the Border Regiment. In his file an MI5 memo from August 1941 notes in relation to a possible secondment: 'Reason for enquiry: for employment as a member of crew on a ship...' followed by 'Action taken: to be specially employed.'

The ship concerned scarcely deserved the name. Maid Honor was a sixty-five ton Brixham trawler, a sailing vessel with a small auxiliary engine; and the summons to Hayes to join her had been initiated by her newly appointed second-in-command, Appleyard, with the approval of her commander, Captain Gustavus March-Phillipps. Maid Honor was the unlikely flagship of the newly formed seaborne commando unit, which reported to Mountbatten – whose idea it was – in the Special Service Department of the War Office.

Fitted out and commissioned in a quiet corner of Poole Harbour, the former trawler – a wooden fishing boat of innocent appearance, at no risk from magnetic mines and too quiet to register on Asdic – had been given a truly daunting task: that of sailing across the Bay of Biscay, rounding West Africa and operating on the coasts of the Gulf of Guinea – by now largely hostile territory – reporting on enemy submarine activity there and carrying out clandestine raids on whatever might be worth raiding. She sailed in August 1941, and was to do damage that utterly belied her modest size and origins.

Appleyard's letters indicate that his high hopes of 'the grandest job in the Army' were not disappointed. Commander, second in command and first mate (March-Phillipps, Appleyard and Hayes) got on well, professionally and socially; and Appleyard's early reports from a British base near Freetown are typically enthusiastic: there are Yorkshiremen in the mess, including another Linton man; there is swimming, diving and spear-fishing; and he is busy – 'It's funny, but it seems that the smaller the ship is the more there is to do on it.'

Maid Honor served on the West African coast for around six months, and was abandoned there in 1942 as too unseaworthy to return home. But she served her purpose, demonstrating the value of seaborne special operations and thus resulting in the establishment of the Small Scale Raiding Force and its subsequent expansion. The highlight of her time there was an astonishing action in early

1942. For Operation Postmaster, the Brixham trawler approached the harbour of Fernando Po, a Spanish island colony and technically neutral territory, because intelligence reports indicated the presence of high-value Axis shipping, which turned out to be the Italian liner Duchesse d'Aosta and two German cargo vessels.

On the night of 14th-15th January Appleyard led a party tasked with taking over the liner. There were some problems. As they approached it a mishap led to Appleyard having to leap an eight-foot gap over water, but he succeeded. Then the first charge he laid to sever the ship's anchor chain failed to go off, but he ignored the usual safety precautions and immediately set another, which worked. Appleyard then took over as second-in-command of the liner and, in the words of the subsequent citation, 'displayed initiative and ability to command, under circumstances of great difficulty, of a very high order indeed' – a remarkable achievement for someone who had started the war in command of a motor repair unit and was still a fairly junior Army officer.

Maid Honor and her team had proved their worth. March-Phillipps got a DSO, Appleyard a bar to his MC, and Hayes an MC. Before his investiture at Buckingham Palace Appleyard, whose experience of formal drill in the RASC and the special forces was negligible, was carefully prepared ('Advance three steps. Halt. Bow. Stand to attention. Bow. Retreat one step. Right turn. Quick march.') by his younger brother, a cadet in the Leeds University OTC. In March 1942, with Europe still under Nazi occupation, March-Phillipps and Appleyard were posted to Poole to train commandos for the new Small Scale Raiding Force.

Now a part of Special Services Command and equipped with powerful 30-knot motor launches, the unit would carry out raids against enemy forces on the coasts of France. Training routines were rigorous and sometimes extreme: with exhaustion, immersion, seasickness and gruelling exercises involving live rounds and mines all preparing men for the dangers they would face in action.

March-Phillipps and Appleyard reflected on their experience and together – and most irregularly – wrote a paper on discipline and morale and sent it to their superiors in Army Command. It made important points about the wide gap between conventional training and combat; and contrasted the experience of the First World War – then well within living memory – in which many soldiers had seen action again and again, with that of 1942, when retreats around the Mediterranean and disasters in the Far East had been followed by the need to train at home, for years and virtually in peace-time conditions, for the coming invasion of Europe: 'That is why we are pushing for a more aggressive policy... a really whole-heartedly adopted policy of small scale raiding' – one that would give more soldiers 'at least a taste of action, a baptism of fire.'

And they practiced what they preached. March-Phillipps, Appleyard and Hayes led persistent and daring raids, landing by small boats from their motor launches and repeatedly harassing enemy forces in Brittany and Normandy with small but unpredictable incursions that compelled the defenders to reinforce their guards and sentries along hundreds of miles of coastline, thus diverting significant numbers of troops from war duties elsewhere. Appleyard wrote home about 'another successful little party the night before last... this time we brought back seven prisoners.'

And in a raid on the Casquets lighthouse, a German naval signal station off Cherbourg ('a notoriously evil place... a tremendous tide race round the rocks...'), they captured all present and returned with invaluable codebooks and other naval documents. Mountbatten, by now Chief of Combined Operations, sent a telegram of congratulations. It was good while it lasted, and in all Appleyard and Hayes carried out around twenty such operations.

But on the night of 12 September 1942 the three set out on another raid near Cherbourg: one that went disastrously wrong. Appleyard should probably not have been there. An ankle injury sustained in a previous raid meant that he could not go ashore, or even walk unaided; but his skill as a motor launch navigator in such treacherous conditions – close inshore on a rockbound coast in pitch darkness – meant that he could still contribute. Hayes, March-Phillipps and seven others went ashore in a small boat, came under fire as soon as they landed, fought back, but were overwhelmed.

Appleyard drew as close as he could in the launch to provide covering fire, but no targets could be identified. The shooting died down and Appleyard heard a voice, he thought that of Hayes, telling him to save his ship and go away because all was lost. With one of his two engines out of action following a hit, and still under fire from the shore, Appleyard had no option but to retreat. Next morning the launch was escorted into Portsmouth with air cover provided by Spitfires. March-Phillipps was dead, and the rest dead or wounded and captured – apart from Hayes, who was later posted missing but believed to have escaped.

He had taken to the water, swum for his life, and been washed ashore along the coast. A farmer took care of him, then passed him on to the 'underground' that looked after allied personnel on the run in France. From Normandy he was spirited first to Paris and then to the Spanish border. He had escaped, and news of this reached his parents back in England. But his freedom was soon cut short: the Spanish handed him back to the Germans, and he was taken to Fresnes prison in Paris.

Appleyard, having lost both an esteemed commanding officer and his best friend in just one night, was devastated; but took on the temporary command of the Small Scale Raiding Force and soon resumed operations, capturing in one raid 'the most useful prisoner obtained by anyone up to date... very chatty and nothing is too much trouble for him to describe in detail.'

It was indeed a coup, and Appleyard was summoned to London to meet Churchill, Sir Alan Brooke, the CIGS, and Admiral Sir Dudley Pound the First Sea Lord. The contribution of SSRF to the war effort was confirmed and its further expansion planned. Now awarded a DSO, Appleyard went to Buckingham Palace for a third investiture in eleven months. The King was amused as well as impressed: 'What, you again?'

As allied forces prepared in 1943 for the invasion of occupied Europe, Appleyard, with his unique experience and understanding of seaborne special operations, was increasingly in demand. British successes in North Africa would lead on to Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily, for which detailed reconnaissance of landing places and enemy strongholds was required. Now a major, Appleyard was sent to Malta and from there reconnoitred the island of Pantellaria, halfway between the African shore and Sicily.

Leading a small group landed from a submarine, he carried out a thorough survey of its defences, took the usual prisoners, and returned to Malta to report his findings. The capture of Pantellaria was achieved soon after. It marked the first step in the liberation of Europe. Landings on Sicily began on 9 July 1943, and on the evening of 12 July Appleyard requested permission to go on a flight with commandos who were to be parachuted in to protect a vital bridge near Randazzo in the east of the island. He did so to ensure the drop zone was the right one, and to check on where reinforcements should go in the following night.

The Albemarle aircraft, with ten paratroopers and Appleyard on board, took off later that evening. He had told his unit he expected to be back around 1 a.m. on the 13th. He never returned, and all on board the aircraft were posted missing, presumed dead. Also on the 13 July 1943, in Fresnes prison in Paris and after nine months in solitary confinement, Graham Hayes was taken out and executed by his German captors.

Hayes was buried in the grounds of the prison where he was shot. No trace was ever found of the Albemarle or of those who flew in it. The two boys who had grown up together in Linton had fought together against an evil tyranny that had conquered Europe and would in its turn be conquered. They did not live to see that; but their remarkable bravery, ingenuity and selfless determination in a new form of warfare brought the defeat of the Axis powers closer.

In the church in Linton, near Wetherby in Yorkshire, there is a stained glass window that commemorates them; and this Sunday they, along with all the others from that village who fell in war, will be remembered.

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