

Behind the headlines War heroes



From the left: The taxi outing in Worthing in 1964, on Worthing Pier; groups gather in front of the black cabs in the same year; Harry Joel and Dame Vera Lynn in 1985; Prince Philip outside Worthing town hall in 1979; RAF flying ace Sir Douglas Bader meets the cabbies in 1980



Black taxi cabs from London picked up war veterans across the capital and drove them down to Worthing for day out – the 70th year this has been done. The veterans posed for a photograph outside Worthing Pavilion

Veterans given warm welcome on 'cab' day

War heroes' annual taxi trek to sparks a special trip down memory lane – James Butler reports

War heroes received a warm welcome after black cabs ferried them down to the Sussex coast from London for the 70th taxi outing.

More than 180 veterans were driven in 100 black taxi cabs from around London to South Holmwood village in Surrey for brunch before arriving outside Worthing Pavilion by lunchtime, where they were treated to a feast and entertainment and greeted by several of Worthing's dignitaries.

Among them was Corporal George Parsons from Croydon, right, who has been part of the outing more than five times. The 98-year-old was part of the No. 2 Commando Unit in the British Army during the Second World War, specialising in demolition and first aid. He was present for the German invasion of Norway in 1940, and also served in North Africa, Malta and Italy before ending up in what was Yugoslavia. He said: "The camaraderie was

excellent, but some of the things we saw were a bit unpleasant, especially the raids in Malta. Norway was a different type of combat. We had no support. That was probably one of the most difficult times, up in the Arctic Circle."

George was recently seen on ITV as part of the D-Day Darlings singing troupe's performance in the final of Britain's Got Talent. With his fellow veterans, he walked out at the end of their rendition of Vera Lynn's classic song The White Cliffs of Dover, accompanied by a shower of confetti and a standing ovation from the studio audience and judges. He said it was a 'once in

a lifetime experience'.

"At first it was a bit of a shambles, but then it comes together and you're in the right place at the right time," he said.

"I had a little bit of adrenaline going. It was quite exciting, and then you think of all the family at home watching it, saying 'oh, Grandad's on the telly.'"

The war hero still does collections for the Taxi Charity For Military Veterans at railway stations in London.

He said: "It is nice that people thank you for what you do, because the world would have been different if we hadn't done what we did. "When the world looks a bit

grim, and you think there are a lot of helpful and kind people out there, it gives you a different perspective on things."

Vice-chairman of the taxi charity Ian Parsons, who has been a London cab driver for almost 30 years, picked up a veteran to take to Worthing: air commodore Charles Clarke, 94, who he has got to know over the years of doing the annual outing. His cab broke down early in the journey, so they had to swap over to his car for the rest of the trip. He said: "If he can fly bombing missions, I can surely get him to Worthing."

Mr Clarke, from Richmond, was in the No. 619 heavy bomber squadron of the RAF and carried out 18 missions before being shot down over Schweinfurt in Northern Bavaria.

He was captured and became a prisoner of war in the Stalag Luft III camp in Sagan, now Żagań in Poland, which was the site of a mass prisoner escape made famous by the Hollywood film *The Great Escape*. In January 1945, he was forced on the Long March in temperatures of



Air commodore Charles Clarke, 94, and Ian Parsons, vice-chairman of the charity -30C across Germany before being rescued by Allied forces at the end of the war. How did they manage to survive? "We were young and fit," the air commodore said.

He said he felt 'honoured' to be invited: "It is very moving that even after all these years, people still honour the British participants of the war.

"It is good of the town to put on something like this, which means a lot to the old boys."

Worthing mayor Paul Baker said: "This is a fantastic opportunity for the whole of Worthing to remember



Terry Flynn, left and Ted Heath accompanied by Molly Rogers

How it started 70 years ago...

The London Taxi Benevolent Association For War Disabled (LTBAFWD), also known as the Taxi Charity, was formed at the Bedford Arms in Fulham on 27 February 1948.

Vice-chairman of the charity Ian Parsons said the event began with a trip to Brighton in 1948, but because it was too busy they travelled down to Worthing, where we welcomed the 50 veterans with open arms and the rest is history.

He said: "We couldn't do this without the cab drivers, who give up their time, vehicles and what could be a day's income, but they form an affinity with the veterans and get friendly with them, helping them outside of events like taking them to the doctors, and they become friends."

Over the years, numerous famous faces have been involved in the Worthing taxi outing, including Prince

Philip and Dame Vera Lynn.

One of the finest moments of the charity was in 1994, when they organised a four-day trip to the Normandy beaches for the 50th anniversary of D-Day. On June 9 at 9.30am, 75 London taxi drivers were given the honour of assembling on Horseguard's Parade, with 150 Normandy veterans, to await the arrival of HM Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother.

the sacrifices that have been made by the veterans so that we can go about our normal lives.

"The sacrifices they have made cannot be underestimated. Although they are here today, I think every one is thinking of a friend that had been killed and they wished had been here with them."

The veterans were accompanied by wounded military personnel of all ages who had received treatment from Headley Court Medical Rehabilitation Centre in Epsom, who rode on bikes from the centre to Worthing. They were cheered on by the crowds and the veterans formed a guard of honour for their arrival outside the pavilion.

Among them was Lance Corporal of Horse Ben Scollick, from the Household Cavalry, who set out at 5am and cycled 117km to get to Worthing by 12.45pm. The 36-year-old



from Ascot fell off his mountain bike over the Christmas period, hitting his head and causing a severe traumatic brain injury that left him with speech and memory issues, and meant that if he closed his eyes he would fall over.

After two months of cognitive, occupational, hydro and physiotherapy at the centre, Mr Scollick is now back to work in the Household Cavalry's HQ Squadron.

He said their support had been 'incredible' and praised the people of Worthing: "The reception we have had today has been incredible. I was nearly brought to tears seeing all the 200 or 300 people clapping us in."

Worthing town crier Bob Smytherman said: "It is an absolute delight to have our amazing veterans down for their 70th year, and a privilege to welcome them and see their faces. It is unbelievable, and long may it continue."

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