

# Piper Bill Millin -obituary



Bill Millin playing the pipes at Dawlish

Warren, near his home in Devon CREDIT: LES WILSON  
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Millin began his apparently suicidal serenade immediately upon jumping from the ramp of the landing craft into the icy water. As the Cameron tartan of his kilt floated to the surface he struck up with Hieland Laddie. He continued even as the man behind him was hit, dropped into the sea and sank.

Once ashore Millin did not run, but walked up and down the beach, blasting out a series of tunes. After Hieland Laddie, Lovat, the commander of 1st Special Service Brigade (1 SSB), raised his voice above the crackle of gunfire and the crump of mortar, and asked for another. Millin strode up and down the water's edge playing The Road to the Isles.

Bodies of the fallen were drifting to and fro in the surf. Soldiers were trying to dig in and, when they heard the pipes, many of them waved and cheered — although one came up to Millin and called him a “mad bastard”.



Bill Millin landing on the beaches on D-Day CREDIT: PA

His worst moments were when he was among the wounded. They wanted medical help and were shocked to see this figure strolling up and down playing the bagpipes. To feel so helpless, Millin said afterwards, was horrifying. For many other soldiers, however, the

piper provided a unique boost to morale. “I shall never forget hearing the skirl of Bill Millin’s pipes,” said one, Tom Duncan, many years later. “It is hard to describe the impact it had. It gave us a great lift and increased our determination. As well as the pride we felt, it reminded us of home and why we were there fighting for our lives and those of our loved ones.”

When the brigade moved off, Millin was with the group that attacked the rear of Ouistreham. After the capture of the town, he went with Lovat towards Bénouville, piping along the road.

They were very exposed, and were shot at by snipers from across the canal. Millin stopped playing. Everyone threw themselves flat on the ground — apart from Lovat, who went down on one knee. When one of the snipers scrambled down a tree and dived into a cornfield, Lovat stalked him and shot him. He then sent two men into the corn to look for him and they came back with the corpse. “Right, Piper,” said Lovat, “start the pipes again.”

At Bénouville, where they again came under fire, the CO of 6 Commando asked Millin to play them down the main street. He suggested that Millin should run, but the piper insisted on walking and, as he played *Blue Bonnets Over the Border*, the commandos followed.

When they came to the crossing which later became known as Pegasus Bridge, troops on the other side signalled frantically that it was under sniper fire. Lovat ordered Millin to shoulder his bagpipes and play the commandos over. “It seemed like a very long bridge,” Millin said afterwards.

The pipes were damaged by shrapnel later that day, but remained playable. Millin was surprised not to have been shot, and he mentioned this to some Germans who had been taken prisoner.

They said that they had not shot at him because they thought he had gone off his head.



Bill Millin as a young soldier

William Millin, the son of a policeman, was born in Glasgow on July 14 1922. For a few years the family lived in Canada, but they returned to Scotland and Bill went to school in Glasgow.

He joined the TA before the Second World War and played in the pipe band of the 7th Battalion the Highland Light Infantry. He subsequently transferred to the Cameron Highlanders before volunteering to join the commandos in 1941.

He met Lord Lovat while he doing his commando training at Achnacarry, north of Fort William. Lovat, the hereditary chief of the Clan Fraser, offered him a job as his batman, but Millin turned this down and Lovat agreed instead to take him on as his personal piper.

The War Office had banned pipers from leading soldiers into battle after losses in the Great War had proved too great. "Ah, but that's the English War Office," Lovat told Millin. "You and I are both Scottish and that doesn't apply." On D-Day, Millin was the only piper.

When Millin boarded the landing craft bound for the Normandy beaches, he took his bagpipes out of their box and, standing in the bow, played Road to the Isles as they went out of The Solent. Someone relayed the music over the loud hailer and troops on other transports heard it and started cheering and throwing their hats in the air.



Millin playing at Edinburgh Castle in 2001 CREDIT: PA

Like many others, Millin was so seasick on the rough crossing that the coast of France proved a welcome sight, despite the dangers that came with it. "I didn't care what was going on ashore. I just wanted to get off that bloody landing craft," he said.

He returned to England with 1 SSB in September 1944, but then accompanied 4 Commando to Holland; he finished the war at Lubeck. After being demobilised the following year he took up the offer of a job on Lord Lovat's estate .

This life proved too quiet for him, however, and he joined a touring theatre company with which he appeared playing his pipes on the stage in London, Stockton-on-Tees and Belfast. In the late 1950s he trained in Glasgow as a registered mental nurse and worked in three hospitals in the city.

In 1963 Millin moved to Devon, where he was employed at the Langdon Hospital, Dawlish, until he retired in 1988. In several of the Ten Tors hikes on Dartmoor organised by the Army he took part as the piper, and also visited America, where he lectured about his D-Day experiences.



Millin at a ceremony to commemorate the Normandy Landings CREDIT: PHOTOSHOT

In 1962 Cornelius Ryan's book *The Longest Day* was adapted into a film. The part of the piper who accompanied Lovat's commandos was played by Pipe Major Leslie de Laspee, the official piper to the Queen Mother.

Millin played the lament at Lord Lovat's funeral in 1995, and he donated his pipes to the National War Museum in Edinburgh. The mayor of Colleville-Montgomery, a town on Sword Beach, has offered a site for a life-size statue of Millin opposite the place where he landed on D-Day. This is due to be unveiled next year.

Bill Millin married, in 1954, Margaret Mary Dowdel. She predeceased him and he is survived by their son.