

Surprises Revealed in Normandy



I can't believe lady luck was smiling on me. Its mid-September 2006 at the tail end of a busy tourist season in Normandy and I have the whole World II War battlefield to myself on the Northwest Coast of France---well, nearly. Mind you, there were no crowds, no fuss, and cooler weather. Another plus: Greenery I missed seeing so much in Afghanistan.

Here I am- after a 3 hour train ride from Paris and waiting for over 26 years for this experience unfolding before me.

From a cliff lookout, in front of me I gaze in wonder over the vast expanse of beach--- Omaha Beach---where thousands of allied military personnel and equipment landed in a withering hail of gunfire and artillery over 62 years ago to start the beginning of the end of World War II. The spectacle is awe-inspiring and the feeling of pride and honor is definite.

This overlook I am standing on is just north of the Memorial and provides a comprehensive view of Omaha Beach, which lies below the cemetery. A trail follows the cliff down to Omaha Beach. The length of Omaha Beach is marked by high, chalk cliffs fronted by wide, sloping, sand beaches.



This the center piece of an incredible moment.



D-Day was part of Operation Overlord, the Allied Forces' plan for the invasion of Northern Europe. The action involved 5,000 vessels (landing craft, support ships and war ships), 13,000 aircraft, and hundreds of thousands of soldiers. American forces landed at Utah and Omaha beaches. British soldiers landed at Gold Beach and Sword Beach on each side of the Canadian force, which landed at Juno Beach.

Behind me is the Colleville American cemetery, all 172 acres, where 9,387 brave American servicemen and servicewomen rest, their white crosses

neatly arrayed in exact geometric patterns on a bed of green grass.

Generally rectangular in shape, the cemetery is formed in a manner of a Latin cross. A visit to the American Military Cemetery at Colleville-Sur-Mer (featured at the start of the movie "Saving Private Ryan") will evoke a haunting sense of sadness and incomprehension at the significant loss of life.

You will find some interesting facts. Buried here are also three hundred and seven Unknowns, *three* Congressional Medal of Honor recipients, and four women. Side by side are also buried father and son, and 38 pairs of brothers. There are military from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Another interesting fact: many remains were shipped backed to the USA via boat at the request of the next-of-kin.



Walking along the rows of white crosses, you'll find the marked grave of Medal of Honor Recipient Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt Jr. buried next to his brother.



A wide, grassy mall and a reflecting pool separates major portions of the graves areas as if to bring attention to main paths, graves area, memorial, and chapel areas.

An inscription reads: "...*Think not only upon their passing...Remember the Glory of Their Spirit...*"



In the morning calm, twin flagpoles with American Flags cast their reflections on the reflecting pond bearing silent witness to the many fallen comrades.



Nearby is also a Memorial in the Gardens of the Missing engraved with the names of 1,557 soldiers who died in the invasion, but whose bodies were not recovered.

You will learn an interesting fact: Omaha Beach was the most heavily defended and fortified of all the invasion beaches. The Germans had erected barriers designed to repel invaders and their landing craft both in the water and on the beach. The Germans had heavily fortified the cliffs and the wide beach was targeted by bunkers positioned to

be able to produce deadly crossfire.

Pictures---my mind drifted and imagined what the experience was like back then and Elwood (tour guide) will tell you that landing on Omaha Beach began and nearly ended in disaster. Miscalculations and errors became apparent early. The saturation bombing of the beach defenses by the heavy bombers of the U.S. Eighth Air Force was ineffective because a late release-



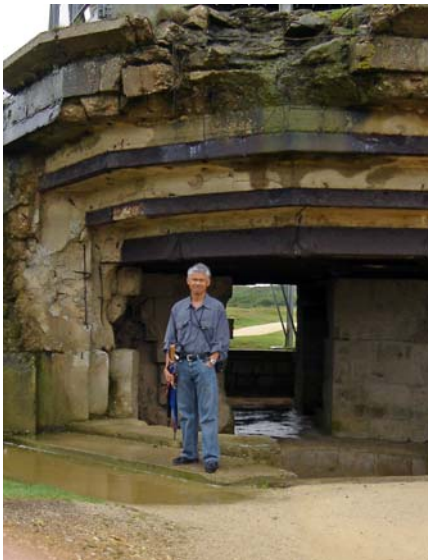
ordered by Eisenhower to protect the landing craft-meant that most bombs fell well behind the beach, killing more dairy cows instead of Germans. To top these miscalculations, landing crafts were launched 10,000 yards offshore, greatly exposing the seasick men to German fire. Many boats grounded on offshore sandbars, forcing the infantrymen either to wade ashore, drown, or to drift in with the advancing tide---many of them were without weapons or equipment.

The invasion forces at Omaha faced many challenges. A number of the landing craft opened for landing too early and sank. Many soldiers drowned before they had a chance to defend themselves. Other landing craft were disabled by enemy fire too far from shore and the heavily burdened soldiers

had to try to swim ashore during a firefight. The invading American forces who reached the beach were easy targets from the cliffs, and it is no wonder that casualties were higher here than on any of the other invasion beaches. You may want to spend some time walking along the beach and contemplating the enormity of the invasion effort. If you do, you will be struck by how peaceful and tranquil it is now and how hellish it must have been on D-Day with the sights and sounds of battle and death around you. Yes, quite unlike Daytona Beach, Florida during Spring Break.

Next was indeed a true highlight of my journey. Between Utah and Omaha Beach is Pointe du Hoc. Pointe Du Hoc was a string of gun emplacements connected by tunnels and underground rooms. In preparation for the invasion, Point du Hoc was bombarded by the Allies with large naval guns and this pummeling resulted in significant damage, but not enough to reduce the threat this site held for Omaha Beach.

Historical accounts write about a team of 260 U.S. Rangers led by Colonel Rudder, scaled nearly 100 feet of the cliff to capture the German guns and nullify the threat posed by the German control of Pointe du Hoc. The rangers finally achieved their goal but lost two-thirds of their team in the assault.



The story of the attack by the American rangers is heartbreaking, as everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong. Numerous problems and operational difficulties slowed the progress of the attack and placed the rangers in the line of fire well before they landed. Finally, unknown to the Allied Forces, the German forces had moved the six 155mm cannons from Pointe du Hoc before the invasion. The same rangers, however, found the guns hidden not far away and managed to destroy them before they could be used against the allies.

Pointe du Hoc is extremely interesting. There are a number of trenches to follow and pill-boxes to explore. Take a flashlight since the interiors of many of the chambers are dark (as well as wet) but it is a fascinating place.

Numerous explosion craters and hunks of concrete blasted from the casemates are scattered throughout the site. When you look from

the top to the bottom of Point du Hoc, it is hard to image anyone climbing the cliffs at Point du Hoc, especially soldiers carrying weapons and packs while under attack by enemy forces.

Next: Utah Beach. Despite being substantially off course, american forces landed here with relatively little resistance, in contrast to Omaha where the fighting was fierce.



Utah beach, about three miles long, was the westernmost of the five landing beaches. The actual invasion resulted in only about 200 casualties.

You'd be surprised to know that the 101st and 82d Airborne Divisions supported Utah beach operation. The 101st Screaming Eagles had a 40% casualty rate in their role.



Normandy has plenty of battlefield tour guides that lead you around the many sites in perhaps cramped tour buses full with information overloaded, tired, and cranky tourists. For military history buffs or serious curiosity seekers, the list is topped by D-Day Tours, which just celebrated three successful years in this type of competitive touring business.

D-Day tours "headquarters" is stationed in St. Mere Eglise, about near Utah and Omaha Beach. In the center of St. Mere Eglise is a Catholic Church where an effigy of 82d Airborne parachutist John Steele hangs from the Church steeple- a re-creation of an early morning June



6, 1944 botched drop zone landing that killed many elite American paratroopers.

As expected, you will find a lot of touring information on Normandy Battlefields from many authoritative sources. With the recent popularity and success of Hollywood hit movies like "Saving Private Ryan" and "The Band of Brothers" there is a resurgence of curiosity in military history. But what you won't find anywhere is an authoritative source of information that lives the momentous historical event everyday.

Ellwood Von Siebold, a British Ex-Pat and founder of D-Day Tours has a simple approach. He gets "cracking" not only with the factoids you would expect from any tour company but storytelling, a unique blended approach to personalizing historical facts and events from a timeline perspective. Even the local French citizens are not aware of Ellwood's knowledge and keen sense of little known historical facts. His tours are designed simply for sharing his wide ranged understanding of one of the greatest moments in military history. By taking a tour with Elwood you have direct access to detailed information sparked by a person who is intuitive, excited, intelligent and no a bit overbearing or insensitive to your level of historical knowledge.

Perhaps there may be different surprises with your own D-Day tour. You start and end your tour in Elwood's home, a 17th century 3-story French manor with an adjoining Cafe aptly called "CH 47" managed by his wife Diana. The CH 47 Cafe with its resident paratrooper dangling from the ceiling is rapidly becoming



a popular hangout for Ex-Pats wanting a quick baguette sandwich, a cup of coffee, English Teas, or soft drinks. See what autograph signature you may find on a CH 47 wing tip there in the Cafe!



How about if Elwood picked you up at the nearby Carentan train station with his special 3x4 Ton authentic military

command car?

Still, through Elwood and his "network" you could meet some of the most interesting celebrities: the original members of the "Band of Brothers", Easy Company, 506th P.I.R, 101st Airborne Division. Bill Guarnere was as feisty as ever- just like his



interviews during the HBO film. He was one of 13,000 parachutists who jumped into Normandy.

The "Icing on the Cake"--- **Special Guests: Bill Guarneri & Edward Babe Heffron, members of the original Band of Brothers.**

I won't tell you the biggest surprise from Elwood---inside his 17th century home is probably the world's largest collection of _____---I'm sworn to secrecy, sorry, you'll have to find out yourself.

Well, this ends a part of my journey, one I hope it inspirational for you as it was for me.

I bid you farewell for now as I prepare to return to Afghanistan.

"...We merely want to live in peace with all the world, to trade with them, to commune with them, to learn from their culture as they may learn from ours, so that the products of our toil may be used for our schools and our roads and our churches and not for guns and planes and tanks and ships of war..."

General Dwight D. Eisenhower

