

B27 D DAY-NORMANDY HASN'T FORGOTTEN

PROJECT: EUROPE 2011

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The 29th of June was one of those picture perfect postcard days. Dew on the grass, cows in the field and the smell of salt air from the Atlantic. We all met in the chateau dining room for one fabulous breakfast.



The choices were a continental menu (breads, cheeses, juices, meats, bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs) or a full English breakfast (eggs cooked to order, English bacon, bangers, pancakes, fried bread and beans).



It would have been great just to sit and relax while sipping coffee but we had plans for the day. A few minutes before Nine, Matthew Cardinale, our guide for the next few days, showed up with a large VW van that could carry all eight of us. It was to be our own D Day because Matthew had an agenda and plans rivaling the original invasion. "Everyone on board," he said courteously. "There is much to be accomplished by the end of day." This set the pattern for the next three days.



Our first stop was at the village of St. Mere Eglise, one of the first to be liberated by the Allies. It is most famous for the unfortunate parachute landing of Private John Steele. His parachute snagged on the church steeple and he landed on the roof serving as a juicy target for the startled German soldiers beneath.



He was shot once in the leg before another GI took out the German sniper. Unfortunately, the German returned the fire and they both died on the spot. For the rest of the battle John played dead while hanging from his parachute shrouds. His was a unique viewpoint of the conflict...if he opened his eyes that is.



In commemoration, a museum and outdoor static displays are in place so no one will ever forget St. Mere Eglise's unique status in the War. One display struck a memory chord with me. This area was the chosen landing site for one-trip gliders. They carried men or equipment or both and were pulled, three at a time, behind C-47 cargo planes.



At a predetermined moment they were released to glide down to the Normandy fields. There were several unexpected factors on landing. The Germans installed thousands of angled stakes in the fields designed to rip the bellies of the fragile gliders. In addition, the fields were flooded to drown men emerging from them.



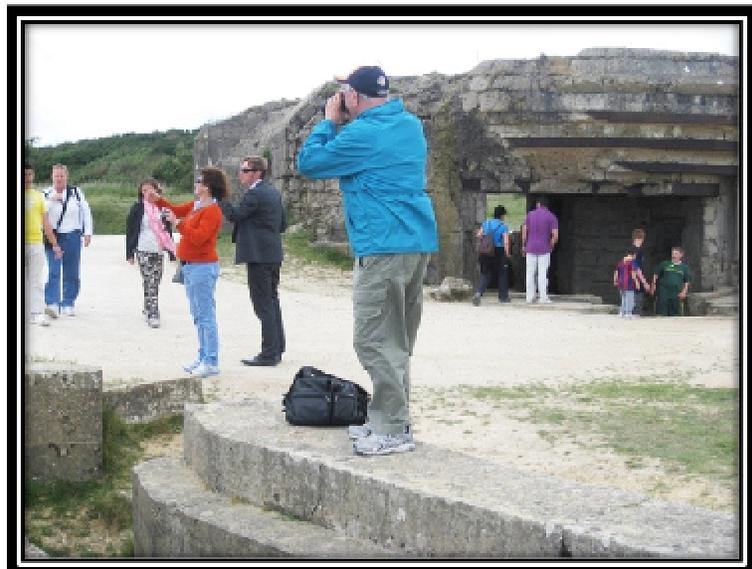
In addition to landing a glider for the first time, the pilots were expected to grab a rifle and start firing afterward. It was a mostly successful plan but only by volume. Many men died in these flimsy craft that were built in a Ford factory in Iron Mountain, Michigan. No one cared if they came with a warrantee.

Matthew moved us right along to Point du Hoc, the top of a steep cliff that was scaled by a company of Rangers whose mission it was to silence four large guns that were placed to sweep the entire coastline. With heavy losses, they reached the top only to find the Germans had moved the guns back into the woods and replaced them with wooden replicas that fooled the aerial cameras. The guns were eventually silenced but, once again, with a heavy loss of American lives.



This area is dotted with remnants of the German bunkers and gun emplacements and the kids had a great time running through cement passageways and popping up through holes that once held machine guns and men ready and willing to use them.

Our next stop was Omaha Beach, the infamous landing site of the American forces. The beach is quiet and windswept today and it was difficult to imagine ships and landing craft for as far as the eye could see on D Day. I took this opportunity to explain to the grandchildren what their great grandfather faced when he landed here 15 days after June 6, 1944.





My father was in a motor pool support group that came ashore and moved along to the front in Belgium. He had no idea he would end up in the Battle of the Bulge next winter. The boys were too busy wrestling and hitting each other to pay much attention...



and Remy, being a girl, had difficulty putting herself in this place. Nonetheless, I wanted them to know their family members served and that's why they weren't speaking German or Japanese today.

Each battlefield has its casualties. 9,296 men and 4 women lie in the American military cemetery just off Omaha Beach. It is a dedicated part of the United States and is maintained as if it will be inspected tomorrow.



While each soldier is important, the grave that draws the most attention is that of General Theodore Roosevelt Jr., son of the former President of the United States. After the recent D Day anniversary commemoration the grass surrounding his stone is quite worn and roped off for re-growth.

As we walked back to the van among all these names unknown to me, it got personal when I noticed the headstone of a soldier who was killed in the Battle of the Bulge on my tenth birthday. It struck me then, that with only one stray bullet, I could be here visiting my father's grave instead of those of thousands of strangers. It reminded me that Kade's dad, Kurt, faces war zone dangers in Afghanistan today that my father faced so long ago in this foreign country. I elected not to share my thoughts with our grandchildren. They'll find out soon enough.



Louise and Ray