

WESSEX BRANCH WFA NORMANDY BATTLEFIELD TOUR ~ 7th-10th October 2022

Friday 7th October 2022

Our tour party of six – Marc, Viv, Roger, Steve, Nick and Tony – left Pimperne village car park at 0630 hours and arrived at the Poole ferry terminal forty minutes later. Passing efficiently through the arrival and passport controls we boarded the Brittany Ferry ‘Barfleur’ and departed at 0815 hours. We sat down to a leisurely breakfast in forward restaurant overlooking the bow of ferry and following a calm crossing arrived at Cherbourg at 1300 hours (local time).

With our passports stamped we drove out of the ferry terminal and into the town. Driving up a moderately steep hill, we passed in our minibus a large blue and white sign marked in large lettering ‘CHERBOURG’. This sign can be seen in the background of contemporary black and white photographs as the liberating Allied troops passed by. The Germans occupied Cherbourg in June 1940 and four years later on the 26th June 1944 surrendered the town to the officer commanding the American VII Corps. Following the N13 we

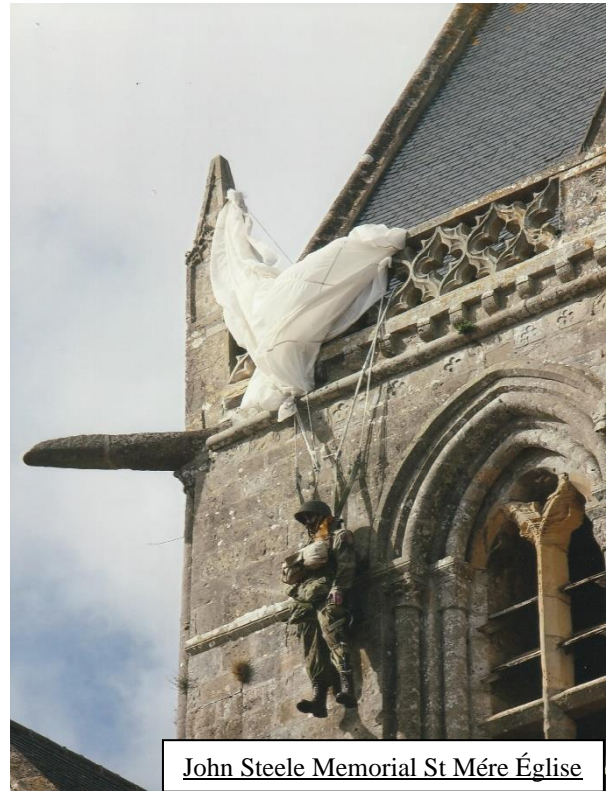


Milestone Marker ‘0’ St Mére Église

passed distinctive red and white marker milestones. Beginning at St Mére Église outside the Marie they mark the Path of Liberty across northern France ending at Bastogne. All together there are 1,040 milestones. They represent the Flaming Torch of Liberty emerging from the sea carried eastwards. Around the circumference of the dome shaped top are 48 stars representing the 48 states that took part in the liberation of France.

Our first stop of the tour was at St Mére Église, where we parked in the village square. By the village water pump Nick gave an account of the parachute landings of the U.S. 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions on the 6th June 1944. The airborne troops were scattered across a wide area of the Normandy countryside. The landings on St Mére Église by the 82nd Division began at about 0140 hours, resulting in significant casualties for the Americans. Private John Steele (1912-1969) of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, descent ended when his parachute got entangled on the spire of the church tower from where he was able to watch all the activity in the

square below him. Pretending to be dead, he hung there for about two hours and was briefly taken prisoner by the Germans who hauled him inside the church tower. He managed to escape and was able to join up again with the 82nd Division when troops of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment and 101st Airborne Division attacked and occupied the village with little resistance by 0500 hours. John Steele is commemorated in St Mére Église by a dummy paratrooper hanging by a parachute from the church spire.



John Steele Memorial St Mére Église

After Nick's talk we entered the 11th century church. Built originally in the Romanesque style, it was completed in the Gothic style during the 16th century. Inside the church there are two stained glass windows dedicated to American troops. Around the church are alabaster tablets marking the stations of the cross. Originally beneath them were inscribed plaques named in memory of individual French soldiers killed in the First World War. Most have disappeared but four have survived.

From the church we walked to the 'Marie' where outside on the footpath is a milestone – mentioned above – the first of the 1,040, marked '0' which is well maintained and is very good condition. Around the village square are various memorials commemorating the events of the D-Day landings. One is dedicated to the mayor of St Mére Église, Alexandre Renaud (1891-1966) who during the German occupation had the difficult task of having to co-operate with the Germans but not collaborating with them and is fondly remembered in the village. There are also attached to lamp posts large photographic banners depicting the 'Never to be Forgotten' World War II American heroes of the 82nd Airborne Division. In the Rue Du Général D.D. Eisenhower, is a memorial tablet on the pillar of a garden wall, where on the 6th June 1944 Private First Class Clifford A. Maughan, (1920-1990) of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment landed in the garden. He was taken prisoner by a German soldier billeted in the house, who then surrendered to him. Private Maughan survived the war and fought in Normandy and Holland.

On completing our walk around the village, we entered the Sainte Mère Église Airborne Museum. There are three buildings, in the first of which is a WACO glider, constructed of wood, tubular steel and canvas. Capable of carrying either thirteen men, or a jeep, a small gun, ammunition, other materials, and equipment. Over four thousand American troops were transported in gliders during the Normandy Landings. Suspended from the roof of the building are parachutes with canopies of different colours - red for munitions, armaments, ammunition; yellow for medical equipment; white for materials and equipment; green for communications; blue for food rations – which enabled those on the ground to identify the types of containers being dropped. Numerous, glass topped cabinets contain a wealth of military equipment and artefacts. Visitors are able to pass through the glider to see the cramped interior, with its dummy crew and paratroopers. The second building, recently redesigned and modernised contains a C 47 aircraft. Entering and passing along and through the aircraft, the visitor can experience the motion of



flying over St Mère Église at night accompanied by the noise of the aircraft's engine and flying sounds. Sitting on the port side of the C 47 are dummy American D-Day paratroopers waiting for the signal to bale out of the aircraft. Looking out from the aircraft small scale model aircraft hang from the roof at different heights to add to the experience of flying in a formation of aircraft at night. Positioned around the exhibition hall are realistic statues of soldiers, dummies in uniform, vehicles, artefacts, and equipment carefully arranged to give an interactive experience of the liberation of St Mère Église.

In the last building of the museum complex is an exhibition about Operation Neptune, the code name for the assault phase of Allied invasion of North-West Europe, Operation Overlord. Also within the building is the Ronald Regan Conference Centre. Dedicated to the American D-Day invasion paratroopers this excellent museum is augmented with reality providing a unique and spectacular experience for the visitor.

From the museum we drove to the La Fiere Bridge, spanning the Merderet River, to west of St Mère Église. The bridge and the causeway and the bridge and causeway at Chef du Pont were primary objectives for the Americans to control both bridges and causeways for the invasion troops coming from Utah Beach. The battle was fought over swampy and flooded ground between the 6th-9th June 1944. At daybreak on the 6th June, a company of the 505th with troops of the 507th and 508th Infantry Regiments, 82nd Airborne Division, captured La Fiere manor and the bridge. The Germans launched a fierce counterattack but failed to retake the bridge. Two days of bitter fighting failed to dislodge the Americans who held their ground. On the 9th General James Gavin, 82nd Airborne Division led an assault to secure the positions at La Fiere and Chef du Pont backed up by tanks from Utah Beach. Two hundred and fifty Americans lost their lives and over five hundred were wounded in the fighting.

To commemorate the American paratroopers and infantrymen who died a statue was erected overlooking the bridge and the ground fought over and was baptised 'Iron Mike'. The plinth has attached to it inscribed tablets with details



about the battle for La Fiere bridge and a dedication to General James Gavin. A remembrance ceremony is held there every year on the 6th June. Nick gave an expansive account of the battle standing beside the elaborate orientation table adjacent to the statue. On the grass embankment by the side of the pathway leading up to the statue are inscribed memorial tablets, including one to Private First Class, Charles DeGlopper who was awarded the Medal of Honour. As we left our last stand of the day, Nick pointed out a foxhole from where the Divisional commander directed the battle 100 yards from the frontline. After checking into our hotel, in St Mère Église we enjoyed a relaxing evening meal in the village at the Auberge John Steele.

Saturday 9th October 2022

We left our hotel after breakfast and drove to the La Cambe German Cemetery. The cemetery is the largest German cemetery in Normandy, containing over 21,000 German military personnel. It was established in June 1944 and completed in 1961. In 1954 12,000 German dead were

removed from other burial sites into La Cambe which already had 8,000 existing graves.

Originally, American and German dead were buried in adjacent fields. The American dead were disinterred and either returned to America or re-interred in the Normandy American Cemetery.

La Cambe German Cemetery is maintained and managed by the voluntary German War Graves Commission (Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge).

In the centre of the cemetery is a large tumulus (or kamaradengraben) flanked by two statues and surmounted by a

large dark cross in basalt

lava, which marks the

resting place of 207

unknown and 89

identified German

soldiers buried together

in a mass grave.

Surrounding the tumulus

are forty-nine plots with

up to four hundred



graves in each. Graves are marked by flat turf stones. At the grave of SS-Hauptsturmführer Michael Wittmann, a tank tiger commander, and his crew, Nick gave an interesting talk about Wittmann's career and of their deaths on the 8th August 1944.

Leaving La Cambe, we drove on through the lovely Normandy countryside bathed in warm sunshine with a background of clear blue sky to Pointe du Hoc. This is the location of a series of German bunkers and machine-gun posts situated on a 35-metre cliff top promontory overlooking the English Channel on the north-west coast of Normandy. It lies about 4 miles west of Omaha Beach. Whilst walking the extensive site, Nick related to us the battle that had been fought here in June 1944. The battery was built in 1943 as part of Hitler's Atlantic Wall fortifications to house six French 155mm First World War guns positioned in open concrete gun pits. By the Spring of 1944 the German had improved the defensive capability of the battery by building over and in front of the circular gun pits, which housed the 155mm guns. It was planned to build six casemates but two were unfinished when the position was attacked by the Americans. An observation bunker was also built and mounts for 20mm Flak Anti-Aircraft Guns. The 155mm guns were capable of shelling Omaha and Utah Beaches. Archival evidence now available suggests that the American planners of the operation were aware that the site was unfinished, although near to completion and that the guns had been removed.

The American 2nd and 5th Ranger Battalions were given the task to assault Pointe du Hoc on D-Day. Ten landing craft carried the assaulting force, with another two loaded with supplies and four DUKW amphibious trucks – (6-wheel-drive amphibious 2½-ton US military trucks also known as ‘DUCKS’) – carrying 100-ft London Fire Brigade ladders. When the assaulting force came within a mile of the shore, they were subjected to mortar and machine gun fire. One landing craft foundered drowning most of its occupants, another was swamped, one supply craft sank, and enemy fire accounted for a DUKW. Elements of the 2nd Ranger Battalion reached the base of the cliff at 0710 hours with half the force it started out with. Delays caused the remainder of the 2nd and 5th Ranger battalions to be landed at Omaha Beach. The Rangers who reached the foot of the cliffs fired rocket launchers with grapnels and ropes up the cliff face, supported by naval gun fire from off shore. On reaching the top of the cliffs the Rangers had sustained fifteen casualties and discovered that the guns of the artillery battery had been removed. Patrols were organised to search for the guns and five were found and put out of action.

The Rangers established a defensive perimeter around the high ground and repelled several German counter attacks launched by the 914th Grenadier Regiment. Having sustained light casualties during the landing, the German counter attacks inflicted heavy losses on the Rangers. They were relieved after two days of fighting by the remainder of the 2nd Ranger and the 5th Ranger Battalions, plus the 1st Battalion, 116th Infantry and tanks from Omaha Beach. American casualties at Pointe du Hoc were 77 killed and 152 wounded. In the observation bunker are memorial plaques inscribed with the names of those who lost their lives. Pointe du Hoc is a memorial site with original fortifications and bomb craters. In January 1979 the 13-hectare site was transferred to the American Battle Monuments Commission who maintain and manage Pointe du Hoc, which also has a museum, as a memorial to the Pointe du Hoc battle.

Following on and along the country roads of Normandy we arrived at our next tour destination Omaha Beach. We drove down one of five draws, naturally cut features through the cliffs which lead down to boulevard along Omaha Beach. The latter was one of five sectors of the Normandy Landings on the 6th June 1944. The landings at Omaha Beach were to link up with the British to the east at Gold Beach and the Americans at Utah Beach. To achieve the link-up the Americans were tasked to secure a beachhead five miles deep. The Germans dominated and fortified the high ground overlooking the beach. It had been planned for the first assault waves of tanks, infantry, and combat engineers who were to destroy the coastal defences, so that larger ships could land the follow-up waves of assaulting troops. Difficulties in navigation caused many of the American landing craft, under heavy enemy fire to deviate from the intended landing points.

The combat engineers struggled to clear the beach obstacles which caused delays. By the end of the 6th June the Americans had gained a tentative foothold which was gradually exploited and over the following days they achieved their original objectives.

We walked a short distance from the car park and onto the beach standing close to the 'Les Braves' memorial situated in the centre of Omaha Beach. Nick related to us about the American landings with its successes and tragedies illustrated by maps and photographs. Some of the American troops never got ashore having drowned fully equipped in the sea. The 'Les Braves' Memorial has three elements: 'The Wings of Hope', 'Rise, Freedom' and 'The Wings of Fraternity'. Tony informed us about the 116th Infantry who landed to the west of Omaha Beach near 'Draw 1' and

suffered significant casualties during the landing. For their participation in the D-Day landings they had undergone training at Slapton Sands, in Devon.

Mounted on the sea wall is a brass plaque commemorating the



landing on the 12th September 1942 of British commandos lead by Major March Phillips, in operation 'Aquatint'. The latter was the codename for a failed raid by 62 Commando on the coast of occupied France part of what later was to become Omaha Beach. Their task was to probe the extent of German defences. It was a small-scale raiding party. Three were killed, Major Gustavas Henry March-Phillips, DSO, MBE, Sergeant Allen Michael Williams, and Private Richard Lehniger who served as Leonard, who lie buried in St Laurent-sur-Mer churchyard, a village 16-kilomtres north-west of Bayeux. Of the others who took part in the raid, one was killed in captivity, two are unknown, five captured, and two survived. The views of the Normandy coastline whilst standing on Omaha beach on the clear and bright autumnal day were glorious and from there we walked across the boulevard to the Omaha Restaurant for lunch.

We resumed our tour passing by the Omaha Beach and Overlord Museums to Coleville-sur-Mer for a visit to the Normandy American Cemetery, which overlooks Omaha Beach. The large 172.5-acre cemetery contains the graves of 9,386 military personnel who died during the D-Day

Landings and subsequent operations. The Memorial to the Missing is inscribed with 1,557 names, rosettes marking those who have been recovered and identified. The cemetery is the American Battle Monuments Commissions most visited cemetery having approximately one million visitors each year. Unfortunately, we were unable to visit individual graves as the plots were roped off to prevent visitors walking on the grass. Nick read biographical details of servicemen whose graves we had hoped to visit. There are three Medal of Honour recipients buried in the cemetery. Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jnr., (1887-1944) was the eldest son of President Theodore Roosevelt. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honour and was originally buried at St Mére Église. His younger brother 2nd Lieutenant Quinton Roosevelt (1897-1918) was killed in action in the First World War and buried near to where he fell. In 1955 his family had his body exhumed and re-interred in the Normandy American Cemetery alongside his brother. First Lieutenant Jimmie Watters Monteith Jnr., 16th Infantry, 1st Division, killed on D-Day was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honour. Troop Sergeant Frank D. Peregory (1916-1944) a recipient of the Medal of Honour was killed on the 8th July 1944.

Leaving the American Normandy Cemetery in a reflective mood we drove on to the Longues-sur-Mer German battery, located between Port-en-Bessin in the west and Arromanches-les-Bains in the east. Situated on a 200-ft cliff overlooking the sea it formed part of Germany's Coastal Atlantic Wall. Construction of the battery began in the autumn of 1943 and was completed in April 1944. Initially manned by the Kriegsmarine, the battery was later transferred to the German army. Each of the four casemates required 600 square metres of concrete with four tons of steel reinforcement to house 150mm guns. Fire control was managed from a two-story command post located 300-metres in front of the guns on the cliff edge.

Situated between Omaha and Gold beaches the battery was bombed on the 5th-6th June 1944, which did little damage. A bombardment by naval warships offshore in the early hours of D-Day inflicted damage, killing several German soldiers. The Germans fired on Omaha and Gold Beaches and return fire from the offshore warships silenced one casemate and damaged two others. The remaining gun fired intermittently during D-Day without much effect on the landings. On the morning of the 7th June 1944, the 2nd Battalion, Devonshire Regiment, 231st Brigade, 50th Northumbrian Division, who had landed at Gold Beach, approached the battery from the east. The enemy garrison, composed mainly of troops over forty years of age surrendered without resistance.

The Longues-sur-Mer Battery is the only battery in Normandy housing its original guns. It was listed in October 2001 as an historical monument and is in a very good state of preservation under the care of the Conservatoire du Littoral – Coastal Conservatory. Nick guided us around the site and brought to our attention the various points of interest. Allegedly, the gun in the fourth casemate was directly struck by a naval shell and put out of action. However, other sources suggest that the damage to the gun was caused by an accidental explosion of ammunition stored in the casemate.

From Longues-sur-Mer we drove on in warm sunshine to Arromanches to view the remains of the Mulberry Harbour, lying offshore and then on to Le Hamel and Anselles-sur-Mer to



visit the 'Jig' Sector of Gold Beach where the 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment, 1st Battalion, Dorset Regiment and the 2nd Battalion, Devonshire Regiment came ashore on the 6th June, 1944. Gold Beach was the central of the five landing beaches located between Port-en-Bessin in the west and Lieu-dit La Rivière in Ver-sur-Mer in the east. Cliffs at the western end of the landing zone meant that the landings took place on the flat section between Le Hamel and La Rivière in sectors code-named 'Jig' and 'King'. Securing Gold Beach was the responsibility of the British Army supported the Royal Navy and other Allied naval forces. The object was to secure a beach head, move west to capture Arromanches and establish contact with the Americans at Omaha, capture Bayeux and the small port of Port-en-Bessin and then link up with the Canadians in the east at Juno Beach. Opposing them were the German 352nd and 716th Infantry Divisions.

Landings began at 0725 hours in high winds and wisely it was decided that the landing craft and amphibious DD tanks – (Duplex Drive amphibious tanks) – move closer inshore and land on the beach. The houses along the shoreline, although strongly fortified were cleared by the infantry who advanced further inland. Commandos of No.47 (Royal Marine Commando) captured Port-en-Bessin on the 7th and to the west the 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment captured Arromanches – later the site of one of the Mulberry Harbours. 69th Infantry Brigade on the eastern flank made, contact with the Canadians at Juno Beach. For his conspicuous bravery on

D-Day at the Mont Fleury Battery, Company Sergeant-Major Stanley Hollis, 6th Battalion Green Howards (Yorkshire Regiment) was awarded the Victoria Cross. The battery was situated to the north of Ver-sur-Mer, 800 yards inland from Gold Beach. Within the battery were four 122mm Russian field gun-howitzers with other guns positioned in the open as their casemates had not been completed.

The first waves of infantry of the 1st Battalion, Dorset Regiment and 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment of 231st Brigade, landed at 0725 hours and came under heavy fire from a 75mm gun at Le Hamel. Strong currents and navigation errors caused both battalions to be landed ashore to the east of their intended landing positions. The DD and Royal Marine Centaur tanks which were to have arrived before the landings were delayed by the rough seas until 0800 hours. Many got bogged down on the beach or were put out of action by the enemy. The rising tide prevented the clearance of beach obstacles and mines. Two companies of the Hampshire Regiment landed close to a strong point at Le Hamel and overcame determined enemy opposition to get off the beach. Around Le Hamel were machine-gun emplacements, mines, and barbed wire. Units of the Hampshires captured a German position to the east of the village of Ansells, then turning to move westward along the beach towards their primary objective Le Hamel, they came under intense enemy fire and had to break off their attack. After several hours, skirting around to attack the enemy from the rear and with armoured support overcame stiff enemy resistance and then engaged them in house-to-house combat in Le Hamel and Asnelles.

The 2nd Battalion, Devonshire Regiment landed at 0815 hours and were subjected to heavy enemy fire whilst on the beach. One company supported the attack on Le Hamel whilst the remainder moved on to capture the village of Ryes in the afternoon. The 1st Battalion, Dorsetshire Regiment attacked a German position on the beach at La Cabane des Douanes and moved inland towards the higher ground south of Arromanches. With elements of the 1st Battalion, Hampshire Regiment, and supported by indirect fire from naval forces offshore they captured Arromanches in the late afternoon.

Standing by a gun emplacement on the seafront and with the beach and sea as a background Nick fully explained the events concerning the landing of 231st Brigade. The gun emplacement housed a 88mm gun which destroyed six British tanks and held up the advance from the beach until it was destroyed by a 25-pounder SP – (Self Propelled) – gun of the Essex Yeomanry. Nick related specific incidents and read out accounts from some of the troops who landed in the ‘Jig’ Sector. There was also additional interesting information provided by Marc and Tony. Situated on and along the promenade are memorials and a section of floating roadway. There is also a

‘D-Day 75 Garden’ designed by John Everiss which was commissioned by veterans of D-Day for the 75th anniversary. The garden was exhibited at the 2019 RHS Chelsea Flower Show before being gifted to the Mayor of Arromanches-le-Bains by the veterans and overlooks Gold Beach and the Mulberry Harbour.

From the ‘Jig’ Sector we drove via roads named after the Dorsetshire, Devonshire and Hampshire Regiments to the British War Memorial Normandy, which commemorates 22,442 men and women under British command who died on D-Day and the ensuing Battle of Normandy. The memorial is situated outside the village of Ver-sur-Mer, overlooking Gold Beach. It was opened on the 77th Anniversary of D-Day, 6th June 2021. In 2016 The Normandy Memorial Trust was created to establish a long-held desire of the Normandy veterans to have a British Normandy Memorial. It was designed by Liam O’Connor a British architect with sculpture of bronze infantrymen by David Williams-Ellis. Names of war dead are inscribed on 160 stone columns and the Normandy Memorial Wall is inscribed with those who died on D-Day.

The visit to the memorial completed our itinerary for the day and we drove on into Ouistreham and checked into our hotel close to the Brittany Ferry terminal. Our day’s activity was not however finished as we drove into Caen for our evening meal. Fully fortified with delicious food and drink we returned to Ouistreham, completing an excellent day in Normandy.

Sunday 9th October 2022

We had a leisurely Sunday breakfast before setting out to visit the German Merville Gun Battery. Following along the D514 to the Merville Gun Battery Museum we passed over Pegasus Bridge and the Horsa Bridge. The entrance into the museum is through a modern building complex, which opens out onto a large grassed covered area with pathways leading to casemates and smaller gun positions. On the 6th June 1944 the British 6th Airborne Division was tasked to secure the left flank of the Allied landings. One of their objectives was the destruction of the Merville Gun Battery. The Battery is composed of four six-foot thick steel reinforced concrete casemates, with additional buildings, and magazines. Intelligence sources believed that the Merville Battery housed 150mm calibre guns capable of shelling the British landings at Sword Beach, eight miles away. The battery was defended by a 20mm anti-aircraft gun, and fifteen machine guns surrounded by barbed wire obstacles and a minefield. In May 1944 the RAF bombed the area without causing any damage to the battery. The only casualty was the battery commander who was killed on the 19th May.

The 9th Parachute Battalion, part of the 3rd Parachute Brigade were assigned to destroy the Merville Battery, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Terence Otway. They were supported by sappers from 591st Parachute Squadron, Royal Engineers, eight Horsa Glider carrying jeeps, trailers, explosives, anti-tank guns and flame throwers. The 9th Parachute Battalion's advance party landed after midnight on the 6th June at their assembly position, without any significant problems. When the main body of the battalion arrived, the parachutists were scattered over a wide area during their descent. Instead of 600 men, only 150 with no heavy weapons or equipment arrived at the assembly point.

Lieutenant Colonel Otway decided to attack the battery and discovered that the guns were 100mm Czech manufactured guns of WW1 vintage (max range approx. 8400m),



The 'SNAFU' Special ~ Merville German Battery Museum

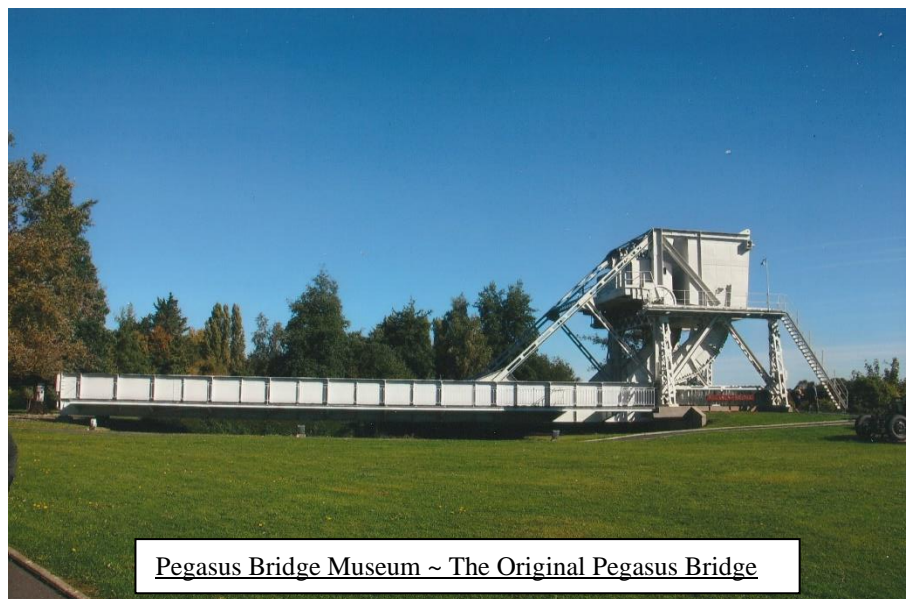
which were capable of firing on Sword Beach and Ouistreham. Using limited explosives, they endeavoured to disable the guns. When they withdrew, the Germans were able to repair two guns for active use. A subsequent attack by Commandos failed to recapture the battery which remained in German control until the 7th August when the German army began to withdraw from the area.

An eye-catching exhibit at the museum is 'The S.N.A.F.U. Special' an authentic Douglas C 47 Dakota aircraft which took part in airborne operations in the European theatre during the Second World War. Recently refurbished it is now classified as an 'Historic Monument'. Within the battery grounds is a memorial bust of Lieutenant Colonel Otway, mounted on a plinth and remains of open gun pits. The base of one has been inscribed with German graffiti when the concrete was wet and dated 1941. A spectacular sound and light show can be experienced in Casemate No.1. Using specialised sound systems to provide spatial sound effects, the visitor is, able to experience the final minutes before the gun was neutralised. The visitor is immersed with the dramatic sounds of intense shell fire, lights, and smells This immersive experience is not recommended for young children and those of a nervous disposition or suffer from claustrophobia. Bunker No.2 has artefacts and memorabilia of paratroopers of the 9th Parachute

Battalion and audio visual recordings, including recollections of Lieutenant Colonel Otway. Bunker No.3 is dedicated to 45 Royal Marine Commando and the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion. Bunker No.4 has display of memorabilia commemorating the liberation of Merville by the Allied forces. Exhibited in the ammunition bunker are other miscellaneous and interesting artefacts. Nick gave a detailed account about the Merville Battery as we walked around the well-preserved museum site. It is not just a museum but real immersion in the reality of history with an educational trail.

We left the Merville Battery and drove to the nearby Pegasus Bridge Museum. Pegasus Bridge, originally called Bénouville Bridge after the nearby village is a road crossing over the canal between Caen and Ouistreham. On the 6th June 1944 the bridge along with the Ranville Bridge over the Orne river, later named Horsa Bridge was the objective of 'D' Company, 2nd

(Airborne) Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, a glider force, part of the 6th Airlanding Brigade, 6th Airborne Division. Under the



command of Major John Howard, 'D' Company was to land close to the bridges in six Horsa gliders in an operation to capture both bridges intact and hold them until relieved.

Bénouville Bridge was renamed Pegasus Bridge in honour of the operation and the name is derived from the shoulder emblem worn by the British airborne force, 1st Airborne Corps which depicts Bellerophon riding the flying horse Pegasus. The original bascule bridge, built in 1934, replaced in 1994, is now in the grounds of the Pegasus Bridge Museum. On the night of the 5th June 1944, a force of 181 men under Major Howard took off from RAF Tarrant Rushton in six Horsa gliders. Composed of 'D' Company with two platoons of 'B' Company 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, 20 Sappers of 247th Field Company (Airborne) Royal Engineers and men of the Glider Regiment. The object of the operation was to prevent German armour from crossing the Bridges and attacking the eastern flank of the landings at Sword Beach. Five of the gliders landed within 50 yards of their objective shortly after midnight. The troops emerged from their gliders and completely surprised the enemy and

captured the bridges within ten minutes. Two men were killed Lieutenant Denham Brotheridge and Lance Corporal Fred Greenhalgh. Lieutenant Brotheridge was the first member of the Allied forces to die on D-Day leading his platoon across Pegasus Bridge. Private Greenhalgh was drowned in a pond where his glider landed. The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry were reinforced at 0300 hours by the 7th Parachute Battalion and linked up with Lord Lovats Commandos. Lance Corporal Greenhalgh is buried in La Delivrande War Cemetery, Douvres.



The magnificent Pegasus Bridge Museum was opened on the 4th June 2000. The roof of the museum is reminiscent of the wings of a glider. In the museum there are themed areas about the story of the 6th Airborne Division's participation in the Allied invasion of Normandy and the liberation of France. Around the large museum parkland are guns, tanks, weapons of war and a replica of Horsa Glider which was installed in 2004. 316 Horsa Gliders landed with the 6th Airborne Division transporting troops, jeeps and trailers, 6-pounder anti-tank guns, motorbikes, and bicycles. The replica Horsa is painted with black and white 'Invasion Bands' which were the identifications markings for the Allied D-Day aircraft. All the Horsa gliders used in the landings were destroyed. Beneath the starboard wing of the replica glider are the interred ashes of Tom Packwood, a veteran of the landings marked by an inscribed turf stone. There is a memorial to Lieutenant Brotheridge and a bronze statue of Brigadier James Hill DSO and 2 Bars, MC. In one of the small hutments is an exhibition about Bailey Bridges. They were designed by Donald Bailey who was requested in 1941 by the Ministry of Supply to construct a full scale prototype. The design was tested at the Experimental Bridging Establishment in Christchurch, Dorset. Production was accelerated for D-Day and over 4,500 bridges were built during the war. The original Pegasus Bridge dominates the park and is in a remarkable preserved condition and open for visitors to walk upon. Careful examination reveals the battle-scarred areas of the bridge.

Walking from the museum to the new bridge, there is on the side of the canal a small German gun emplacement. In a grassed area by the canal is a bust of Major John Howard DSO and a plinth with an inscribed tablet marking the spot where glider pilots Staff Sergeants Jim Wallwork and John Ainsworth landed Major Howard and 30 paratroopers at 0016 hours on the 6th June 1944. Crossing over the canal we passed the Café Gondee, a small coffee house liberated from the Germans at 0620 hours by the paratroopers. On the opposite side of the road from the Café Gondee we had our lunch in the Les 3 Planeurs restaurant.

We walked back after lunch to our minibus and drove to Ranville Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery. The cemetery contains the graves of 2,236 Second World War casualties, 90 unidentified, 323 German graves and 4 other nationalities. Ranville was the first village liberated in

France when the bridge over the Caen canal was captured in the early hours of D-Day by troops of the 6th Airborne Division, many of whom are buried in the cemetery. Access to the cemetery is through Ranville



Churchyard which contains 47 commonwealth graves, one unidentified and one German war grave. We paused at the grave of Lieutenant Herbert Denham Brotheridge, placing a Wessex Branch WFA cross by the headstone. Continuing, we entered Ranville Cemetery where we walked amongst the graves paying our individual respects and placing crosses on the graves. Nick guided us to the grave of nineteen-year-old Private Emile Servais Corteil, 9th Parachute Regiment and his dog Glenn. They were both killed on D-Day and were buried together.

Another grave drawn to our attention was that of Private Murray Adams-Acton who served as Acton with the 12th Battalion (Yorkshire Regiment) The Parachute Regiment and was killed on the 22nd August 1944 aged 17. A Wessex Branch WFA wreath was placed on the grave of Private Kenneth Andrew Stout of the Dorsetshire Regiment (No.1 Commando) who was killed on the 25th July 1944 aged 20. There are bullet hole marks on parts of the exterior walls of Ranville Church and inside the church there is a stained glass, window commemorating the 6th Airborne Division.

Leaving Ranville Cemetery, we drove into Ouistreham to visit the Museum of the Atlantic Wall – ‘Le Grand Bunker’ – The Grand Bunker of the former German Command and Fire Direction Post. The 17-metre high, construction has been completely refurbished to house a museum dedicated to the Atlantic Wall. It was reopened in February 2022. All the rooms, spread over five floors contain an abundance of authentic German material to present the essential function that characterised the life and conditions in the bunker in 1944 prior to the D-Day Landings. On the top floor is a telemetry post which overlooks the entire Orne estuary. Arrayed around the forecourt area of the museum are guns, tanks, a small landing craft and war related equipment. The bunker commanded six 155mm guns covering the entrance to the River Orne. The size and scale of this building demonstrates the enormous commitment and resources required by the Germans to build their Atlantic Wall. On the 9th June 1944, Lieutenant B. Orrel 91st Field Company, Royal Engineers, accompanied by three men attempted to blow open the armour plated entrance door. It took them four hours to open the door and the garrison of 2 officers and 50 men surrendered, completing the liberation of Ouistreham,



Grave Of Pte. K.A. Stout Dorset Regiment

By the end of our visit to the Le Grand Bunker there was sufficient time to visit the Hillman Bunker near Coleville-Montgomery. Colleville-sur-Orne was renamed after the war in honour of Field Marshal Viscount Bernard Montgomery, commander of the Allied Ground Forces during the Battle of Normandy. There is bronze statue of him in the town. In the car park by a Churchill tank Nick gave an interesting talk about the history of the Hillman Bunker and its function during the Second World War. The Hillman Fortress, part of the Atlantic Wall was a German bunker and command complex built in 1942 on the 24-hectare site. It consisted of eighteen bunkers, including two command posts with armoured observation cupolas and a bunker for artillery guns. Situated on high ground overlooking Sword Beach, the Hillman Bunker (German Widerstandnest 17) controlled the firing of artillery at Widerstandnest 16 (Allied Code Name Morris). The complex was code named Hillman and other nearby bunkers were code named

Morris, Daimler, and Humber after makers of British cars by the British during the Normandy Landings.

The Hillman Bunker was garrisoned by 150 officers and men of the 736th Grenadier Regiment. Each bunker was well equipped with mechanical ventilation, medical facilities, ammunition, and food storage. Trenches and a telephone network linked each bunker. Surrounding the complex were Tobruk pits – for machine-guns – barbed wire and mine fields. On D-Day the Hillman Bunker was assaulted by the 1st Battalion Suffolk Regiment who had landed on Sword Beach at 0830 hours. They were

commanded by Lieutenant Colonel R.E. Goodwin part of the 8th Infantry Brigade, 3rd Division and supported by tanks, the Royal Artillery and Royal Engineers and a machine-gun platoon. Although they encountered a strongly defended position, most of the Hillman



Bunker was captured by the evening of the 6th June and the last remaining bunker surrendered the following morning. The 1st Battalion, Suffolk Regiment sustained two officers and five men killed and 24 wounded.

Following the ending of the war, the bunkers were filled with earth and rubble which kept them in a good state of preservation. In 1989 Madame Lénaud, a resident of Coleville-Montgomery and owner of the land on which one of the bunkers had been built donated it to the Suffolk regiment. A memorial was created within the bunker and opened on the 6th June 1989. Since 1990, volunteers of the Association 'Les Amis du Suffolk regiment', supported by the local community have preserved and continue to restore the Hillman Fortress. The bunker was not open when we arrived, but we were able to walk over the extensive ground and enter some of the bunkers. By each entrance of the ten bunkers open to the public are stone plinths with information panels explaining the purpose of the bunker. The visit to the Hillman Bunker completed our battlefield tour.

We had our last evening meal at another restaurant in Caen across the road from the Château du Caen – Castle Caen – which was begun by William the Conqueror in 1060. He is buried in the Abbaye-aux-Hommes in Caen. The city was intensively bombed on 9th July 1944 which

destroyed 70% of its infrastructure. Reconstruction of the city took fourteen years to complete (1948-1962). It had been planned to capture Caen on D-Day, but the British and Canadian troops were held up by the Germans until the city was bombed. Approximately 2,000 French civilians were killed.

Within the castle is the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen (Museum of Fine Arts) and the Musée de Normandie (Museum of Normandy). Bullets holes visible on the walls of the castle are a reminder of the execution of members of the French Resistance who were shot by the Germans during the Second World War. Nearby to the entrance to Caen castle is a memorial dedicated to the men of the 3rd British Infantry Division, one of the assaulting divisions which landed on D-Day and liberated Caen on the 9th July 1944.

Monday 10th October 2022

We had an early and light breakfast on the Monday morning, the day of our return and departed from the hotel just after 0700 hours for the Brittany Ferry Terminal. Passing through French exit controls we boarded the Brittany Ferry 'Mont St Michel', sailing at 0830 for Portsmouth. The crossing was fine and calm, and we docked at the Portsmouth Ferry Terminal at 1315 hours (local time). An hour later we were on our way to Pimperne village hall car park arriving at 1530 hours, from where tour members departed on their own homeward journey.

This Normandy battlefield tour was an outstanding success for all concerned. It gave us a valuable visual insight into the enormous complexity of the Allied landings in Normandy. The museums, landing beaches, bunker complexes and cemeteries visited during the tour amplified some of the details of this momentous undertaking. We often paused to reflect and remind ourselves of the cost in human lives and the destruction brought about by war.

Thanks, must be extended to Tony for his skilful and patient driving around Normandy and for imparting interesting information about the D-Day Landings. Similar thanks, are also generously extended to Nick Saunders for planning, arranging, the time given, and his knowledge imparted to the tour members about the D-Day Landings and other Normandy operations to ensure that the tour was a successful one.

Roger Coleman

Sources

Battlefield Tour Notes

Wikipedia Website ~ www.wikipedia.org

Museum Booklets

Museum & Bunker Information Panels

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