

Report of u3a trip to Normandy September 21st to 24th 2023

Normandy calling

On a fine September day, 40 members of our u3a embarked by ferry from Portsmouth for a tour of the Normandy landing beaches, and the various monuments and other sights commemorating Operation Overlord, the D-Day landings of 6th June 1944. The contrast between our comfortable 5-hour trip with a hundred or so other passengers on the *Mont St Michel* and the vast complexity and sacrifice of landing 156,000 troops 80 years ago was not lost on the group.

Arriving at Ouistreham, the ferry port for Caen in the evening, our experienced Normandy tour guide, u3a member Michael Phillips, directed our coach to our hotel in Bayeaux, conveniently located on the ring road that was originally built by the Allied Forces to enable military vehicles to avoid the narrow streets of the beautiful old city. After a good night's sleep and an early breakfast we drove to nearby Arramanches to view the only remains of the artificial so-called Mulberry Harbour on Gold Beach. These impressive concrete pontoon structures were towed across the Channel and flooded to settle on the shallow seabed, providing protection for the supply ships supporting the invasion.

Working our way westwards along the coast, we investigated the medium gun battery at Longues sur Mer. These camouflaged concrete fortifications housed four 152mm cannons with a range of 12 miles that could threaten Gold, Juno and Omaha Beaches, until Allied naval bombardment and subsequent capture by British ground forces put them out of action.

After a sobering visit to the American Military Cemetery, a few miles away at Colleville-sur-Mer, we lunched in a popular brasserie before driving to La Pointe du Hoc. On this strategically fortified promontory we picked our way between countless bomb craters and explored the concrete bunkers and gun emplacements built, but not completed, by the Germans to cover Utah and Omaha Beaches – the focus for the American landings during Operation Overlord. Heavy Allied naval bombardment preceded the attempt on D-Day by 225 US Rangers to seize the battery at La Pointe du Hoc. They daringly scaled the 110-foot cliff using rocket-propelled grapnel hooks and London Fire Brigade ladders, only to find that the Germans had moved the guns inland.

Day 2 involved driving through the rolling pastures and cider orchards of the *bocage*, and visiting Graignes, where 182 US paratroopers initially survived and regrouped after being dropped off target into the marshlands of the *marais*, which had been flooded by the Germans to prevent gliders landing. In the church cemetery at Graignes they set up a mortar post to defend against 2,000 troops of a nearby German Panzer Division. They were overwhelmed, the church was largely destroyed and many, together with villagers who helped them, were killed or taken prisoner.

At nearby Sainte-Mère-Eglise we lunched at the foot of the church tower which bears an effigy of US paratrooper Pfc John Steele, who famously landed and hung by his parachute before being cut free by a German soldier. Initially taken prisoner, Pfc Steele was liberated when Cherbourg was captured by American forces on 26th August 1944.

In the afternoon we visited Utah Beach, site of the most successful American landings, where an initial wave of 20,000 men suffered less than one per cent casualties, in sharp contrast to their enormous losses at Omaha Beach. Hitler's concrete "Atlantic Wall" was breached, ultimately enabling the passage of more than 800,000 men, 100,000 vehicles and almost 1 million tons of supplies. The German garrison at Cherbourg was finally cut off and captured, and the push south and east commenced.

On our final day we paid our respects at the recently completed British Normandy Memorial at Ver-sur-Mer, overlooking Gold Beach. This serene and moving site commemorates by name each

of the 22,442 servicemen and women under British command who fell on D-Day and during the Battle of Normandy.

To conclude our tour of the landing zones and complete our understanding of the incredibly detailed plan of securing a bridgehead stretching from the Cherbourg peninsula to Caen, we were taken for a personal presentation at the Pegasus Bridge Museum at Bénouville. This magnificent building and reconstructed bridge marks the night landings of 180 men of the Ox & Bucks Light Infantry by our 6th Airborne Division glider pilots, three of whom landed within yards of this important, but lightly guarded, bridge across the Caen Canal. Having taken the bridge, they fought off a German counterattack and secured several other bridges, enabling the Allied troops to move quickly inland from Sword Beach. These forces eventually met up with General Patton's armoured divisions moving rapidly from the Cherbourg peninsula, circling south around Normandy and on across the River Seine to liberate Paris on 19th August 1944.

On this wonderful thought-provoking trip, we felt that no historical accounts or feature films could substitute for visiting the terrain and strategic locations of Normandy in the company of an expert guide. Michael put the whole intricate and costly campaign in context for us, presenting a truly balanced view of the price paid by both sides in terms of successes, failures, misjudgements and, most of all, young lives.

The War Cemeteries

The American Military Cemetery at Colleville sur Mer, officially US territory, is a typical example of formality and fastidious maintenance on a vast but dignified scale. Covering over 170 acres, it contains the glistening Carrara marble headstones of more than 9,000 US military, most of whom lost their lives in the D-Day landings and ensuing operations. On the Walls of the Missing are inscribed a further 1,500 names, with rosettes marking the names of those since recovered and identified.

The contrast of the German Military Cemetery at La Cambe could not be greater. More than 21,000 are buried here in groups marked by single tablets with no inscription, with groups of five stone crosses — the symbol of the German War Graves Commission. This organisation is non-governmental, and the only memorials allowed are 1200 maple trees sponsored by corporations and individuals. At the centre is a 20-foot high tumulus of unidentified remains, topped by a massive basalt cross flanked by two figures. A narrow entrance to the burial ground means that only one person at a time can pass, causing them to pause and reflect on the terrible consequences of war. However, there are few German visitors, as the War is generally not part of their taught history.

The British War Cemetery at Bayeaux takes the middle road, being less austere, with elements of an English garden and four conker trees that are said to be a not-so-subtle reference to the Latin inscription at the entrance, which translates as "We, once conquered by William, have now set free the conqueror's native land". Here, among the graves of 5,500 British soldiers, lies Corporal Sidney Bates VC, "a true Camberwell boy", who died aged 23 while persistently attacking a German position through a hail of enemy fire. Poignantly, as the cemetery is on the site of a former field hospital, there are also graves of 500 German soldiers who did not survive their injuries.