

SPECIAL FEATURE REMEMBERING D-DAY

THE DAY THAT CHANGED HISTORY



Normandy's beautiful coastline stretches from the quaint harbour town of Honfleur in the east to the impressive Mon-Sainte-Michel. But as you traverse this impressive region, it's not hard to be moved by the memory of the men who gave their lives on its beaches. For it was here, on 6 June 1944, that the liberation of Europe began with history's most heroic seaborne invasion.

In June 1944, the majority of Europe had been under oppressive Nazi occupation for four years. In that time, Britain and her empire had fought alone under the leadership of Winston Churchill, and despite raids against the occupied European coastline, there was no way Britain could independently mount an all-out liberating invasion. Annoyed by these commando raids and with an urge to protect his ill-gotten territory, Hitler ordered the

construction of massive coastal defences to stretch all the way from Norway to the Spanish border, known as the Atlantic Wall.

After the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, America finally entered the war and the build-up of allied forces began – led by Supreme Allied Commander Dwight David Eisenhower.

Eisenhower and his planning team, known by the acronym COSSAC, had to find an ideal stretch of coastline on which two entire armies

This year, 6 June marks the 70th Anniversary of what many people believe to be the most important day of the 20th century. D-Day was the beginning of the end for the Nazi cause, and this is likely to be the last anniversary when D-Day veterans attend in large numbers. Tony Eden helps you plan a trip



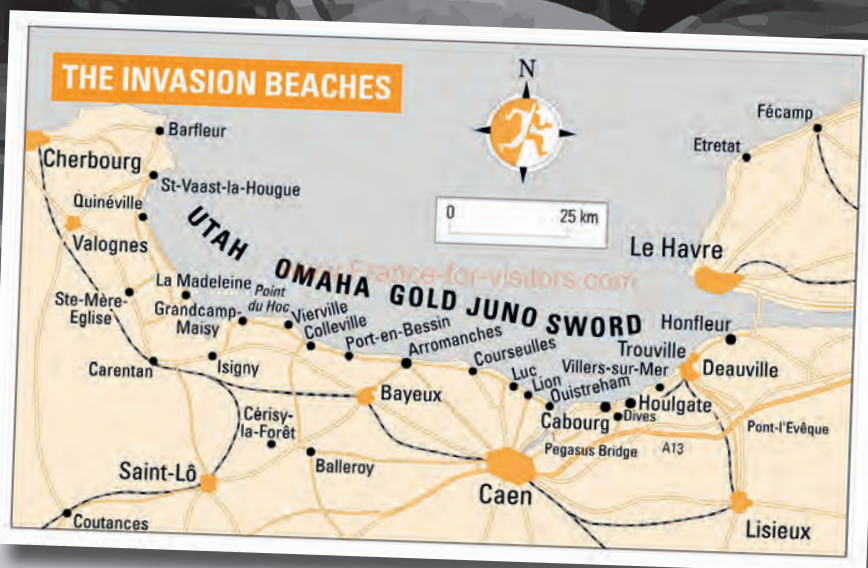
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Remember them. American troops approach Omaha beach on D-Day



could be landed, and where Hitler's much-vaunted Atlantic Wall was at its weakest.

The ideal choice was the Pas-de-Calais, but that was where the Germans expected such a landing. Therefore, by process of elimination, Normandy's beautiful Calvados Coast was chosen as the landing ground for this huge, seaborne assault. The operation's codename would be 'Overlord', but the day of the assault would go down in history as D-Day.



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CLOCKWISE Café Gondrée at Pegasus Bridge. The original Pegasus Bridge was captured by 181 allied troops who landed in three gliders

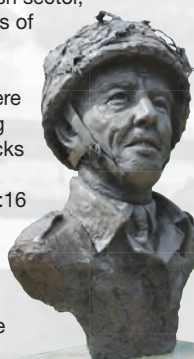
The invasion has undoubtedly left its mark on the coast and countryside of Normandy. Museums and memorials tell stories of courage, triumph and tragedy, while the cemeteries, with their beautifully manicured lawns and stunning horticultural displays, commemorate the sacrifice made by so many young men at the altar of freedom.

PEGASUS BRIDGE

D-Day tends to conjure up images of beaches, but before any of the landing craft approached Normandy's shoreline, thousands of airborne troops landed by parachute and glider to secure the flanks and capture vital positions. Pegasus Bridge was one such position in the eastern British sector, and was vital to the success of the landings.

Known in 1944 as the Bénouville Bridge, it was here that three gliders containing 181 men of the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry, led by Major John Howard, landed at 00:16 on 6 June. They were the first allied troops in action and captured the bridge in a textbook coup.

The gliders landed on the eastern side of the bridge. Looking at this area, little more than a small triangular



Major John Howard

strip of ground flanked by a large pond and, of course, the canal, it's no wonder that Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory called this remarkable landing 'The greatest feat of flying in World War Two', having touched down undetected within yards of the bridge.

On the western side of the bridge is Café Gondrée. This was the first house to be liberated in France and is still run by Madame Gondrée, the original owner's daughter. Over the years it has become a shrine to the assault on Pegasus Bridge.

The bridge that's there now actually replaced the original one when the canal was widened in the 1980s. However, the original bridge sits proudly in the grounds of the nearby Pegasus Bridge Museum. This museum is well worth visiting: it contains many artefacts given to the museum by the actual soldiers who captured and held the bridge until being relieved. Among these items are Bill Millen's bagpipes. Millen was Lord Lovat's personal piper, and landed on Sword beach with Lovat and the Special Service Brigade. Having piped them ashore, he played as they approached Pegasus bridge to relieve the glider troops.

SWORD, JUNO AND GOLD

Heading west along the coast road, you encounter three sweeping beaches. They were codenamed Sword, Juno and Gold and were assaulted by

The author

Tony Eden has always had a keen interest in military history and a strong bond with WW1, as his grandfather was killed at First Ypres and is remembered on the Menin Gate. Tony is an accomplished battlefield guide and runs Riflemen Tours, an independent WW1 and WW2 battlefield tour operator specialising in small group tours. **T** 01908 617264 **W** riflemantours.co.uk

British, Canadian and French troops. The only troops here today are those of the bucket and spade brigade, yet the history of the area is never far away. Bunkers and memorials unmistakably line the route.

Juno beach straddles the three small seaside towns of Courseulles-sur-Mer, Bernières-sur-Mer and Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer. This was the landing beach for the Canadians, and at Courseulles-sur-Mer a modern museum situated just behind the dunes tells their story.

Further west is Gold beach and just inland is the small hamlet of Crépon. Here the only Victoria Cross of D-Day was awarded to Company Sergeant Major Stan Hollis of the Green Howards. Hollis's heroics included the



Piper Millen's bagpipes



Horsa Glider at Pegasus Bridge



© Andrew Howard



CLOCKWISE: Mulberry at Arromanches, Gun turret at Longues-Su-Mer, Flags are seen everywhere

capture of two pill boxes on the morning of D-Day and a field gun later that same day. A memorial to the Green Howards and boards explaining Hollis's actions are located here.

Back on the coast at the end of Gold beach, and the extreme edge of the British sector, is the seaside town of Arromanches. It nestles in a valley running down to the sea. Any damage that the town suffered during the invasion was not down to the fighting that went on here on 6 June, but to the use of the town in the days and weeks that followed D-Day, for here would be the main point of entry for the British logistics.

Looking out to sea is an archipelago of small man-made islands. This is what is left of the Mulberry Harbour, a man-made port that was constructed in England, towed across the channel and assembled. Erring on the side of caution, the allies were aware that they would need a port to bring in supplies and that if one could not be captured, they would suffer supply shortages that could be catastrophic. So they decided to bring their own. Two ports were built, one for the British and one for the American sectors. The Mulberry port at

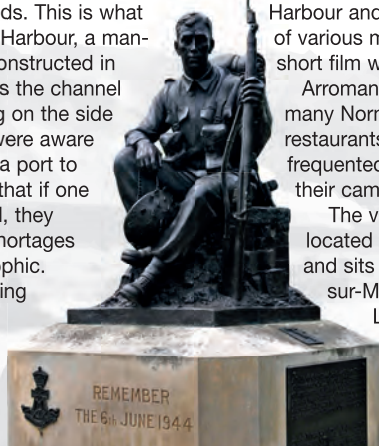
Arromanches was known as Port Winston and supplied the British army.

As you walk on the beach at Arromanches, you come to terms with the scale of this gargantuan feat of engineering. Offshore are the large Phoenix Caissons, hollow concrete units that were flooded and sunk to the seabed to form the harbour walls. On the beach are the remains of the pontoon roadways, Whales, that led to the shore.

An original piece of Atlantic Wall forms part of the town's harbour wall and above this sits the excellent D-Day Museum, which tells the story of the construction of the Mulberry Harbour and the D-Day invasion with the aid of various models, artefacts and an excellent short film with original footage.

Arromanches is the spiritual centre for many Normandy veterans. Dozens of small restaurants are located in the town and are frequented by old soldiers proudly wearing their campaign medals upon their chests.

The very centre of the landings is located three miles west of Arromanches and sits under the gaze of the Longues-sur-Mer Gun Battery, also known as Le Chaos Battery. This is the best preserved battery on the Normandy coastline, with its 152mm guns still in their casements, barrels pointing out to sea in the same positions



**Above: Memorial at Gold Beach of Company Sergeant Major Stan Hollis of the Green Howards
Below: The tranquil view across Battery Field today**



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Brilliantly located near Pegasus Bridge, this site has great facilities for kids, decent washrooms and is just 10 minutes from the Portsmouth-to-Caen ferry.



LE POINT DU JOUR

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This site in the town Merville-Franceville-Plage, overlooks the sea and is less than 30 minutes drive from Caen. There's a heated pool onsite and kite-surfing nearby. Très bon.

CAMPING LA VALLÉE

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La Vallée is a pretty campsite which lies on the aptly named Flower Coast. It has 372 pitches, four pools and beautiful views over the nearby shoreline. It's also within walking distance of a delightful sandy beach and the elegant town of Houlgate.



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they would have been in when they fired their last rounds on 6 June.

Constructed and manned by the *kreigsmarine* (German Navy), the battery's job was not to shell the beaches, but to engage shipping in the channel. The guns went into action at 05:37 on D-Day morning, shelling HMS Eamon and the USS battleship *Arkansas* located ten miles off Omaha beach to the west. The battery then shifted its attention to the ships off Gold beach to the east and was in turn attacked by HMS *Ajax* and *Argonaut*. These two British war ships fired a salvo of 179 shells at the battery, putting it out of action for the rest of the day. The damage inflicted on the battery is still visible today.

On the clifftop's edge sits the battery's observation post, which surveyed the Channel to relay targets and coordinates back to the guns. It can be entered and explored today.

THE AMERICAN BEACHES

As you venture further west along the coastline, you enter the American sector that includes the Cotenin Peninsula. Here, as with the British sector, airborne operations took place prior to the landings. Two US Airborne Divisions (82nd & 101st) dropped here to take vital positions and protect the troops coming ashore. Unluckily, bad weather scattered the parachute drops and many troops fought together as ad hoc units.

The town of Sainte-Mère-Église bears testimony to these scattered paratroop drops. A stray incendiary bomb had set fire to a house east of the town square. The church bell was rung to alert the townspeople who formed a bucket chain in an attempt to extinguish the flames. However, by 01:00 hours, the town square was illuminated by the flames and full of German soldiers. Two planeloads of paratroopers from the 82nd airborne division dropped in error directly over the village. A slaughter ensued as they were machine-gunned by German troops while they descended into the town square.

One paratrooper, John Steele, witnessed the carnage. His parachute caught on the church steeple and he hung there limply for two hours pretending to be dead. Steele was later cut down, and escaped to rejoin his division. As you walk around the square below, bullet holes are still present in the church walls and gouges can be seen in the steel railings around the square. A mannequin of John Steele hangs from the steeple in memory.

On the site of the burnt-out house a wonderful, modern airborne museum has been built, its roof shaped like the canopy of a parachute. The museum also has a fabulous array of artefacts and memorabilia as well as a Dakota aeroplane and a Waco glider. Also on the site is a Sherman tank, all coupled with a superb gift shop.

Moving north is Utah Beach. Landing in the wrong position, the US 4th Infantry Division faced very little opposition, which was in stark contrast to the two divisions landing east of here on Omaha. This is probably the

most iconic and well known of all the landing beaches. It gained the name 'Bloody Omaha', as casualties here were at their highest.

Today, the four-and-a-half-mile beach is peaceful and idyllic, but in June 1944 it was totally different. Obstacles with mines littered the beach, ready to tear the bottom out of any approaching plane. Because of these obstacles, the US forces had to land at low tide and fight their way up the beach.

On the bluffs and shoreline were many machine gun positions and bunkers that are still visible today. Despite the landing here almost being aborted, the courage of the troops prevailed and by early afternoon they had fought their way off the beach. Today a steady walk along the coastal road, starting in the east at the Vierville Draw at Dog Green sector, is highly recommended. This area is where landings are depicted in the film *Saving Private Ryan*. All along the road are information boards stating exactly what happened in each sector as well as showing archive pictures. Centrally located is the relatively new Les Braves Omaha Beach Memorial, dedicated on the 60th anniversary to all the soldiers who died on this costly stretch of beach.

WAR CEMETERIES

But where were the rest of the troops that died here laid to rest? Just above Omaha beach, outside the village of St-Laurent-sur-Mer, is the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial.

It was established by the US First Army on 8 June 1944, the first American cemetery on European soil in WW2.

The site covers 172 acres and has 9387 graves, with most dedicated to those who were lost on D-Day. On the Walls of the Missing, in a semi-circular



Utah Beach panorama





LEFT TO RIGHT US Airborne Museum at St-Mère-Église. Mannequin of John Steel hanging by a parachute on the church teple at St-Mère-Église. Memorials at Omaha Beach. The Normandy American Cemetery. The 'Spirit of American Youth Rising from the Waves' statue and the reflective pool at the American Cemetery



garden on the east side of the memorial, are inscribed 1557 names. Rosettes mark the names of those since recovered and identified.

The memorial consists of a semi-circular colonnade with a loggia at each end containing large maps and narratives of the military operations. At the centre is the bronze statue, 'Spirit of American Youth'. Facing west at the memorial, in the foreground, is the reflecting pool and beyond is the burial area. Atop each grave is a marble cross bearing the details of the soldier, airman or sailor buried beneath.

As you follow the outer path, an orientation table overlooking the beach depicts the landings in Normandy and from here you can walk down the bluff to the beach. The cemetery also has an impressive visitor centre, with film shows explaining the construction of the cemetery and the choice given to the relatives of the soldiers concerning burial or repatriation.

The main cemetery for the Commonwealth soldiers is located just off the ring road at Bayeux, and is the second largest Commonwealth cemetery in France with 4648 burials. Opposite the cemetery stands the Bayeux Memorial, which commemorates more than 1800 soldiers who died in Normandy and have no known grave.

Whatever your reason for visiting Normandy, be it a touring holiday or a battlefield pilgrimage, you cannot help but be affected by the sheer scale of events that took place here 70 years ago, and the sacrifice made by so many young men. The Kohima epitaph says it all: 'When You Go Home, Tell Them Of Us And Say, For Your Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today'.

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Before you go...



WATCH

◆ THE LONGEST DAY (1962)

A stellar cast, including John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, Sean Connery and Henry Fonda, recreates the drama of the Normandy landings, based on the historically accurate 1959 book by Cornelius Ryan. Many D-Day participants were used as advisors for the movie, including Erwin Rommel's widow, Lucie.

◆ SAVING PRIVATE RYAN (1998)

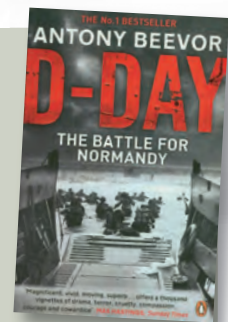
The first 20 minutes of this Spielberg spectacular on the Normandy beaches are literally breathtaking. They display both the jaw-dropping bravery and scale of the undertaking but also the utter futility of the whole escapade, as thousands of men are blown to pieces by machine guns, mines, mortars, fighter planes and artillery. Certainly not easy viewing, but definitely essential.



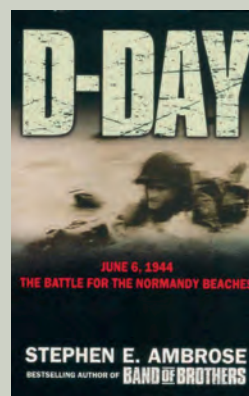
READ

◆ D-DAY THE BATTLE FOR NORMANDY BY ANTONY BEEVOR (BLOOMSBURY)

A realistic and therefore quite grisly account of the D-Day landings, this book gives real insight into the courage and fatalism of the allied troops. Using diaries, letters and real-life accounts, Beevor has created a compelling account of the invasion, with dozens of amazing stories taking views from all sides.



◆ D-DAY, JUNE 6, 1944: THE BATTLE FOR THE NORMANDY BEACHES BY STEPHEN E AMBROSE (POCKET BOOKS)



Stephen Ambrose interviewed 1400 veterans of the action to piece together this brilliantly insightful book, which reveals how the 'best-laid plans' went to pot before a shot was fired, and how only the courage and ingenuity of the fighting men saved the day. Fascinating.

