

# The VSB Pilgrimage to the D-Day Beaches

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## Bloody Omaha.

That's what the valiant survivors called Omaha Beach when they spoke of June 6, 1944. On that day, the ocean was red with blood, the beach sands turned crimson and body parts were strewn everywhere. Of the five landing sites, it was Omaha that became Hell on earth as American soldiers had to make their way, with no cover other than an occasional patch of marsh grass, across the sands of low tide and up steep cliffs that fiercely defended by German forces.

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The VSB MidYear Meeting in Paris last November was spectacular – we enjoyed great education, wonderful museums, parks and churches, and reveled in the wonderful cuisine and French wines that Paris afforded.

Amidst all the fun, the trip to the Normandy Beaches was sobering. There we sat, at a cute seaside restaurant, savoring our “moules frites” and homemade pizza, quaffing the local wine, and gazing at a beach that gave no hint of anything other than tranquility. It is often true that the bloodiest battlefields give way to nature's restorative powers over time until the horrors of the past are invisible.

The beach we saw was beautiful though the view of the steep cliffs that we knew our soldiers had to scale was ominous and made the words “Bloody Omaha”



resonate in our hearts.

For those readers who may not entirely recall

their high school history classes and Operation Neptune (the D-landings) – a subset of Operation Overlord (the Battle for Normandy), the British, American and Canadian airborne troops mounted a furious assault in Normandy just after midnight on June 6. Starting at 6:30 a.m., an amphibious landing of Allied infantry and armored divisions hit the beaches.

We were darn lucky. Inclement weather, which postponed the invasion by a day, helped to keep the element of surprise, though soldiers stuck on the turbulent ocean waters were horrendously seasick. Also helpful was Operation Bodyguard, designed to divert German attention (and the attention of Adolph Hitler in particular) from Normandy and focus attention on the Pas-de-Calais as the probably invasion site. The many ruses worked.



The Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces was General Dwight D. Eisenhower. The command of ground forces was assigned to General Bernard Montgomery (universally

known as “Monty”, fondly by some, not so fondly by others). The D-Day assault was the largest amphibious invasion in world history, taking place along a 50-mile segment of the Normandy coast which was divided into five sectors – Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword.

The Germans had an extensive defensive system, centered around the Atlantic Wall which was constructed pursuant to an order by Hitler. The “wall” stretched

from Norway to Spain but was most highly fortified in the regions facing the English Channel. General Rommel firmly believed that any Allied landing would be made at high tide. He had the wall fortified with pill boxes (dug-in guard posts with holes through which soldiers could fire), artillery, machine gun positions and vast quantities of barbed wire. He also laid hundreds of thousands of mines to discourage any landings along the wall.

Those in command of Operation Neptune determined that they would attack at low tide to minimize the effectiveness of the landing obstacles which might have sunk boats and drowned men. There was a powerful drawback though – the men were exposed to defensive fire over a much greater area of beach.

As the morning of June 6<sup>th</sup> unfolded, some of the worst fears of Operation Neptune's commanders were realized. Many men drowned in shallow water, weighted down by heavy packs. As they made the long trek to the cliff walls, many were cut down by German artillery fire.







There was no remaining trace of that carnage when the lawyers of the Virginia State Bar visited. We began our morning at Pointe du Hoc, the highest point between Utah Beach to the west and Omaha Beach to the east. The

Germans had fortified the area with concrete casements and gun pits. On D-Day, the United States Army Ranger Assault Group successfully assaulted Pointe du Hoc after scaling the cliffs. We could see and walk through the casements and look out the holes through which German soldiers shot – we could also see the large craters in the earth formed by the Allied bombings during the night before the troops landed.

This assault was actually easier than anticipated, as the Germans had moved some of their equipment further inland in response to earlier Allied bombings. It was curious that you could feel the war more there than at Omaha Beach, simply because of the craters and the casements - at Omaha the horrific bloodshed left no lasting visual reminders.

It was a somber visit for the adults as we carefully read the signs along the way and tried to imagine what the day must have been like for the brave men who scaled those cliffs.

Then we were off to Omaha, where, as previously recounted, we had a delightful French lunch in tranquil surroundings which gave no hint (other than the sign in the photo and a monument) of their history.

Included in our tour was one of the many D-Day museums where we strolled amidst the tanks, the artillery, the small mementos of daily life - diaries, cigarettes, field toilet paper in a can, powdered eggs. These were the things many of us had seen in the history books, but seeing them in person made them real.

And then there were the medals, so many of them belonging to Americans who gave their lives in a country not their own, for the sake of freedom.

It was those Americans we went to see on our last stop, at the American Cemetery. If you have been to Arlington National Cemetery, the sight would seem familiar to you. There are rows upon endless rows of identical tombstones with white crosses and Stars of David atop them, neatly laid out – all those who died being equal in death.



The American Battle Monuments Commission administers the cemetery, which shows evident loving care, and resides on French soil honored by a nation grateful for its liberation by the Allies.

Fittingly, it overlooks Omaha Beach and the English Channel. It is amazingly restful to walk the pathway overlooking ocean waters, beautifully graced by trees and gardens.

There is a small but lovely chapel with an altar which reads “I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish.” On the outside of the chapel, there is an inscription which reads, “This chapel has been erected by the United States of America in grateful memory of her sons who gave their lives in the landings on the Normandy beaches and in the liberation of Northern France. Their graves are the permanent and visible symbol of their heroic devotion and their sacrifice in the common cause of humanity.”

Inside, I was especially struck by an inscription which read, “Think not only upon their passing - remember the glory of their spirit.”

The cemetery also contains massive boards depicting the actual chain of events that occurred on June 6, 1944 which our wonderful and knowledgeable guides helped us to understand.

We spent a lot of time in the cemetery – the grounds are fairly large. The Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in France is located on the site of the temporary American St. Laurent Cemetery, established by the U.S. First Army on June 8, 1944 and the first American cemetery on European soil in World War II. The cemetery consists of 172.5 acres and contains the graves of 9,387 of our military dead, most of whom lost their lives in the D-Day landings and ensuing operations. Father and son are buried side by side and 38 pairs of brothers. Three Congressional Medal of Honor winners are buried there, including Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr.

Roosevelt was the only general on D-Day to land by sea with the first wave of troops. At 56, he was the oldest man in the invasion, and the only man to serve with his son on D-Day at Normandy (Captain Quentin Roosevelt II was among the first wave of soldiers to land at Omaha beach while his father commanded at Utah beach). His arthritis was so bad that he had to use a cane. He had a serious heart condition and had been urged by his doctors and his colleagues not to take part in the landings. He had actually been denied permission to participate several times but he wrote a heartfelt petition saying in part, “I personally know both officers and men of these advance units and believe that it will steady them to know that I am with them.” He was finally and reluctantly given permission to go.

His leadership was phenomenal that day. He did indeed steady the nerves of his men, reciting poetry and recounting anecdotes of his father. When things didn't go as planned at Utah Beach and he discovered that the landing craft had drifted more than a mile off course, he devised a new plan, personally touring the area, acting as a traffic cop in all the confusion and personally greeting the men on each craft that landed and explaining "the new plan." The GIs, seeing him fearlessly walking on the beach, ignoring the artillery fire as clods of earth rained on him, were reassured by the General's calm and began to execute the new plan, ultimately achieving their mission. Years later, when General Omar Bradley was asked to name the single most heroic action he had ever seen in combat, he replied, "Ted Roosevelt on Utah Beach." Six days later, while resting in a converted sleeping truck captured from the Germans, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

I walked with friend and colleague Bill Wilson around the Walls of the Missing, in a semicircular garden on the east side of the memorial. Inscribed on the walls are 1,557 names of those who were missing and presumed dead. Rosettes mark the names of those since recovered and identified. Bill and I quietly read aloud to one another the names of the Virginians we found on the walls. We thought of what an additional sadness it must have been for the families not to have the closure of having their sons buried with their comrades.

As is so often the case, in the midst of our solemnity, there was levity. Bill remembered a story from his youth which caused us both to chuckle. His mother had purchased a box of Clark Bars to be sent to his uncle fighting in World War II and hidden them in the closet. Bill (naturally) found the box and consumed every last one of the candy bars. It did not go well for him when his mother discovered his misdeed. I sent him a Clark Bar for Christmas in good-humored memory of our walk together that day. Curious how odd moments can nurture a friendship.

Along with many of the other lawyers and spouses who walked the grounds of the cemetery that day, I found myself wiping away tears from time to time. I had always been moved by the stories of the bravery of the men who scaled the cliffs

of Normandy, but nothing could so impress itself on my heart as the sight of all those crosses.

The most wrenching words were on 307 crosses. They said “Here rests in honored



glory a fallen comrade, known but to God.”

So many who could not be identified met the horrors of that day, no doubt frightened but also brave, with their bodies so badly damaged

that only God would know them. That was when the sacrifice of all these young men hit me the hardest. While I wiped tears from my eyes, I prayed, as countless visitors before me had – and as many of my colleagues were doing as we walked quietly and reverently amidst the dead.

Then we returned to our buses for the ride back to our hotel. But every one of us will always carry Normandy and the memory of the men who fell for freedom’s sake in our hearts. May we be worthy of – and protect - the freedom for which they gave their lives.

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