

Normandy 2009 – What I learnt and will remember



By Matthew Cullen

Age 15

St. Mary's Catholic College

Blackpool

After days of wondering what the week in Normandy had in store for me, it was time to find out. On Wednesday 3rd June we had a long journey in store down to Browndown camp, Portsmouth. After saying farewell to my parents we loaded the coach and set off. The atmosphere on the coach was bleak as every cadet was falling asleep with music playing in their ears due to the early morning start. Our first stop was Charnock Richard services to pick up more cadets; however as we set off again the mood didn't change. My first thoughts were that it was going to be a nice quiet week; easy for a corporal like me as the cadets would be quiet and obedient. However all was about to change!

After hours of sitting on the coach we arrived at our first stop; the National Arboretum. Whilst waiting for our tour guide most of the cadets bought a hot drink and cake; this is when we all started to get to know each other and the atmosphere among the group started to become livelier. Then we had a talk with one of the workers at the arboretum who told us about its background and about the layout of many of the memorials. On our walk to the main memorial we passed the propeller shaped Royal Air Force memorial and the Ann Frank memorial. The memorials were all very interesting as they all had separate things to remember and had specific things to represent what they did remember.

When we reached the main memorial to remember all the soldiers that have died in combat since the end of World War 2, the thing that was most scary was the amount of space left on the walls. We walked round the thousands of names; the area was extremely still and quiet. Our tour guide told us about the designer and why he had added things to this memorial. One of these things being a model of the Victoria Cross. This was added in memory of all the soldiers. The designer said he added it so every fallen soldier could have the prestigious award given to them. This then lead to the group going into the middle of the memorial; we were all in a semi-circle around the centre of the memorial. This was because we were going to lay a wreath; as the area fell silent and the last post played Wing

Commander Anthony walked up and laid the wreath on the centre. This was a very moving event as the thought of all the soldiers that had died came to mind.



This is where our wreath was laid. Also in the picture is the statue of an airman, a sailor, a royal marine and a soldier carrying a dead soldier to the dead soldiers grieving mother and child.

After the Armed Forces Memorial we were back on the coach heading for our accommodation in Portsmouth. We would be staying here until Friday 5th of June, when we would be getting the ferry to France.

Thursday 4th June began with a boat tour around the Royal Naval dockyard. On this tour we saw many of the Royal Navy's ships, including aircraft carriers and destroyers. This was extremely enjoyable as these were ships that are in service and have the latest modern technology. We also learnt a lot about how and when

they were used and how they have changed thanks to our staff members who knew lots of History and information about warfare. This was followed by a tour around an ex-service submarine. This was really interesting as we learnt about how the submarine worked and we all wondered how the workers could cope as it was extremely cramped with weapons and supplies which left the workers with not a lot of room to move. After this we went in the submarine museum which was an interactive museum which taught people about the evolution of submarines. This day was highly enjoyable especially as the sun was beating down on us all and the morale of the group was high. Back at Browndown Camp we all watched a film called the Longest Day. The film was very interesting as it included many of the places we were about to see in the next week however as we were all tired from the early start many cadets were falling asleep. However Friday began with an even earlier start!

A four am wakeup call meant that the atmosphere among our cadets was very bleak; with everyone tired we tidied our room and prepared to leave Browndown Camp. The travel to the ferry was also very quiet with most people asleep on the bus and all quite hungry as our breakfast was not until we were on the ferry. However after the short wait at customs we were on the ferry and in no time we were on our way to Ouistreham. In my opinion the continental breakfast was the best part of the crossing, especially as I spent most of the crossing asleep. However there was also a lot of D Day Veterans on the boat with us; every one of them having an interesting and enjoyable story to tell about 6th June 1944. However after listening to many enjoyable stories which all the cadets had learnt much from it was time to go back to the coach for the journey to Port En Bessin; where we stayed in our hotel for the remainder of the week.

On Friday evening after settling into our hotel and looking around Port En Bessin we travelled down the coast to Pont du Hoc. Before seeing the actual battlefield we had a quick lesson by a member of staff on why this assault happened and why it was so important that

it worked. We were taught that at Pont du Hoc there was a German fortified position with a Battery of 6 x 155mm heavy guns. These weapons would be able to dominate both Utah beach and Omaha beach. Pont du Hoc had already been heavily bombed and on the night of the invasion would be heavily shelled by warships however it was crucial that this battery was captured so the Germans could not use it on D Day. The men to capture the battery were soldiers of the 2nd US Ranger Battalion.

When we walked onto the cliff top it was very daunting to see how high the American Rangers had to climb to reach the battery, and when I realised that they would have been under constant German fire I wondered how on earth they achieved it. The grassland was a rollercoaster of dints into the ground from the artillery of the warships. This especially brought to mind the vicious effect of the artillery guns. It was a peculiar thing to witness, as we were walking I kept trying to imagine how it happened; but as I saw how strong the German positions were it was impossible to imagine it happening. However even though it was a very moving and peculiar place it was very interesting to see the battlefield in real and I learnt lots from being there.

As the extremely long day ended everyone went to sleep early that night; especially as we had another early start in the morning for a formal parade in Ouistram.

An early start and an early breakfast lead to us all getting changed into our number one blues uniform for a formal parade. After the short trip to Ouistram we watched preparations for the parade we would be taking part in. Other than the veterans there were only us and some Royal Marines in uniform for the parade. At first it did not look to busy, however as we drew closer to the start the crowd started to grow. After being briefed on how the parade would work Flight Lieutenant Nickson gave me the squadron wreath to lay on the parade. I was extremely honoured that I had been given this responsibility as I would be the only cadet on the whole parade to lay

a wreath. However I was nervous as I would be marching up to lay the wreath in front of hundreds of people. At just after 11 o'clock we marched on to the parade behind the Royal Marines. As we listened to speeches from the priest, stood there in the boiling sun, my nerves began to grow. However finally my time came to go up and lay the wreath; I was nervous as I thought I could have gone up too early or I might mess up. However as soon as I started marching out I looked up and held my head high; I believed that I could do it and went for it. I did my best at making sure my drill was excellent and as I saluted and lay the wreath I felt proud of myself.

However the best part was still to come. As I marched back into my squad some of the royal marines nodded and smiled at me to say well done. I was pleased that I had laid the wreath and done it well. At the end of the parade we marched off the parade; leading off the Royal Marines with our heads held high. All of the staff on the trip with me congratulated me on how well I did and one veteran had even given Pilot Officer Whitton a badge to give to me to say thank you for laying the wreath. After this all the cadets and staff met and had a picture with a D Day veteran, Royal Marine Jim Baker, who was a former cadet of 177 Blackpool Squadron. This was weird as many years ago he was like me; a cadet in the Air Training Corps. This parade is one of the things that I will remember from being in Normandy in 2009. It was an honour to be here to celebrate the lives of the veterans who lived and died on D Day.

After a well deserved lunch we headed to see the National Veterans Association parade at Arromanches. We were originally planned to be taking part in the parade however there was not enough room on the parade square. However before we went to see the parade we went into a 360 cinema; this is a cinema where there were screens all around your head. We learnt a bit about the Mulberry harbour and about the invasions of all the beaches on the morning of D Day. We then headed down to see the parade. As we waited for V.I.P's like Gordon Brown to arrive we spoke to even more veterans who were not on the parade; they told us their stories of being in the

town we were standing in on D Day. However the parade was not exactly going to plan; it was running extremely late and was beginning to rain. This led to the veterans marching onto the parade square as they wanted to get their parade underway. This started a chain reaction as the band and other people in the parade followed the veterans.

Me and certainly the other cadets learnt an awful lot about the D Day landings on June 6th and we all enjoyed the day; taking part in the parade at Ouistram and going to Arromanches was highly enjoyable.

On Sunday 7th June we started off by going back to the town of Arromanches to go to the Mulberry harbour museum. Here we watched two videos about the making of the harbour and how it was used. We also had a guided tour of all of the models of the harbour. This was a very interesting feature of the times after D Day as it was a huge accomplishment. The harbour was built in only a couple of months and the Germans had no idea that the building was taking place.

There were also many veterans there in Arromanches; one of whom recognised me from laying the wreath at Ouistram the day before; this also meant a lot to me.

We then moved on to the Bayeux museum and cemetery. In the museum we watched a film about the landings and the planning of D Day. This helped an awful lot as it showed us how detailed the plan for D Day was. After the museum we went to the cemetery where we laid another wreath at the memorial then we were all given a cross with a poppy on it to lay at a grave of our choice; mine went to the only soldier in cemetery who shared my last name; Cullen. Here we also met up with some soldiers from the U.S. Army. They taught us a lot about the American landings at Omaha beach.

Coincidentally the following day consisted of a visit to Omaha beach battlefield memorial. We started off by laying a wreath and having a

parade at the memorial. We took all of our Squadron standards and laid a wreath, this was enjoyable especially as many visitors to the memorial watched the parade. After this we put our standards back on the coach and took a small walk down on to the actual beach. Omaha beach is the largest out of all the beaches that were invaded; it was six miles wide and saw the most intensely fought battle on D Day. The troops involved in breaking the Germans formidable defences were from the US 1st Army. However the well made defences were not the only problem for the Americans. The tanks they need for armoured cover did not turn up as all 27 out of the 29 tanks released were stopped by the sea as they were released too far away from the beach. There were also well placed German gun emplacements which caused many casualties for the Americans.

When we got to the beach we were shown where the Allied soldiers would have been targeted from and we could also see more clearly the struggle they had to make it to the Germans. We then walked to the back of the cemetery and were given another cross to lie at a grave.

As we walked back up and lay our crosses we stopped in the Chapel of Remembrance. It is only a small chapel however it depicts the message of remembering the fallen on D Day well. The cemetery itself is a very emotional place as it makes you realise how many people lost their lives for their country.

Below is a picture of where our parade at Omaha Beach took place; our standards were in a circle around the memorial and we laid a wreath in front of the statue.

In the back of the picture the 12,000 graves of fallen American soldiers can be seen



After our parade and visit to Omaha Beach we headed to St Mere Eglise; this is a small town behind Utah beach and was a flooded area on D Day. The town was assaulted by the 505 Parachute Infantry Regiment, part of the famous 82 Airborne division of the American forces. Here we visited the museum; this was extremely interesting as we saw remains of some of the parachutes used on D Day and there were many interesting artefacts like weapons and planes used on D Day.

After our visit to the museum we went around the town of St Mere Eglise. In the town there were many shops which sold airborne souvenirs and a lot of interesting books and videos about the landings on D Day.

Once again we had had another fantastic day in France and we had already learnt so much about D Day and what happened in the various places.

Our last day, Tuesday 9th June, began with a visit to Pegasus Bridge. This was a bridge that was essential to the Allied forces as it would secure the left flank of the whole invasion and allow British forces to

advance across it. The men from the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry assaulted the bridge after landing in gliders.

At the actual bridge there were still heavy guns there from D Day which were used to attack boats on the river and soldiers attacking. Also there had been a replica of the actual bridge put in place, this was interesting as we could clearly see what the bridge was made for and how it worked.

We then went to the Pegasus Bridge museum where the real bridge was kept. Walking over the bridge showed how hard it must have been for the British soldiers to capture it. This is because the bridge was covered in bullet holes created by the Germans trying to stop the British forces. It was also very interesting to see a model of one of the gliders that they landed in.

However this enjoyable place was sadly the last visit in our trip to Normandy; after Pegasus Bridge we headed for the channel tunnel to go back to England. On our way back I reflected on the whole week and what I had learnt. We had been taught so much about D Day itself and even experienced where it happened and also helped to celebrate the dead and the living who took part in the D Day landings on June 6th 1944. I will always remember the things I have learnt in this week and remember the lives of the soldiers who took part for their country's freedom.

My most cherished memory of the trip however is when I laid the wreath at the RN/RM Parade at Ouistreham. This is because it is very unique as for one I was the only cadet that laid one on the day and it was a very special honour to lay a wreath on behalf of my squadron for the D Day veterans. Overall it was a fantastic week and I will remember so much; from the good times with my friends to the visiting the cemeteries to remember the dead; after all we will always remember them.

Cpl Matthew Cullen

177 Blackpool Airport Squadron ATC