

HISTORISCHE FEIERTAGE IM JUNI

D-Day / Allied Invasion of Europe
(der 6. Juni 1944)

VIERVILLE, France — Now it's a beautiful beach. Long, gentle waves wash onto the golden sands. Just down there, two boys play a bowling game.

A young family — mother, father and small son — stroll along and enjoy the spring sunshine.

Nothing, nothing at all, tells you that 35 years ago today — on June 6, 1944 — this was known as Omaha Beach and thousands of young men died here in a single day.

Then these golden sands were stained with blood and strewn with the litter and filth of war.

"We counted more than 5,000 bodies that evening," said Michel Hardelay, now mayor of Vierville.

He sat in the dining room of his home just behind the beach and spoke of that day. D-Day. (J-Jour in French.)

His mind roamed easily back across the 35 years. He remembered that he was awakened before dawn by the noise of shells shot from ships at sea as they screamed over his house and smashed into the sides and top of the 100-foot bluff laced with German guns just behind his house. And, from up there, German guns fired back at the ships.

Hardelay, then a 26-year-old civil engineer, walked outside and saw a stunning sight. On the sea, as far as he could see in any direction, were ships and boats of all sorts, everything from landing craft and minesweepers to majestic warships.

Smoke from the guns gave a ghostly appearance to this armada that had been assembled out of a port of southern England. Over the vessels, barrage balloons bobbed along crazily.

It was hard to believe. All told, 5,000 ships and boats carried 170,000 men whose mission it was to crack and penetrate Hitler's Fortress Europe.

Hardelay heard a new sound. Planes, far above the clouds, began to drop bombs onto the bluffs where the Germans had gun emplacements.

Hardelay got off the beach and a good thing it was. Moments later the Germans opened fire on the beach, hitting everywhere with artillery and mortar shells, machinegun fire, small arms fire.

At sea, landing craft were hit and exploded. Other boats, overloaded, were swamped by the heavy surf and soldiers drowned. Still others ran into obstacles and were destroyed by mines.

But more and more landing boats survived the gunfire and put more and more soldiers ashore with guns, tanks, trucks and all the other things it takes to fight a war. On the beach, these men saw that to stay put would be to die and they moved inland on the road that led through Vierville.

The same thing was happening elsewhere on the Normandy coast. A dozen miles west of here, on a beach designated Utah Beach, the U.S. 4th Division landed and moved inland.

To the east, the British and Canadian troops landed and moved inland almost immediately.

Another Frenchman who remembers the events of D-Day is Pierre Havel, who later was the local fire chief and, now retired, runs a taxi and guide service.

He told the story of one American who landed at Omaha Beach, a story that pleases the people here. The soldier, Leo Heroux, fought on the beach while a couple

D-Day Remembered

of miles away was a young woman — Marie Broeck — whom he would meet in two days and later marry. Heroux, his wife and their three children now live in Bayeux, where he runs a driving school, Havel said.

Havel then drove us to a bluff at the western edge of Omaha Beach, a place called Pointe du Huoc. The story of the point is the story of bravery and a terrible irony. On D-Day, 225 members of the Second Ranger Battalion were put ashore and ordered to take Pointe du Huoc at all costs because Allied intelligence said that there were German gun emplacements on top and these contained six 155-mm. howitzers capable of decimating Omaha Beach.

With ropes and grappling hooks and ladders, the rangers started up the bluff and were subjected to constant fire from the Germans above. Dozens and dozens of young Americans were wounded or killed and fell from the sides of the cliff. The rangers persisted and of the 225 who started up, only 90 made it to the top, the others all being wounded or killed.

Then came a terrible discovery: There were gun emplacements all right, thick concrete ones. But there were no howitzers — and never had been any.

Pointe du Huoc, by the way, was recently designated by the French government as a U.S. memorial, meaning the land gained at such cost will forever be American.

Then there's another parcel of ground, 172 acres in all, that will forever be American. This is on the bluff overlooking Omaha Beach near Colleville and it is the U.S. military cemetery containing the bodies of 9,386 Americans who died on D-Day and in the terrible fighting that followed along the hedgerows and in the cities of Normandy.

A few visitors walked the rows of graves, and among these was an American, about 60, who was accompanied by his wife. For 20 minutes or so he trooped the rows of crosses and stars and wept openly. Then his wife took his hand and led him away.

It is difficult to see this place without choking up. There are all kinds of stories under the carefully tended grass. A father is buried beside his son and in 33 cases brothers are buried next to each other. Some 307 of the dead are listed harshly as "unknowns."

Thirty-five years, and the grass has done its work. It covers all. It is a comfort to the eyes of the visitors.

Thirty-five years, and a couple of wars later.

If you seek comfort, you can find it. Remember that those young men died in 1944 with the firm belief that their deaths gave meaning to their lives for their cause was just.

And that's more than you can say for the sons they might have had, sons who very well could have been marched off to wars in which they didn't believe... Korea, Vietnam and other places.

So don't feel sad for the 9,386 men buried here. Feel grateful for them.