

## BEACHHEAD REVISITED

**"YOU'LL HAVE TO GO"** said my beloved, in a very thoughtful mood. "Go" said I "Go where"! (Was I, after fifty years about to be traded in for a younger model). "To the beaches, of course" said my beloved. Ah! A holiday perhaps "Er, which beach, Blackpool, Brighton or Bondi" I asked. "The French Normandy Beaches at Arromanches" she said "Where you landed in 1944. Everyone else is paying a visit so why not you. I shall be quite happy to stay at home and take it easy".

50 years ago I was with a R.A.F. Mobile Radar Unit (A new-fangled innovation then) which was part of a combined operations unit undertaking commando style training in various parts of the U.K. over many months. Lord Mountbatten, as C. in C. of Combined Ops, inspected our particular units, and shortly afterwards decided his future prospects were better elsewhere and transferred to South-East Asia command. However, after all our "Wet Landing" training our services were not called upon and the invasion went ahead without us.

We wireless ops went back to base, R.A.F. Chigwell, redeployed to an all signals unit attached to H.Q.72 Wing, 2nd TAF. Eventually in September 1944 we embarked at Gosport and disembarked at Arromanches via the famous Mulberry Harbour and we did not even get our feet wet. And so on to Caen via the Pegasus Bridge and a few days later arriving in Mons, Belgium where our H.Q. was set up for the remainder of the war. In view of the prospects that lay before us during our earlier intensive training, I

have always considered myself a very lucky man in the ultimate outcome.

So, in September 1994, being determined to use public transport from Shipton to Caen, having purchased my tickets to travel via National Express Coach from Oxford to Portsmouth and overnight ferry to Ouistreham (the port for Caen), my holdall containing spare socks, shirt and a packet of cheese and pickle sandwiches. (I had learnt some French phrases for:- "Please direct me to the nearest bar / pizza parlour / toilet"), I felt fully prepared for an excursion to foreign shores.

Apart from the pouring rain as I set out to catch the local villager bus to Witney, then a connecting bus to Gloucester Green, there were no problems until it was announced that the coach to Portsmouth would be 1½ hours late. The driver, new to the route, had lost his way from Liverpool, but arrived in Portsmouth in good time for our 11.30 pm sailing. Arriving at the French port at 6 am the following morning and after "petit déjeuner" I had to find a room to rest my head for five nights. I soon found a small single ensuite bedroom at a price to suit my pocket. The rest of the day was spent exploring the town.

**DAY 2 :** A visit to the city of Caen and the new Memorial Museum and Gardens of Peace. Very impressive and expensive for admission to the museum with it's running commentary and images on giant screens tracing the history of the years 1910 - 1945, causes and effects and the hopes of peace for the future.



Bayeux – British Memorial

The gallery showing Nobel Peace Prize winners from 1901 onwards is housed in a former German underground command post. The Gardens of Remembrance were very pleasant together with their American Memorial Lake. Caen itself is a very busy city with some fine stores and a one way, very French traffic system. I was glad I was not driving this time. 50 years ago when I last drove through, it was just piles of rubble.

DAY 3: There was a Service of Remembrance held at the Memorial to the 4th Commando Unit that had captured that part of the coast at Riva Bella (next to the Port of Ouistreham) now a holiday resort. Taking part were representatives of all the firemen in the Normandy Region. Bands played, flags displayed, wreaths laid and finally a march past of all firemen followed by a drive past of firefighting vehicles. It was a warm sunny Sunday so all the local citizens

were promenading (with their dozens of dogs) along the beach path, flying kites or sunbathing – topless of course.

DAY 4: I had bought a special anniversary bus pass which gave me unlimited travel to visit places of interest along the invasion coast. My first stop was Arromanches where just a few portions of the Mulberry Harbour remain in the sea. The town itself is full of the usual souvenir "tatt" and the usual museum showing the usual memorabilia. Walking to the cliff tops and surveying the scene below it was time for some sober reflections on the events that took place on that beach 50 years ago and I found it all rather sad in remembering the lives that were lost in gaining that foothold on French soil. On to Pont Du Hoc where the Americans had a hard time scaling the cliffs to overcome the German gun emplacements there on the top. (pto)

The wrecked gun emplacements remain together with the bomb craters. A simple memorial commemorates the action. Next destination was Bayeux with it's fine British cemetery and excellent Battle of Normandy Museum, admission free to 1944 veterans. I could not leave Bayeux without paying a visit to view the famous tapestry. I was not disappointed.

DAY 5: It poured with rain all day so my visit to Benouville to see the famous Pegasus Bridge was rather damp. The bridge spanning the Caen Canal was captured by the 6th Airborne Division (The Ox. and Bucks.) on the night of June 5th - 6th 1944, to ensure a clear road to Caen. The original bridge now parked in a field nearby has been replaced by a larger version.

The Café Gondrée nearby, the first house in France to be liberated is still owned by the daughter of the original owner, together with yet another museum doing a trade in souvenirs and cups of coffee.

After another quick visit to Caen it was back to my hotel to dry out and pack up for my return home. I do not regret my visit, although after 50 years I do not remember sights, but having seen Normandy coastline I humbly pay tribute to the invasion planners and the men who fought there to make it all possible.

And my journey home from Portsmouth! Well, that's another story.

Fred Evans  
Ex. R.A.F. Wireless Op.

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