

NORMANDY

The 73rd Anniversary of D Day

Swarms of men and women everywhere in American military uniform, some of them in jeeps. Not all of them were American! Many were British, and of other nationalities. A young American serviceman I spoke to said he didn't mind but then he only looked about 14.

The most interesting and most moving museum for me was that at Ste-Mère-Église, where they commemorate the American airborne landings in the Cotentin, behind Utah beach. The film incorporates interviews with old men, recorded possibly 20 years ago now, who had all been there in 1944 (when I was minus 4). They will all almost certainly be dead now. John Steele, who survived, landed on the roof of the local church and is commemorated with a life-size dummy, whose chute still blows in the breeze.

We could not get to Utah beach itself because of the dignitaries, whose police escort closed the road more effectively than the Germans had in 1944. Instead we visited Point du Hoc, where the fortifications and craters are still visible. This was (amazingly) where the Rangers climbed the cliffs with grappling irons. Then onto Omaha, the bloodiest beach, commemorated in 'Saving Private Ryan' and in 'Band of Brothers'.

The American military cemetery is very moving. What struck me is that the graves tell you not only whether the individuals were Christian or Jewish, but what state they came from; and they came from so many places remote from the War, until then. Some would have said that the displays here are a trifle vainglorious; but I would say that the Americans were entitled to take pride in what they did; and they did after all contribute more, both in men and materials. 22 American divisions, 11 British, the rest minor in numerical terms. Remember that.

On to Gold, Juno & Sword (we had three days). In Arromanches there is an impressive French museum, which paints the wider picture and in particular, has a scale model of one of the Mulberry Harbours. (There were two, but one was destroyed in a storm). There is also a British film about the making of the harbour, made in the patriotic Pathé News mould I associate with voice of Bob Danvers-Walker (younger readers see Wikipedia). Two years and 30,000 steelworkers! Towed down from the shipyards and across the Channel! It made us proud, but it also made us wonder whether our generation could have done it – or any of it.

Finally, the British cemetery at Bayeux. Makes you cry. Also there are several hundred German graves here, which are simpler than the British, but equally telling.

What did I learn? That D Day may have been one invasion but there was a series of waves and a series of battles, lasting until the end of August 1944. At Utah, there were waves of pathfinders, parachutists and glider-borne troops followed by

the men who actually landed on the beaches. Then the battle for the beaches was followed by the battle in the bocage, the cutting off of the 'Island' of the Cotentin, the push north to Cherbourg and the 'breakout' (Operation Cobra) to Avranches, Brittany and points East. In the East, the British had to fight to capture Caen, then came the failed offensive known as Goodwood, before they were able to join the Americans in cutting off large numbers of Germans in the Falaise Pocket, where they took around 50,000 prisoners.

Before going I read Anthony Beevor's book on D-Day; but there is also an excellent account in Holger Eckhertz's 'D Day through German Eyes' (DTZ, 2015).