

# On Hallowed Ground

For the visitor, the vast scale of the Normandy operation may come as a surprise

By JON NORDHEIMER

Americans don't come here for sunshine, good food or medieval history, though Normandy in the late spring has all these things in abundance. They come to plant a foot in the coarse sand and let their imaginations people the beaches with wave after wave of Allied soldiers coming ashore on a bleak morning in 1944 from an armada of nearly 5,000 fighting ships and other vessels plowing through gray, wind-whipped seas.

Perhaps only a third of Americans alive today were old enough in 1944 to remember hearing the first news bulletins of the landings, and the stricken feeling that was aroused by the realization a father or brother might at that precise moment be fighting, or dying, to open a beachhead on the European continent.

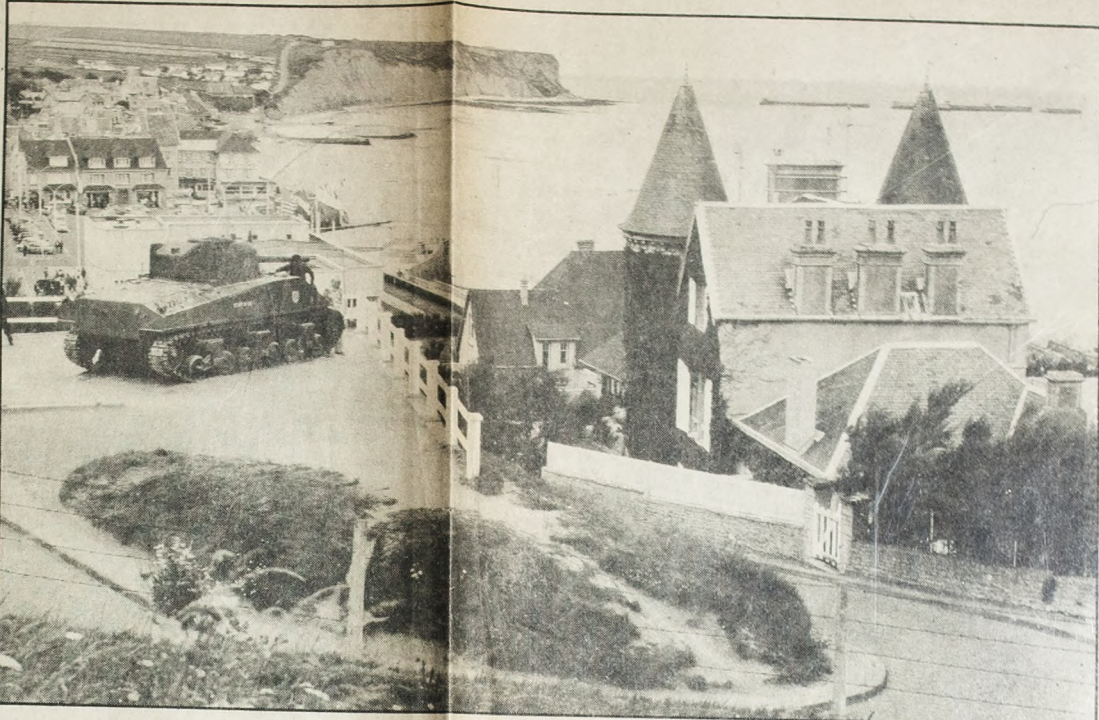
Three million American, Canadian and British troops were in England for the invasion buildup and many of them would be moving across the English Channel to reinforce the more than 180,000 who opened a 50-mile front on the Normandy coastline on D-day. So a visit to Normandy should be undertaken with a knowledge of the magnitude of the invasion because, with few exceptions, it is the scale of the operation that really hits the traveler on a first visit to the landing beaches. Reading up on the planning that went into Operation Overlord, the code name for the invasion of Europe, is essential to put what you see into perspective. A vague sense that tens of thousands of troops waded ashore and eventually defeated the Germans is not sufficient. The scale of Normandy is so vast that one cannot just stand at a strategic vantage point and grasp the extent and range of the fighting, as it is possible to do, say, at American Civil War battlefields like Gettysburg, where one can look down from Cemetery Ridge and see in one splendid sweep the entire field of battle.

There is a timelessness about Normandy, a sense that little changes from decade to decade. The same hedgerow fields that G.I.'s moving inland from the beaches had to cross are still there, with dairy cows grazing, and apple orchards that once hid German troops and tanks still rim the low-lying hills. Sturdy, half-wooded farmhouses lean into the bracing wind coming off the sea, partly hidden by ancient stone walls, just as they have done over the centuries.

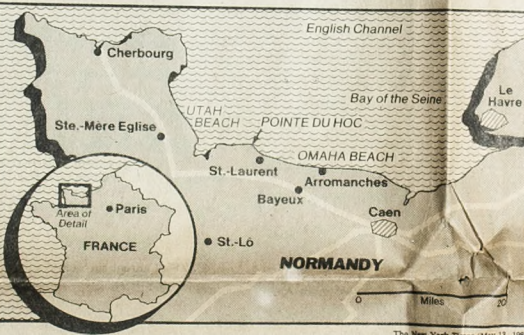
Some towns like St.-Lo were destroyed in the fighting and were rebuilt. But the countryside that dominates the region has not been suburbanized. Other than a few wider roads and an occasional modern building, the area has an ageless texture to it, and the landing beaches in most places are unencroached upon.

How you see Normandy depends on the amount of ground you want to cover and the depth of your interest in details of the battle. By car, it's possible to see the two American beaches, code-named Omaha and Utah, the Ranger Memorial at Pointe du Hoc, and the American cemetery at St.-Laurent in one day, providing that you find hotel accommodations in Normandy and don't try to make a round trip from Paris the same day. The trip from Paris to Caen on the six-lane autoroute is two hours on a good day but takes longer in the summer, especially this summer, when tens of thousands of additional tourists are expected in Normandy, not counting the day trippers among the French headed for the beaches. Hotel reservations represent a special problem. There are not many first-class hotels in Normandy and the few there are have already been booked for most of June and other periods in the summer. But the second-class hotels and pensions are fine for an overnight stay if one is not too demanding.

If that doesn't appeal to you then it is possible to book a bus tour from Paris that departs early in the day and returns around midnight. The advantage is that you are taken di-



Denis Mitchell/Pirellano Photographers' Guild



The New York Times/May 13, 1984

rectly to the battle sites, memorials and beaches and don't have to hunt for them on your own. Another possibility is to take a fast train to Caen and either rent a car for the day or hire a taxi for a three-hour tour of the D-day highlights. According to Michel Poulain, head of the Bayeux Office of Tourism, a local taxi can be hired for three hours at a cost of about 200 francs (\$25), but one must be careful, he advises with a smile, to fix the price before setting out.

For those who want to absorb a greater understanding of the region and its history, as well as get a comprehensive view of the D-day operation and battles, there are guided package tours that spend three or four nights in Normandy.

Whatever mode of travel you settle on, a key thing to keep in mind on a trip to Normandy is that there is little physical evidence of the war that can be seen from the window of a car or bus. Relics of the invasion pop up here and there on the edges of towns, mostly in the forms of tanks and pillboxes that are maintained locally. D-day museums can be found in numerous towns along the main roads and, inside, one can view collections of combat paraphernalia that were plucked from the surrounding fields or left behind by the German occupiers.

Along the beaches are German bunkers that have been turned into memorials and offer superb views of the sea and give an impressive idea of what the invading troops faced. For the most part, however, the coast in the spring is serene and barren except for the occasional roar of dune buggies. Perhaps the biggest surprise is the extent of the ocean tide that exposes vast expanses of the beach at its ebb, and provides a graphic demonstration of why the D-day planners had to build the invasion around the time of the highest tides and why bad weather threatened to postpone the entire operation for a month unless the troops could be put ashore by June 6.

But not much has been left of the Atlantic Wall, the coastal fortifications that Hitler relied upon to destroy an allied landing on the beaches. The scars of the war have been absorbed by nature over 40 years, and the forests and fields have reclaimed a land once devastated by combat.

The starting point, and highlight, of a trip by an American visitor to Normandy should be the United States military cemetery at St.-Laurent. It sits near the edge of the marsh-grass-covered bluff overlooking the center of four-mile-long Omaha Beach, "Blood Omaha," where the German defenses put up the stoutest resistance.

The American cemetery has an altogether different tone than the 16 British and six German ones there. The British cemeteries, with identical granite headstones declaring the name, rank and regiment of the fallen soldier, have a village-like simplicity. The German ones have a mournful, almost chilling, motif of black granite crosses.

The St.-Laurent cemetery contains what

## Sherman tank overlooking D-day museum at Arromanches.

gone wrong since then, with so many illusions shattered and dreams reviled, one feels compelled to pause a minute or two to contemplate the nature of their sacrifice.

From the cemetery it is an easy walk along a trail to an observation table above Omaha Beach, about 200 yards wide at this point. Looking down, one gets the visceral sense of what it was like for the Americans on D-day, coming out of the landing craft at the water's edge and facing a withering crossfire of machine guns and mortars fired by Germans holding this height.

Seven miles to the west is Pointe du Hoc and the memorial to the United States Rangers who scaled the sheer cliffs of the promontory in the hours on the dawn of D-day. The plan was for the Rangers to arrive at the base of the 100-foot cliffs in darkness, fire rocket-powered grappling hooks to the top rocks, and using rope ladders, climb to the top and knock out the German batteries that could control the beaches with their fire. The Germans rained a murderous fire down on the hapless boats. Somehow — and the view from the top looking down makes the feat all the more incredible — the Rangers reached the top and took control of the promontory. However, in one of the cruel jokes of the war, the conquerors of the heights discovered the Germans had already dismantled the guns and removed them to the safety of a nearby apple orchard. The survivors of the assault then came under a bombing attack from their own planes and ground fire from friendly forces in addition to German counterattacks. When they were relieved on D-plus-two there were only 60 Rangers left alive and unwounded from the original team of 225. The bunkers and shell holes are still there, and the crash of surf on the rocks below sounds like the beat of distant drums.

Another stop that is worth a brief visit is

Ste.-Mère-Eglise, the first town in France liberated by the Allies when units of the 82d Airborne Division were mistakenly dropped into the middle of the village by transport planes, flying blind in the darkness. The spire of the 11th-century church in the village square is the one on which the parachute of one of the paratroopers floating down to the ground became snagged. The soldier was suspended high off the ground for more than two hours, with Germans taking potshots at him, before he was rescued. Look for a stained glass window in the church showing the Virgin Mary surrounded by paratroopers.

A museum in the village on the Place du 6 Juin, across from the church, is filled with paratrooper memorabilia and combat equipment, uniforms and weapons. An adjoining structure — both have roofs designed in the shape of a parachute — houses a C-47 transport plane from the fleet that dropped the paratroop assault.

In the city of Bayeux, not far from the museum housing the tapestry illustrating another cross-Channel invasion 900 years ago that carried the forces of William the Conqueror to England, is the Memorial Museum of the Battle of Normandy.

If there is time, the quickest taste of the British and Canadian role in the invasion can be seen in Arromanches, where the remains of the Mulberry Harbor, a temporary harbor designed for the Normandy landings, can be seen in the shelter of the Calvados Rocks. A museum in the town has a model of this harbor, which simulates wave action against the man-made caissons, as it was used to land supplies and equipment on the beaches. There is also a model of the beaches themselves, along with other exhibits and documentary films on D-day.



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## Observances

D-day was only the beginning of an 11-month Allied campaign of continuous fighting to defeat the Axis powers in Europe. Consequently, observances will be held through much of the year.

**The Netherlands**  
Operation Market Garden — the combined American and British ground and paratroop attack that failed to establish a foothold across the Rhine at Arnhem — will be commemorated on Sept. 23-24. Among other things there will be an air drop outside Arnhem, the site of the "Bridge Too Far."

**Belgium/Luxembourg**  
The Battle of the Bulge, in which American troops withstood a German armored assault that was Hitler's last-gasp effort to halt the Allied advance, took place in December 1944, but the official celebration will take place at several places around Bastogne. Also of interest in the area are the Marston Memorial overlooking Bastogne, and the United States military cemeteries at Luxembourg and at Neuville-en-Condroz in the Ardennes Forest, 12 miles southwest of Liège. Of special interest, though unrelated to the Battle of the Bulge, are the Maginot Line fortifications at Immerhof Fort and Hackenberg.

**Denmark/Norway**  
There were no major American operations in these countries, but the national resistance museums maintained in Copenhagen and Oslo provide fascinating looks into how Danes and Norwegians fought German occupation forces.

**Italy**  
Of special interest are the landing beaches at Salerno and Anzio, and the site of the Abbey at Monte Cassino, now reconstructed. J. N.