

NORMANDY, 1944-1984

'WE HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN'

D-Day: They came from the sky and the sea; in the hedgerow country and the coastal towns a grateful France remembers

GLOBE PHOTO BY STAN GROSSFELD



HAROLD STUDLEY OF WATERTOWN, MASS., AT AMERICAN MILITARY CEMETERY IN ST. LAURENT-SUR-MER, NORMANDY.

By Charles E. Claffey
Globe Staff

STE.-MERE- EGLISE, Normandy — In the early morning of D-Day, June 6, 1944, Robert Constans witnessed the beginning of what he and his French Resistance comrades had been working toward for four years: "I looked up and saw the paratroopers jumping. The sky was full of them. I will never forget that sight." The long-praised Allied invasion had begun.

Now, 40 years later, Constans, a short, wiry man in his early 60s, is the mayor of Ste.-Mere-Eglise, the first Nor-

man town liberated by the Allies.

"We have not forgotten," Constans says of the American paratroopers of the US 82d Airborne Division and the Allied troops that liberated his town and France — a nation that had not fully recovered from the blood-letting of World War I when in 1939 the German Army once again massed at its borders.

Nor have Constans and his friends in the Resistance forgotten, or forgiven, the brutalities that took place during the German occupation.

On June 6, President Ronald Reagan will join Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain, French President Francois Mitterrand and Canadian Premier Pierre Elliott Trudeau in ceremonies in Normandy marking the 40th anniversary of D-Day.

West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl has not been invited, primarily because of strong pressure brought by former Resistance members who still harbor strong anti-German feelings.

Of the French government's rejection of overtures by the West German chancellor to attend the ceremonies, Constans said in an interview in his office that "It was a right decision, a good decision" to exclude Kohl.

On May 8, the 39th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE) Day, officials and French World War II veterans gathered in front of city and town halls in places like St. Lo, Caen, Villers-Bocage and Bretteville for ceremonies marking the end of the war in Europe in 1945 with

observances that included special words of gratitude for American and British forces.

At Villers-Bocage, totally destroyed during the war and now rebuilt, medals were conferred on French Army veterans, some of them partly crippled from war wounds, a few of them brushing away tears.

Like most of the towns in Normandy, Ste.-Mere-Eglise is full of reminders of the war — and there will be more in the next few weeks as this town and many others in Normandy prepare for 40th anniversary ceremonies and observances.

There are reminders such as streets named Rue Robert Murphy, after a former paratrooper of the 82d Airborne, now a Boston attorney; Gen. Ridgway

Lane, a rural path that marks the site of the command post of the then commander of the 82d Division, Maj. Gen. Matthew Ridgway; Rue Capt. Rex Combs, after a company commander of the 508th Regiment, 82d Airborne; and two miles away, at LaFiere, on the Merederet River, the unmarked foxhole occupied by Brig. Gen. James M. Gavin, deputy commander of the 82d.

Then there is the church in the center of town, its foundation dating from the 11th century, the present structure from the 15th century. From the church belfry, John Steele, a paratrooper of the 82d, dangled helplessly from his parachute harness for three hours in the early morning of D-Day, playing dead while D-DAY, Page 70

NORMANDY, 1944-1984

D-Day

Continued from Page A69

his comrades dropped all around him in the village square.

Inside the church, two stained glass windows, one of them a gift from the 82d Airborne Division, depict the landing of the American paratroopers on D-Day.

Across the street from the church, there is an airborne museum whose unpaid curator is Philippe Jutras, an American and a former Maine state legislator who has lived here since 1972 with his wife, a native of the town, who owns a local clothing store. Jutras, 68, is a retired Army warrant officer who served in Normandy.

Jutras pointed across the street to a farmer named Jules Guyot, whose wartime claim to fame is that soon after the Allies arrived in town, Guyot was somewhat mistaken for a German, arrested, and interned in a prison camp in England until October 1944 when the mistake was discovered and he was repatriated to Ste-Mere-Eglise. His only comment, then and now, on his incarceration was that "the English food was terrible."

This part of Normandy is mostly dairy-farming country, and the land and customs have changed little over the centuries. The ancient hedgerows, in and around which German and Allied infantrymen fought, still define the boundaries of Norman farms as they did a millennium ago.

About seven miles west of Ste-Mere-Eglise is Utah Beach, the right flank of the Allied invasion force. It was at Utah that the men of the American 4th Infantry Division waded ashore on D-Day and into the gunfire of the German 716th Infantry Division, a unit made up mostly of wounded veterans, reservists and foreign "volunteers."

Utah, like most of the Allied landing beaches - American, British-Canadian and French - has its own memorial, museum and markers to commemorate the invasion.

There is no marker at German Strongpoint W5, one of its platoons commanded by 2d Lt. Arthur Jahnke, then 23, a veteran of the Russian front who had won the Knight's Cross, Germany's highest award for bravery, as a platoon leader. Wounded, he had been sent to a reserve unit in Normandy a few months before D-Day.

In moving Victory in Europe (VE) Day ceremonies in Normandy this month, officials and French World War II veterans gathered in front of city and town halls in places like St. Lo, Caen, Villers-Bocage and Bretteville for observances. At Villers-Bocage, totally destroyed during the war and now rebuilt, medals were conferred on French Army veterans, some of them partly crippled from war wounds, a few of them brushing away tears.

Jahnke's strongpoint was well-fortified: an 88-mm. gun, bunkers with flanking 50-mm. guns, a 75-mm. anti-tank gun and machine gun nests. It does not look like the kind of place from which it would be easy to dislodge a skilled, well-armed defender.

As the first American troops piled out of their landing craft at 6:30 a.m., the time of the first landings, Jahnke at first thought they were too far away - 500 yards - to commence firing, that they should be allowed to come to within 100 yards. But wave after wave of GIs streamed onto the beach, and Jahnke almost immediately gave the command to open fire.

By noon of D-Day, Jahnke's platoon was decimated, the strongpoint overrun and he himself almost buried alive by a shell burst. Wounded, he was pulled legs first out of his dugout by his American captors.

Before the day was over, the first elements of the 101st Airborne that had dropped in and around Ste-Mere-Eglise had achieved the Allied objective: to join up with the troops of the 4th Division advancing inland. And Jahnke was on a ship bound for a prisoner of war camp in England.

Driving along the nearly 60 miles of Normandy coastline that comprised the Allied invasion beaches, one is struck by the scope of Operation Overlord, the code name for the assault on Fortress Europe. The area involved in the landings approximates the coastal distance from Duxbury to Provincetown, along the inner side of Cape Cod.

The extreme ocean tides of Normandy figured prominently in the timing of the Allied invasion. At low ebb, vast stretches of beach are exposed, which made it critical for the Allies to land at the time of highest tide. At low tide in Arromanches, where the British landed, a "Mulberry" bridge (a segment of an artificial harbor built 40 years ago stands out in bold relief in the sea - an unintentional monument to Allied engineering skills.

The cliffs and bluffs overlooking the beaches sometimes rise as high as 150 feet. At irregular intervals along the coastline German bunkers, pillboxes and American Sherman tanks often form centerpiece of museums and memorials.

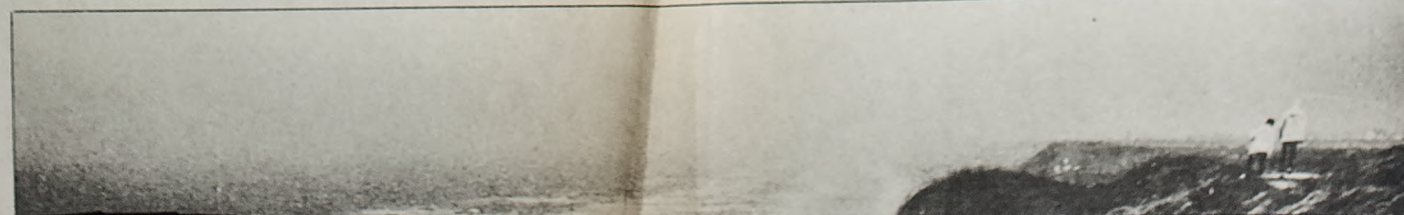
Near one of these bunkers at Omaha Beach, German Strongpoint WN62. Continued on Page 71



GERMAN TANK ON UTAH BEACH, NORMANDY.



FRENCH WWII VETERAN AT VILLERS-BOCAGE VE DAY CEREMONY.



GLOBE PHOTOS BY STAN GROSSFIELD