D-Day + 40 Years

The invasion beaches are calm now, but reminders of the war abound

By JOHN VINOCUR

Pointe du Hoc is a knife, stood on its edge, pointed into the sea. It looks lethal, a palisade of boulder and mean rocks where Normandy's green softness has reclaimed nothing. Battlefields: you could walk them from Gettysburg to Waterloo, and go back to your car, thinking of lunch. But not at Pointe du Hoc. The brightest morning roughens there, the wind working like a rasp, still scoring cruel edges on the sheer cliffs. On D-day, the U.S. Army's Second Ranger Battalion had to climb the knife's blade through bullets and shells. In 1984, looking down to the sea from the viewpoint of the German machine-gun emplacements, imagination becomes superfluous. The emotions are all immediate and distinct: my God, they made it to the top; this is still a cruel place; it holds the mark of a killing ground.

Pointe du Hoc is special. For the most part, the pastoral blanket of Normandy covers over any sense of the fury, the dying, and the scale involved in the thrust of 180,000 Allied troops into Europe on the 6th of June 1944. The pastures are too lush, the land too rich with apple orchards and rose arbors. In Normandy, near the beaches, the war burned fast. There is no complaint, of course — the Allies rushed through the nearby countryside, and were soon gone; 11 months after D-day, Hitler's Europe fell. Occasionally, a speech (hundreds are scheduled this year) will resemble the regrown landscape and turn the invasion to whole glory, leaving the dead as a detail. Reality was something else. In the first 25 hours, the U.S. First Army had 6,603 casualties; two months later, the Americans had to use bulldozers to clear a passage through the 40,000 German corpses at Chambois to the south.

Normandy, its landscape healed, soothes mostly, and holds tightly to its emotions. They are there, although not much at Utah or Omaha Beaches, or in the invasion museums, where models of the engineering feats have the look of Erector sets, and the old uniforms seem like rock band gear from costume shops. The sense of war, the extraordinary bravery of the Allied armies, the numbers, the losses, the real suffering that disappears in time and commemorative oratory, are not marked out in any red guidebook of the emotions, but they are present if you look.

I went to the D-day beaches for the first time 15 years ago in May 1969, expecting no feelings at all. Europe seemed so rich and self-content that it was hard to believe that the United States had to come to help. World War II, just 25 years earlier, felt terribly long ago then; in 1969 there was too much war going between my own contemporaries, all of it bad, the just cause not having leaped the generational gap. I had just returned from Biafra reporting on a ghastly and lunatic war of starved children and big oil interests, and the news in the papers was of Hamburger Hill, the tag name for a place the U.S. Army was having trouble capturing in Vietnam. The stories made clear that there were grunts who did not want to go into the fire, and the accounts, I thought, were written with the sympathy of the times, and probably often read that way too.

I got to Pointe du Hoc mostly by accident then because the road was not well marked and seemed to peter out in the fields. The wind jumps up from the sea as you get closer, and the fields begin to roll and dip, cratered by the Allied offshore bombardment. At the edge of the cliffs, the wind is a smack, and D-day becomes wildly clear: climbing that cutting edge into the bullets. The first men came up on rope, and then ladders belonging to the London Fire Department. The Germans, firing down at them, even rolling boulders over the precipice, killed more Americans in the first wave than those who got to the top.

The day I was there, a man paced around Pointe du Hoc as if he were taking measurements for a linoleum company. His name was Robert Fruling, he worked in a spare parts department in West Palm Beach, Fla., and he was looking around because he had come up the cliffs as a Ranger. I heard how he got hell for losing the radio he was toting, and how a bullet went through his helmet, kindly following a path that avoided his head. He talked about the place with a kind of chirpy good humor for a while and then he stopped. About 75 men in the 235 he came ashore with survived. "We got it, and we got it," he said, and turned away. He bent over shaking with sobs.

There is as much death as glory now at Pointe du Hoc, and somehow, in a recriminating 1984 Europe, a disenchanted one, the battlefield and D-day seem more real than in 1969. Do we discuss going up the cliff? Not here. Pointe du Hoc offers its own conclusions, a battlefield never gone quite still.

The quiet lies elsewhere, its emotions strong. The American cemetery at St.-Laurent-sur-Mer is a great lawn at the edge of the sea, white marble crosses and Stars of David against an open horizon. It is a graceful, light, uncomplicated place. I think of it as very American in the best sense: no phony piety, simple, easy. The graves are the message, and they are left alone: long rows, long rows, long rows. Unequivocal. The monument is inscribed with monument-inscription language, but minus the tremolo, it is right: "This embattled shore, portal of freedom, is forever hallowed by the ideas, valor and sacrifice of our fellow countrymen."

At Cambe, near Isigny, away from the sea, and off a main road, there is a German cem tery. It is a very different place, a power one, not so simple, not so certain, one that more of this than that other time. The hea stones are low and dark, almost black, loo ing like Knight's Crosses. The grass is let t grow high, and it moves in the wind agains the dark stones. The Germans execute scores of French hostages at Caen, nearby the night of the invasion, but no one has eve touched, tried to vandalize, these graves. They have extraordinary dignity. As much as St.-Laurent seems American in its emotions, as much as it seems to reflect the right war and its cost, La Cambe strikes me as German; it has real beauty, and a dark, melancholy strength.

How do you mark the graves of a defeated army, fighting for monstrous goals, on the land of a country it had conquered? "Here lie German soldiers," one inscription says. On a pedestal in the same dark stone, old parents huddle and grieve. And this, chiseled deep: "God has the last word."

This is the 40th anniversary of D-day. T law of round numbers and memorial ref tion probably mean that the next time p think about it much is in another 10 yea spite of Normandy's forgetting meadov cliffs and the graveyards will not los strength, their terror, their message.

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Gerard Rancinan/Sygma

Peter Turnley/Kay Reese & Associates

A German pillbox between Omaha and Utah Beaches, above; offering flowers at the American military cemetery.

Churchill's Command Post Beneath London

By DREW MIDDLETON

Is there a faint whiff of cigar smoke in the corridor? Does the shuffle of tourists' footsteps still the memory of those lambent phrases that were the sword of freedom when freedom's swords were few? Perhaps so. It is 44 years since Winston Churchill first entered the bunker known as the Cabinet War Rooms from which he conducted Britain's war. But the flavor of the man and the period are alive in this place.

Hitler died in his bunker in Berlin. Churchill fought from his. Today, after extensive and careful reconstruction, the visitor can see the rooms from which a war was fought during its most desperate period.

The war rooms lie some 10 feet underground in the basement of the Government offices at the western end of Great George Street, a few steps from Parliament Square. Construction began in the summer of 1938, when the thunderclouds were rising above Europe, and the rooms became operational on Aug. 27, 1939, a week before Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Churchill, the War Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff used the bunker most frequently from September through November 1940. This was the period of the Blitz, the name the British public gave to the protracted bombing of London by the Luftwaffe. The Cabinet Room also was used extensively from June to September 1944 and from January to March 1945, when German V-1's and V-2's rained on London.

The Cabinet Room seems almost too small — about 18 by 21 feet — to contain the leadership of a nation at war. The visitor sees the room as it was on Oct. 15, 1940. Churchill's chair is in the center of the back row. The chair on his right was reserved for Clement Attlee, the Deputy Prime Minister. The other chairs were occupied by men, great in their day, who are a memory now: Anthony Eden, Ernest Bevin, Lord Beaverbrook. A staff officer's cap hangs on a peg.

In the middle, facing their formidable master, sat the chiefs of the three armed services. Who can name them now? Certainly not the awed little boys who survey the room.

An air of timelessness hangs over the room. A visitor remembering those days half expects Adm. Sir Dudley Pound to stamp into the room, fling himself into his chair and begin to tap the pale green blotter impatiently. Or for Anthony Eden, always elegant, to murmur a few words to the attentive Attlee.

In 1940 when the War Cabinet met in the bunker it was reasonably secure. The concrete slab above the Cabinet Room was proof against a 500-pound bomb and there were few bombs of that size at that time. Above the door on the left are two electric bulbs painted red and green that indicated whether an air raid was in progress. Cabinet meetings began about 10 P.M. and lasted until business was done. A participant remembered that the Prime Minister refreshed himself from a tall glass of whisky and water.

A board indicates the weather above. During air raids it frequently read "Windy," in British usage meaning frightening.

Security was one thing, comfort another. Sir John Colville, Churchill's private secretary, has recorded that "The Prime Minister much disliked the place, which he found ill-smelling and claustrophobic." Churchill worked at No. 10 Downing Street by day and in the bunker by night during the worst of the German air raids.

Churchill much preferred a bedroom built on the floor above, but he slept in his bunker bedroom three or four times and from the table that faces the bed made four of his wartime broadcasts, one of them the declaration of war on Japan. A storm lantern stands on the table next to his bed, sharing the space with an ashtray for his cigar butts. A cigar humidor is within reach.

Churchill, like Hitler, was prepared to die in his bunker. After warning the British of the dangers of invasion in July 1940, he looked around the Cabinet Room and, according to his associates, said, "If the invasion comes, that's where I'll sit. I'll sit there until the Germans are driven back or they carry me out."

Throughout the bunker there are reminders that this was the nerve center of a nation at war. On one wall of the map room hangs a blackboard reporting the state of the Luftwaffe and of the Royal Air Force's Fighter Command on Sept. 15, 1940, the critical day of the Battle of Britain.

Not unnaturally, the figures represent the inflated British claims of the day. These were later revised, but even the revision showed that the R.A.F. had mauled the Germans to the point that they began to withdraw from the daylight air battle.

The map room was the nerve center of the bunker. Staffed around the clock throughout the war, every piece of information from every battlefront, every air strike and every convoy was logged and recorded on the maps. The room rings with history. Here are the Japanese moving into northern Burma toward India. There are the Germans fighting the Allies in Normandy with heroic desperation. All the maps were left in place when the bunker closed in August 1945. Dusty pigeon holes near a green scrambler tele-

Continued on Page 16

DREW MIDDLETON, the military correspondent of The New York Times, reported from London in 1940 and 1941.

If you go

There are 20 rooms in the bunker. Five of them had been open to visitors on a severely restricted basis in years past. Ten more, which had been used by senior staff officers and typists during the war and were later used as a storage area, have now been restored and furnished with wartime memorabilia. A further two are now used as exhibition rooms for documents and photos and a changing series of period objects.

The bunker is open daily from 10 A.M. to 5:50 P.M. with the exception of Good Friday, Christmas Day and the May Day holiday, May 7, plus the few occasions when a state ceremony is held and the whole area is cordoned off. On these occasions they open at midday and close at the usual time. The phone number to call for information is 930-6961, but reservations are not necessary. Admission is £2 (about $3), $1.50 for children.

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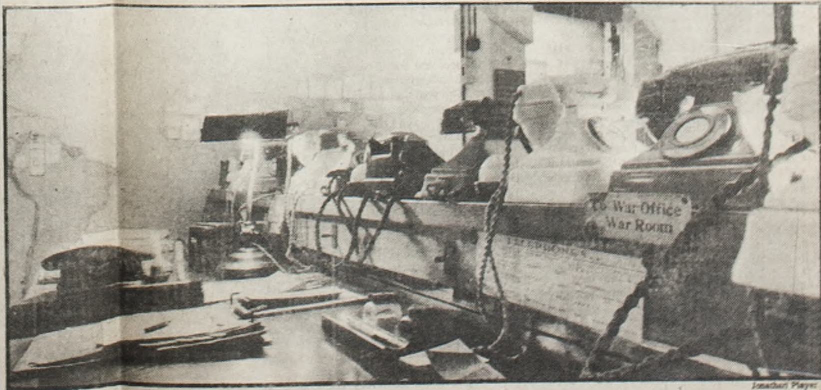

Jonathan Player

All the underground Cabinet War Rooms are now open to the public.