

April 2, 2007

TAKING MY GRANDSON TO NORMANDY TO LEARN ABOUT REAL HEROES

For one who hates to travel, I have long awaited this trip — taking 16-year-old grandson Thomas Yarbrough to Normandy, the site of Operation Overlord — most of us refer to it as D-Day — the largest military invasion from the sea in history and the beginning of the heroic liberation of Western Europe from the grips of Nazi Germany. It is my second trip there and, frankly, the only reason I would ever set foot in France.

Thomas has shown a great interest in World War II. I'm not sure why. Maybe a teacher inspired him. Maybe he read something that sparked his interest in the subject. It really doesn't matter. The main thing is that when he sees firsthand the beaches and the hedgerows — and the cemeteries that simply take your breath away — he will understand what bravery, duty and patriotism are all about. He damn sure won't learn it watching the talking heads on television, reading *The New York Times*, or from Washington politicians using our troops in Iraq as pawns in a shameful exercise on one-upmanship.

The real heroes, as Thomas will soon learn, lie in graves some 4,000 miles from here. They gave their lives in order that the rest of us can sit around and whine about all that is wrong with the greatest country on earth. That part is hard for me to understand. Maybe Thomas will.

I am pleased that my grandson wanted to make this trip because time is diminishing the significance of World War II, and the men and women who were a part of it. It is alarming to note that we are losing WWII veterans at the rate of a thousand a day. Through the intercession of my friend, Bill Kinney, associate editor of the *Marietta Daily Journal*, Thomas and I met one of those veterans recently. Arthur Crowe, 82, is a retired attorney and was a member of the 9th Infantry Division during the invasion.

Twenty years old at the time, Mr. Crowe participated in five separate campaigns and miraculously was never wounded. Was he ever scared, Thomas asked him. "Absolutely," the old man said. "If you weren't, you weren't human." Thomas wanted to know if he had any close calls during the invasion. Crowe thought a moment and said, "No, not any that I can think of." I reminded him of the story Kinney had told me about Crowe leaving his foxhole and going across an apple orchard to join a colleague in another foxhole. While he was gone, a German shell hit the original foxhole and blew it to smithereens. "Wouldn't that qualify as a close call?" I asked. "Well," he said after a considerable pause, "yes, I guess it would."

My favorite story from our meeting with Mr. Crowe involved Ste. Mère Eglise, site of the famous incident where paratrooper John Steele was snagged on the steeple of the local parish church and played dead for several hours to avoid being killed. Arthur Crowe was a forward lookout at another church in the town. While on duty, he noticed a single American tank tearing down one road and a German tank down the other. As he watched in fascination, the two tanks collided. Both hatches opened. The German and the American looked at each other, jumped out of their tanks and ran in opposite directions. War may be hell, but it can also be weirdly funny.

My friends at Matterhorn Travel in Annapolis, Md., have arranged a superb trip. There will be 22 of us, plus several knowledgeable military historians. We will visit Omaha Beach, the site of the bloodiest of the D-Day landings; Utah Beach, Ste. Mère Eglise and Pointe du Hoc. All of these are just names to Thomas at this point, but my hope that when he and his granddad get back home, the experience will be forever etched in Thomas' consciousness. If so, the trip will have been a success.

One of our first stops when we return will be to visit Arthur Crowe again and tell him what we saw. It will be an honor.