

April 9, 2007

## HOME AND HUMBLE FROM OUR TRIP TO NORMANDY

The weather was miserable. The trip was magnificent. Grandson Thomas and I are back from Normandy, trying to absorb what we saw, heard and felt as we walked the same beaches, bridges and killing fields where long ago ordinary men did extraordinary things. It was known officially as Operation Overlord. We call it D-Day. D-Day began in the first minutes of June 6, 1944, with the invasion of France. Operation Overlord ended when troops arrived in Berlin 11 months later.

There were about two dozen of us on the trip. People from as far away as Oklahoma and as nearby as Fayetteville, Ga., all came to learn more about the largest military invasion from the sea and the people involved. The names are familiar from history: Eisenhower, Bradley, Patton, Omaha, Utah, Caen, St. Lo and Pegasus Bridge. But our trip was the chance to experience it up close and personal.

Our leader was military historian and retired Col. Alexander Shine, a Great American. Col. Shine, a West Point graduate with 27 years active duty as an infantry officer, served a tour in Korea and two in Vietnam and knows his business. Al Shine alone was worth the price of the trip.

As we toured the Memorial in Caen, an impressive museum that graphically depicts not only D-Day but the events leading up to it, Col. Shine asked 16-year-old Thomas what he would have done had he been aboard the landing crafts that hit the beaches of Normandy on D-Day. It was an insightful question, given that my grandson is only a year or so younger than many of the troops who participated in the invasion. I held my breath at the answer. Thomas is the family's free-spirit, and you never know what will come rolling out of his mouth. This time I underestimated him.

"I would look at the walls of the boat on both sides of me and water in back of me," he said, "and then I would run as fast as I could for cover." Col. Shine smiled and said, "That is exactly what the troops did. That's all they could do." Score one for Thomas.

At the Caen Memorial, it was striking to see hundreds of young people from throughout Europe and the U.S. watching intently the old grainy Nazi propaganda films extolling Hitler's Youth Corps, the 14- to 18-year-olds who were considered the future of Aryan supremacy. The kids seemed fascinated by what they saw. I trust they saw through it.

No trip to Normandy would be complete without a visit to the American cemetery. This is where you see the enormous cost of victory. More than 9,300 servicemen and women are buried there. Among the numbers are 213 Georgians. I found seven of them as I walked through the cemetery and they deserve special mention in this brief space: Charles Massey, Joseph Little, Paul Bearden, Edward Ozbalt, William Turner, Dennis Turner and Luther Newsome. Al Guite, our tour member from Fayetteville, had planned to sprinkle some authentic red Georgia clay on their graves as a tribute, but the security stiff-necks at the Atlanta airport confiscated the clay. I hope they feel proud of themselves.

I mentioned last week about visiting with Arthur Crowe, the D-Day veteran who watched a German and an American tank collide from his perch in a church steeple in Ste. Mère Eglise and how both drivers jumped out and high-tailed it in opposite directions after the crash. Thomas and I are sure we saw the church and the intersection at which the crash occurred. Alas, after 60 years there is still no stop sign at that intersection. Remember that if you happen to be driving your tank there.

I believe Thomas will remember our trip to the D-Day battle sites as an unforgettable experience. In our short time there, we saw remarkable examples of the best and the worst of mankind. Heroes and villains. Brutality and heroism. Patriotism and duty. Plus, he got a taste of what war is really like. I pray this is as close as Thomas ever comes to the real thing.