

D—Day. 80 years on.



1944...2024

On the 4th of June 2014, a small Squadron of small power boats, all ex-services which had served during WW2, departed from Portsmouth. They were en route to Pegasus Bridge, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the D-day landings in France, on June 6th, 1944.

Now, 10 years later, as one of the remaining participant from 10 years ago, I took the opportunity to once again, visit Pegasus Bridge, as I have done every year. I have with us the 23 crosses, destined for the graves in Benouville, and Brucourt. These crosses are annotated by residents in our village of Woolavington in Somerset UK, and are kept in the St Mary's Church for 2 weeks before departure, for this to happen.



Sadly there are no powerboats this year, as the commemorations in Portsmouth will need them to be “at home” for the events planned, for the Portsmouth area. However, the Dunkirk Little Ship, the Steam Tug Challenge, had offered to attend, at Caen.



Then, 2014. HSL 102.



Now, 2024. ST Challenge

Our small family group are booked on the Portsmouth to Outstreham ferry, and we board for the crossing, a daytime sailing.

Departing Portsmouth always brings into mind, that for so many of our men who made this crossing 80 years ago, this would be their last view of home, never to return.



Then, 1944.



Now, 2024.

On board with us, we were privileged to have a number of American and UK Veterans, on their way to France again. I was privileged to have met and chatted to some of them.



Donald Cobb, now 99, was a Radio Operator on the USS Murphy, DD603



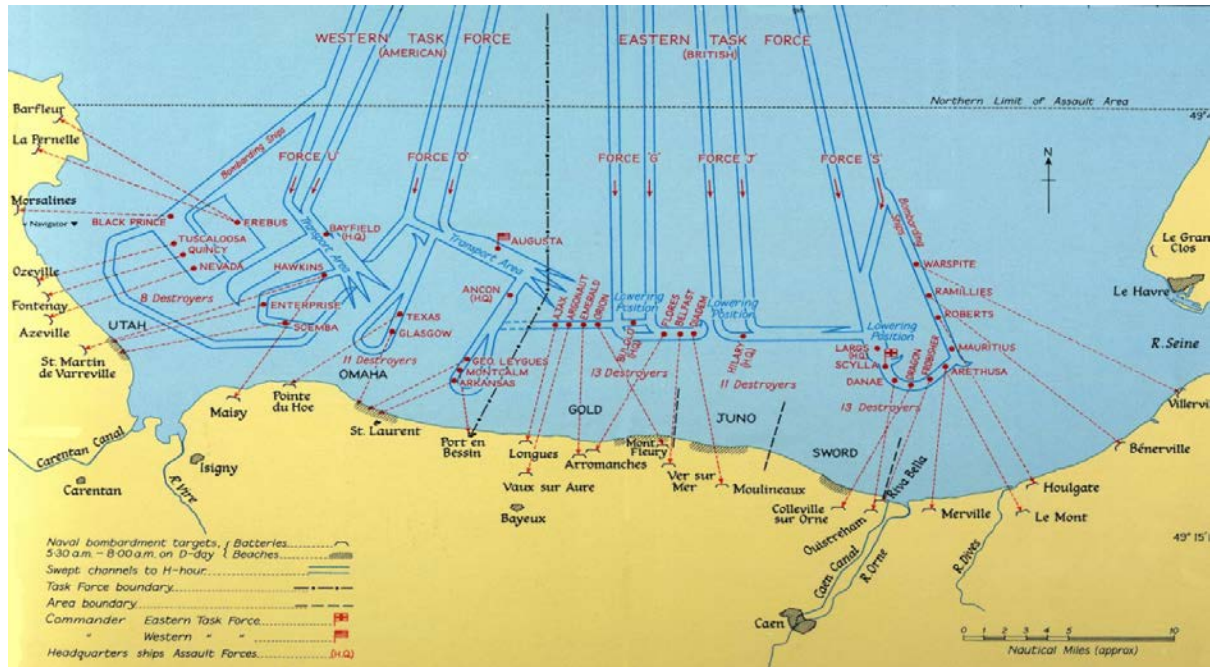
Left. Joe Grossman, USS William S Jackson.



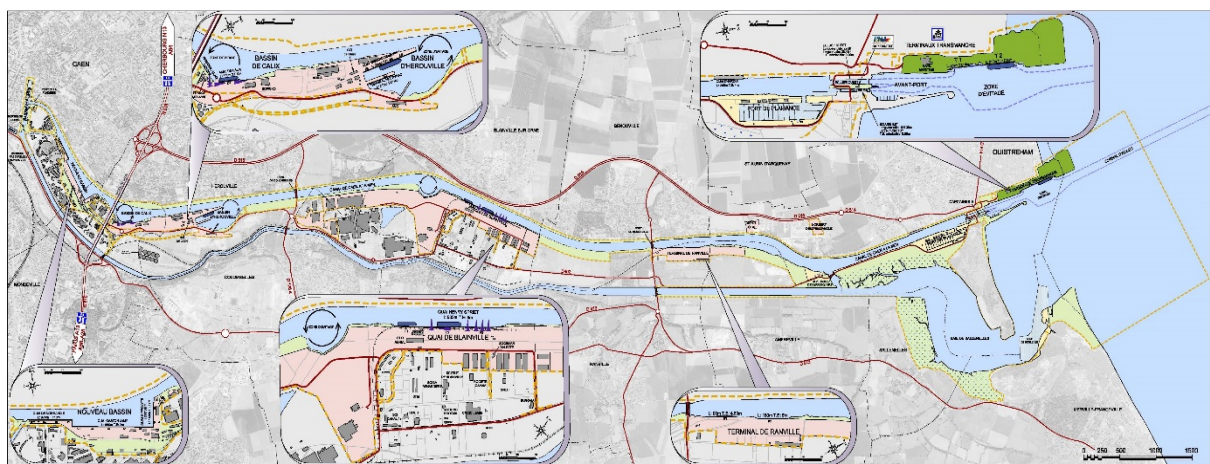
Three of our own.

Right. Sgt. Steve Melnikoff, who landed on Omaha beach, and fought all the way to Bremehaven, with the 29th Division. He is now 102 years old.

We disembark from the ferry on arrival Ouistreham, which is the entry port for the canal, leading up to Caen, via Pegasus bridge. It is a 15 minute drive to Benouville, the village where Pegasus Bridge is situated, and settle in to our mobile home, on the Capfun Holiday Park, in Benouville. The mobile homes are fully well equipped, and there is a fine restaurant and small shop on site. About 10 minutes away is a huge superstore, so we have never wanted for anything at all, during our many visits.



The approaches to all the DDay beaches.



Pegasus Bridge, in Benouville, up this road.....^ , where the road crosses the canal.

The approach to Ouistreham is from the right hand side of the map, three quarters of the way up. The canal is entered via a lock, and the canal ends in Caen, on the left hand side of the map. The ferry stops in Oustreham, and from there on, it is by road, using if needed the excellent bus service to Caen. If you are on a bicycle, there is a tow path all the way from the port, via Benouville, to Caen, along the canal.

My first “duty” upon arrival, is to pay a visit to Madame Arlette, at the Cafe Gondre. The Gondre family were living here when the war started, and have lived there ever since. Madame Arlette, the daughter of the Family Gondre has run the Café for ever and a day, and has taken good care of our team, on every visit that I have made since 2014. 0730 for tea and croissants, is essential to my soul..



Then, Mr Gondre, and 2 of ours.



Now June 2024

Breakfast outside Café Gondre, 1944 and now 2024.

We had arrived early in order to take part in 2 events. The first was a dinner organised by Steve Oldrid, which has happened every year. This raises funds for Armed Forces Charity's, and this year managed about 13000 euros, an amazing amount.



Above left, are Steve receiving a presentation from John and Jacob Millin, son and grandson of Bill Millin. Above right, some of the guests enjoying the evening. On our table we had the privilege of having Jimmy Jukes and Michelle Thorpe owners of the “Homes for Heroes” Veterans Charity, as well as being the Pearly King and Queen of Bermondsey and Rotherhythe. Steve donated £1000.00 to their very worthy cause.

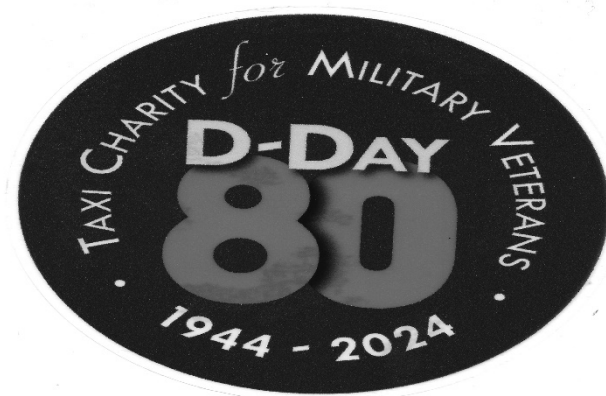


The second event was a marathon, which seemed to have half the world running in , including my daughter. This started inn Benouville, and ended in Caen.



Whilst daughter started the Marathon, which required the runners to cross over Pegasus Bridge, and run past the Café Gondree, I was privileged to be able to sit and partake of tea and croissants, with Margaret Brotheridge, daughter of Lieutenant Den Brotheridge. Den was the first of our Forces to be killed in action, on D-Day.

Every year, the London Taxi's get together , and bring across as many Veterans and their carers, as are still able to travel. The Veterans are transported from venue to venue, and are made very welcome wherever they arrive.



The Glider landing ground, where the 3 first wave of Gliders landed, is a beautifully kept area. There are memorials to each Glider, as well as to the Ox and Bucks and Parachute Regiments, led by Major Howard. This team had been brought out from England in Gliders, and made a perfect landing, in the darkness of the middle of the night, much to the surprise of the German forces occupying the area.



On their way.



Arrived.

The landing point of each of the 3 Gliders, is well marked. The first glider, with Major Howard in command of the operation, landed close to the bridge. The team disembarked, Lieutenant Den Brotheridge, in the first glider, having sustained a fractured leg during the landing.



Then.



Now.

The second and third gliders landed safely, sadly however, the first fatality to be recorded on D-day occurred, when L/Corporal F. Greenhalgh was thrown out of number 3 aircraft, and drowned in the close by marsh.



Then



Now.

Having disembarked the gliders, the men then had to approach the bridge, neutralise any resistance, and secure the bridge.



Then.



Now.

The Café Gondre remains the same today as it was then, seen between the control tower and the bridge., right hand photo.The bridge had to be crossed from this side, toward the Café Gondre.

The lads had first to shut down the pilbox, seen in the left hand photo below, which is still there today. Then, led by Lieutenant Brotheridge, they crossed the bridge, to the Café Gondre side.



Arriving on the Café Gondre side of the bridge involved exchanges of gunfire. Lieutenant Den Brotheridge, despite having a fractured leg, led the charge across the bridge. Sadly, on reaching the Café Gondre side, Den was mortally wounded.



The Bridge won, note the gliders in the background.

Having taken the bridge, it remained to clear the area and hold the bridge until the main forces arrived. This involved much close quarter fighting, during which many of ours were lost, and remain in the graveyard, in the village of Benouville.



Then.



Now.

The battle raged on up the high street, to the roundabout outside the Mayor's office, where today can still be seen the signs of warfare.



Now



and

Then

Turning right at the Mayor's office the fighting went on toward the Benouville Church. It is here that a sniper had ensconced himself in the Church Spire, and after causing many casualties, was forcibly removed.



Then.



Now.

The result of the heavy fighting left many of our lads mortally wounded, and 23 are buried in the Church graveyard.

Every year, on the morning of June 6th, 27 of the Benouville school children gather at the Mayor's office, and the Mayor and her Staff, led by the Pipes and Drums, walk the half mile up the road to the Church.

When all are assembled around the graves, each name of those who gave their lives so long ago, is read out, and one by one, a beautiful bunch of flowers from the Mayor. and one of the 27 crosses which we have brought from Woolavington Church, are placed on each grave.

This is a very moving experience, as you can imagine, when 40 Pipers start playing Highland Cathemeral, in that beautifully kept graveyard....!

Our team had laid our crosses on each grave earlier that day, which we have thankfully been permitted to do each year, for the past 10 years.



This year, one of our team's Grandsons laid the first of our crosses, and it is hoped that this bodes well for the future!



One of our Woolavington crosses being laid down, by a Benouville school pupil.

On the evening of the 5th, the main ceremony occurred, but I did not get to the Museum, or the Memorial, as the crowds made walking passage impossible, as people were toe to toe..!

We had one duty to perform, in the village of Brucourt.

Regrettably we were unable to attend the official ceremony as the date clashed, so we went and laid our crosses anyway. There are 6 graves in Brucourt, the Abbey and graveyard are just outside the village, on a hillside, a beautiful place to be.



Laying our crosses this year.



The Abbey, the graves up the hill on the right.

We have been going there every year, and always we are made to feel very special, and welcome by the Mayor.



Myself and our own Admiral Neil Rankin, a year or two ago, with mayor Marie.

We were honoured to have been invited to the Benouville Mayors dinner, which was a superb occasion. This is preceded by an hours' worth of musical magic, which is, every year, provided by the Police Band from the UK. This band meets here in Benouville, once a year, and without any practice, produce magnificent music, for many of the commemoration events here.

The band is led and organised by Keith and Julie, and the final musical event each year, is the lowering of the flags at the Museum, to the sound of Sunset. A very fitting end to a very emotional few days.



Flags lowered, and centre two, me with Keith.



The wreaths laid during the remembrance parades, in front of the original bridge, which is still well kept and maintained, in the Museum grounds. And so we board the ferry back to our homes, 15 minutes to the terminal, and a short crossing time, to plan for the next visit in 2025.

It is a journey well worth taking, to experience the real emotions of being in the place where it all started, as one can join in to any of the commemoration events.

I have taken many a liberty with using some pictures which appear in the public domain, and hope that the owners thereof, have no objections, as this epistle is designed to remember those who gave their lives for our freedom. Thank you.

We will remember them.