

French People are Still Honoring WWII Veterans

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While the veterans who fought on Normandy's beaches are aging, they are most certainly not forgotten. French organizations, VFW members and museums diligently uphold the honor of the troops who served during D-Day and beyond while actively engaging younger generations to carry these stories to the future.

STORY AND PHOTO BY KELLY GIBSON

Conditions along the English Channel on June 6, 1944, were not ideal. In fact, all of the weather that strategists had hoped to avoid rolled in that morning: dense fog and heaving waves. A cold wind whipped hard raindrops into the youthful faces of so many GIs, awaiting their fate as they held on to the sides of landing craft. They prepared for the pivotal battle that would claim so many lives but would save so many more.

To this day, French children are told stories of the heroism displayed by American troops so France might remain free. They still offer single flowers to visiting American veterans, now hunched with age but still bright with pride. These veterans visit the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer to reminisce about their time in battle.

Normandy's landscape is dotted with hundreds of memorials, monuments, cemeteries and museums dedicated to the memory of GIs who fought there 70 years ago—some as small as stone markers in a field, and some covering more than 20,000 square feet and housing thousands of WWII artifacts. Nowhere else on Earth is so much war commemoration

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

concentrated. And in few other locales overseas are American sacrifices so fondly remembered.

The Importance of Bearing Witness

Several organizations have appeared in recent years—staffed and maintained by those much younger than “the greatest generation”—making it their mission to continue honoring American veterans.

One such group is the Amis Des Vétérans Américains (AVA), founded in 1964 by Simone Renaud, a Frenchwoman from Ste.-Mère-Église. She saw firsthand the brutalities of war, as Germans and American paratroopers fought in the streets of the small town. To this day, “the village population dedicates its eternal gratitude” to GIs, AVA volunteers say. Extensive memorials and commemorations can be found throughout town.

Renaud’s vision of a volunteer association dedicated to welcoming veterans was the first of its kind in Normandy.

The group has done much in Normandy to immortalize and honor American veterans. This included raising money for and coordinating a memorial to Allied paratroopers for the 70th anniversary. AVA also created a memorial site at La Fièvre, which remembers the Battle of La Fièvre fought June 6, 1944—touted as the first fight in the battle for Normandy.

“It illustrates a page of history, a page written with the blood of soldiers and civilians, a page known by France and the United States of America,” Renaud said during the site’s inauguration June 9, 2013.

Army Pfc. Charles DeGlopper posthumously received the Medal of Honor for his valor during that battle as part of C Company, 325th Glider Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. AVA brought the DeGlopper family to Normandy for the ceremony.

Michele Coupey is the vice president of AVA. She met her husband, Lilian, in the United States and moved to his native Normandy in 2001.

“I was enthralled with the stories from Lilian’s family about the German occupation and their town’s liberation by American troops,” Coupey said.

She and Lilian participated in ceremonies and events every June. That is how the couple got involved with AVA. Through the organization, she voices her passion for recognizing veterans.

“I feel so honored and privileged to be a part of it all,” Coupey said. “I am so proud to be an American but am also so proud of my adopted country for all that France has done throughout the years to honor U.S. veterans.”

Coupey is too young to have served in WWII. But she says AVA’s partnership with current U.S. servicemembers and veterans is personally powerful.

“I want Americans to know why I love France so much, and what it does for American veterans is one of those reasons.”

The Association U.S. Normandie Mémoire et Gratitude, formed in 2005 by a group of volunteers from Amfreville, France, has goals similar to AVA. It is “dedicated to guarding the memories of its [France’s] freedom,” volunteer Vivian Roger says.

Like Coupey, Roger—a native North Carolinian—met her husband in the United States and

returned to Normandy with him in 1992.

“It is important to keep our history alive and to never forget the cost paid for freedom,” she said. “Everything we do is for the families and friends and WWII enthusiasts of all ages and from all walks of life.”

Today, the association works side-by-side with veterans service organizations, including VFW Post 9249—named after DeGlopper—in Grand Island, N.Y.

Volunteers welcome visiting veterans and their families, offering them food and transportation from memorial to memorial. The group also researches and collates information for local historical displays and documentaries. They support a parachuting team dedicated to memorializing WWII veterans. And they participate in les fleurs de la mémoire—the practice of laying flowers on graves at Normandy American Cemetery.

“It is our duty to keep the memories alive and pass them forward,” Roger says. “All of us. Freedom is not free. Just because our own country may not be occupied at the moment, it could someday. We need to work together in peace and harmony with and for others.”

VFW Plays a Role

This June is one of the last opportunities for many of the warriors who fought in Operation Overlord to revisit the battle sites. So it is vital to honor them one last time while they are still living. But it is equally important to remember them after they die.

VFW members in Normandy are dedicated to capturing the stories of Operation Overlord veterans and facilitating commemorative activities.

One such member is Chuck Steiner, a retired Air Force colonel who was assigned to a rescue station at Anderson Air Force Base on Guam in 1966-67. He understands how critical it is to remember the sacrifices of others.

Steiner, the service officer for Post 605 in Paris, France, says he is proud to support commemoration efforts, even though he did not serve in WWII. "I am happy that this is going on here now. It is important for all veterans."

This June, Steiner worked with the French government to actively recognize American veterans. He has helped to collect names of living Operation Overlord veterans for the French government. He also works closely with a former Post commander who was part of the invasion, landing on Utah Beach on Day 3.

In addition, Steiner and members of Post 605 will help staff a welcome center in Carentan, Normandy, some six miles from the landing beaches, for visitors at the 70th-anniversary activities.

"We should learn from past history," Steiner says. "People forget it most of the time."

As an aside, it is amazing that after all of these years a VFW Post in Europe can still boast at least one Normandy vet. "Iron Mike" Murley of Post 8862 in Vicenza, Italy, jumped into France on D-Day and was awarded the French Legion of Honor last year at age 90.

Keeping Current

Stories continue to pass down through each generation, maintaining a strong oral tradition. Still, museums must find additional ways to stay relevant.

Encouraging visitors to learn about the horrors of war is one means of inspiring peace in future generations. Documenting veterans' stories before they die is crucial to this effort.

For instance, Utah Beach's Musée du Débarquement originally opened in 1964 but underwent significant renovation and expansion and reopened in 2011. It offers VIP tours to GIs who lived the history and is currently seeking accounts from those who landed there. Curators encourage those visitors to tell their stories on camera for posterity. This will allow future generations to hear the history firsthand.

"The D-Day museum at Utah Beach opens its doors with two aims," says Ingrid Anquetil, the museum's director. "They are to register as a key location where the duty to remember is evident and to be a major player in Normandy. This year is an opportunity for us to confirm our commitment to provide an exceptional heritage to future generations within an innovative environment."

With technological advances, the millennial generation is wont to digitally immortalize history. Museum staffs are working diligently to incorporate technology into museum exhibits. Touch screens and interactive displays are being added to entice younger visitors so they can share in an important time in history.

Additionally, tourism offices in villages rife with D-Day history offer self-guided walking tours using touch-screen devices. They are activated by standing near certain sites and are loaded with GPS tracking systems to keep visitors on the right path.

These types of tours include trivia games and personal stories of Operation Overlord told by those who lived them. This adds a personal touch, showing the depth of French passion for the Americans who helped liberate their country.

To access the digital version of VFW magazine click here: <http://www.vfw.org/News-and-Events/Magazine/>.

For a list of memorials in Normandy dedicated to D-Day-related battles, visit

www.normandiememoire.com.

To learn more about each memorial, contact the Normandy Tourist Board, Jerome Mercier-Papin, j.mercier-papin@normandie-tourisme.fr, or Atout France USA, 825 Third Ave., 29th Floor, New York City, N.Y., 10022, (212) 838-7800.

Photo caption: The Musee du Debarquement at Utah Beach, renovated in 2011, offers VIP tours to veterans and their families. In an effort to maintain their legacy, veterans can record their experiences.