

My Day at the Beaches

I grew up watching old World War II movies. I imagined what it was like to run off a landing ship or jump out of a plane; shells bursting all around. And I've always wondered whether I'd have the courage to do it. The Normandy invasion heavily influenced my decision to join the paratroopers, and I've wanted to visit the beaches there ever since.

But, standing in my pajamas, alone in France, I read "Jules...Eric is gone. Heart stopped".

I knew what it meant in an instant, and it hit me hard. My thirteen-year-old nephew, who I'd seen only weeks before, had passed away. Feelings of loss smothered my chest, and I held back tears. I investigated changing my flight home, but it was expensive for a minor change. Besides, this was to be the culmination of my trip, and I wasn't sure if I should cut my plans short. So, despite some guilt, I decided to carry on. With conflicted emotions and a heavy heart, I stepped out to my car.

The Normandy countryside is rural for a region with such significant history. Its rolling hills are checkered with farms and covered in trees. The roads are narrow, and weave between little rustic hamlets. As you near the coast, you can feel the sea and the heaviness in the air. It felt at once familiar, but also special.

I drove to Omaha beach where the January sea-breeze cleared my head. This is where the heaviest fighting occurred on D-Day. Along the dunes lie several old bunkers with cottages between the beach and seawall. Gulls dip above the sand, and a large stainless sculpture reflects the sunlight. I walked out to the water and looked back at the dunes and felt the weight of the past.

Utah beach is even less developed. It's wide and flat and I watched horses pulling little racing sulkies beside the ruins of old concrete pillboxes. People looked for mussels and oysters on some old iron wreck. I called my wife when I knew she'd be awake. I was afraid she'd want me to come home right away, and I wouldn't be able to finish my trip. However, she agreed it wouldn't make much difference and that I should stay.

Relief. My last stop was the most important to me.

I went to Sainte-Mere-Eglise, where my regiment had parachuted at 1:00am on D-Day. They still have a replica of a paratrooper who landed on their church hanging from the steeple. He's a bit faded and torn, but it's nice to see they remember. I also found a monument that happened to be erected by my regiment a few days before I joined the 82nd Airborne.

When I arrived at my Airbnb that evening, my host asked what brought me to Normandy. I explained I had come to see the battlefield, but she said she never gave it much thought.

I guess that makes sense. People have moved on; perhaps rightfully so.