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HANDING DOWN HISTORY ON THE BEACHES OF NORMANDY

By Shawn Fisher

In 1954, Colonel James Rudder made his second landing at Pointe Du Hoc, France. This time he was 44-years old, paunchy, wearing a sports coat, and riding on the shoulders of a French fisherman who carried him ashore in the high tide so Rudder would not get his feet wet. A second fisherman carried Rudder's fourteen-year-old son, Bud. The Frenchmen laughed under the strain of carrying the pair but deposited the two – quite dry – on the beach beneath the 100-foot cliff.

“Can you imagine anybody going up that thing?” Rudder said, mostly to himself.

“It's twice as high as I thought,” the boy said. “Do you think we'll be able to climb it?”

“No, son. We won't.”

“But you climbed it before.”

Rudder was quiet. He paused. “I was younger then, son. And we trained for it.”¹

Ten years earlier, at 7:00 AM on June 6, 1944, he was the first American to set foot on The Pointe, leading then 225 men of the Second Ranger Battalion. The Rangers labored under constant fire up the legendary cliffs, climbing with ropes, with ladders borrowed from the London Fire Department, and with their bare hands. All the way to the top.

In March 2017, I stood atop those cliffs with my wife and two daughters, struggling to explain the meaning of the place which General Omar Bradley had described as “the most difficult assignment he had ever given a soldier.” The Pointe was the German stronghold on the Normandy beaches, and the artillery there had to be knocked out or thousands of Allied troops would be killed. Rudder, a Texas high school

¹ The conversation here is paraphrased from the article “D-Day Relived,” as found in W.C. Heinz, *When We Were One: Stories Of World War II* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002), 172.

football coach just a year and a half before, was leading the most important mission of D-day.

Despite losing some men in swamped and misdirected landing craft, the Rangers hit the beach at The Pointe and started climbing immediately. A Ranger made it to the top in five minutes, and within half an hour the whole unit had taken the cliffs. It was a heroic feat of duty, dedication, and hard training, but only 90 men were left in fighting condition.

In 1984, one of those Rangers, Herman Stein, did it again – this time in his sixties. A roofer by trade, he blasted up the cliff and left behind a dozen embarrassed young Green Berets. Shortly after his climb that day, President Ronald Reagan gave the speech of his life, affectionately referring to the Rangers as “The Boys of Pointe Du Hoc.” Reagan highlighted the importance of the mission, saying “in seizing the firm land at the top of these cliffs, they began to seize back the continent of Europe.”

As my family and I walked back from the cliffs and around the deep shell holes that still dominate the landscape, I explained how the Germans had removed the guns from the Pointe, leaving the Rangers who finally scaled the cliffs to find the guns missing. Rudder sent two men to find them: Leonard Lomell, of New Jersey, and Jack Kuhn, of Alabama. These two men scouted ahead and quickly found the five 155mm guns under camouflaged nets behind a hedgerow, and as German gunners stood nearby waiting for orders to fire, the two Rangers snuck forward and disabled the guns with thermite grenades. The invasion was saved. The time was 8:30 A.M.

My visit to The Pointe was one of several WWII sites our family visited over the course of four days in Normandy. When historians walk in such places, we are often assaulted with layers of memory. Stories from the past spring to life as if ghosts arose from the very soil to fight again old battles, and make old speeches. We saw the church steeple in Sainte-Mère-Église where American paratrooper Sgt. John Steele hung from his parachute in the early morning hours of June 6. Inside, we saw the stained glass of the church which now depicts Jesus and Mary, flanked by American paratroopers descending in their parachutes. We visited the Airborne Museum next door, which included tanks, jeeps, and

gliders – and the Ronald Reagan Franco American Conference Center. Next we walked the battleground at Brecourt Manor where a handful of men from the famed Easy Company, 506th Parachute Regiment under the command of Capt. Richard Winters captured a German artillery battery. We stopped a short distance farther on to see the monument near the exit of Omaha Beach dedicated to Winters and other small unit leaders of the American army.

There is a living monument, though, in the warm affection our family received from our French host at the twelfth-century Chateau de Flottemanville. Unlike the cold urban setting of Paris, Normandy was cozy, rural, and very welcoming to Americans. American flags were everywhere – in fact, we saw more American flags in Normandy than in Searcy. Our host, Francois de Flottemanville, explained that her father was wounded within minutes of the liberation, but he was treated for his wounds by Allied medics and soon appointed mayor of nearby Valognes (the former mayor had been a German collaborator).

We sat in the ancient chateau's dining room for breakfast each morning near a small sign from the war. The chateau had been occupied by German officers for four years, and the sign warned in German that it was off-limits to enlisted personnel. We listened to Francois explain how her father wept remembering the sight of American paratroopers walking into Valognes on June 6. When I explained that my grandfather had come ashore at Utah Beach on D-day +10, she kissed my hand and hugged me. "Thank you," she said, "We owe so much to your country." We had many experiences at the historical sites during our trip to Normandy, but this living gratitude was the most visceral.

We Americans often forget amid our self-reflection, arguments, and criticisms of our country that we have been a great force for good in the world. The price has been stupendous. Nowhere have I felt this more strongly than while strolling with my family through the Normandy American Cemetery near Colleville-sur-Mer. There are some 10,000 Americans buried there. They came from across the ocean to defeat tyranny. They gave their lives to liberate the people of France. I was reminded there of John 15:13, "There is no greater love than this: that a person would lay down his life for the sake of his friends." We can do no more.