

TRIP journal. JUNE 5-13, 2016]

June, 2015: At the 50th reunion in June, 2015, Tom Long talked to us about the class he teaches at George Washington University Called The Price of Freedom. The class concludes with a trip to the Normandy beaches. He raised the possibility that Dartmouth Travel might set up a similar trip if enough people were interested. About forty people signed up. Of course, “interested” doesn’t mean committed.

October 18th: A note from Tom announced the trip was a go. Bev and I dilly-dallyed; June 5-13 required some rescheduling. Surely we had plenty of time to decide ...

October 23rd: Tom sent a note (“This is not, repeat not a sales pitch,” he said). The trip was almost full. End of the dilly-dally for us.

The trip brochure included a reading list. And a watching list. Tom suggested that, at minimum, we read The Normandy Diary of Marie Louise Osmont, and Antony Beevor’s D-Day. I also got John Keegan’s Second World War from the library. Osmont’s diary was delightful, exposing the daily grind of war and the reality that it is fought by ordinary people, not just generals. Beevor’s book was nearly encyclopedic, recording what must be a half-lifetime of research with no filter, reminding one of the old Joe Friday line, “Just the facts.” I started Keegan, whose other books I loved, when I was part way through Beevor. Keegan’s writing is much better, but compared to Beevor, more opinionated. Thinking I should go with just the facts, and considering the hundreds of other pages I needed to read in my life as a writer, I dropped Keegan. In retrospect, someone like me who has not studied the war in detail might have been better off with Keegan.

November: Tom's bibliography arrived—fifteen single-spaced pages. He said modestly, “It's a work in progress.” This seemed like standing on the 2/3 completed Khufu's pyramid and remarking that it is a work in progress. Oh, and anything we might be able to add would be much appreciated. I read through the list, having the same sinking feeling I remember so well from fifty-one years ago, when the sadists in the English department handed out the single page that stood between we majors and graduation: the comps list of works we might be tested on ... single-spaced, double-sided and ending with the chilling “and any other significant work in the English language after 1500.” (A paraphrase, but a close one).

June 5: Beverly and I flew overnight from Minneapolis to London. Uncomfortable, but not too bad until we hit Heathrow immigration. When I was traveling for work years ago, I always tried to avoid Heathrow. I chewed over this insipid observation as we moved slowly through the lines. An hour and a half later, we were on our way to the hotel. We were late arrivers, but were able to join the group at the Churchill War Museum. The museum itself, set up during the Blitzkreig as the nerve center of the British military, was impressive in so many ways. It had a homey feel, reminding us that we were entering a different era. Tom gave his first lecture, orienting us to the time ahead. He has the kind of in-depth knowledge... the facts, the twists, the dumb luck and the personalities... that make history interesting. Bruce Jolly, remarking at the end of the trip on Tom's presentations and his leadership, “Your knowledge of the Normandy invasion, your open personality, your enthusiasm, and your skill in delivery make you a great teacher and a great tour leader. You hit the perfect balance in speaking to all members of the group. If you ever lead another Dartmouth tour, please sign us up. I don't know if we would come along should you choose to storm a beach, but, even then, we might come pretty close to

joining you.” Indeed, Tom succeeded in capturing an action whose complexity strains the imagination: Two million men, hundreds of thousands of pieces of equipment, landings on five beaches and many behind-the-lines places, coordination between forces of several nations. Hard to capture it in a few days, even having read about it in advance, but Tom made the history live. Tom’s talk led to lively dinner conversation, and Keith and Wanda Young joined us that evening, traveling in from the London exurbs.

Ruth Polling (our guide in England) was quite wonderful. Being a guide in Britain means master’s-level education, and it shows. Ruth was knowledgeable about the subject matter, and about London. Even London traffic snarls provided the opportunity for interesting asides as we traveled (or not) between places. John David Kling, our tour manager, made the trip move along nicely. The duck-on-the-pond analogy seems appropriate ... we were able to glide smoothly over the various obstacles that happen in any trip because of furious, but usually invisible, paddling by John David.

June 6. Bletchley and *HMS Belfast*. A discussion on bus of the concept “war is deception” (Sun Tsu) introduced us to Bletchley Park, perhaps the most astounding aspect of the trip for me. The technology was impressive ... breaking the Enigma cipher machine with Alan Turing’s *Bombe*; later development of Colossus to decrypt German high command orders. *Bombe* was electro-mechanical computing at its most sophisticated, and Colossus was the first electronic computer. Ten thousand people worked to decrypt almost every German message; the impact on D-Day was immense, and historians figure that breaking the code shortened the war by as much as 2 years, saving nearly 20 million lives. The most astounding part, particularly in this day of

instant messaging and Facebook confessions, was that there was never a leak ... not even a hint ... of the operation until the government admitted its existence in 1974.

From Bletchley, we moved to *HMS Belfast*, anchored in the Thames, a light cruiser that supported the invasion. Since many of the tanks and artillery batteries planned to support the invasion didn't get to shore, the Navy presence was crucial to the invasion.

June 7. We traveled away from London toward Portsmouth, one of the several gateways to the invasion. Partway, we stopped at Southwick House, Ike's Headquarters for the Allied Expeditionary Force. We got a distinctly British presentation of the preparations for the battle. Interestingly, Lord Montgomery, who was apparently disliked by nearly everyone, came out as a brilliant guy and a hero in the British telling. It's easy to be awed by the complexity of the mission itself and lose the reality of the personalities and egos involved. Dozens of top-level military men, each with strong opinions, all wishing to lead. Makes one appreciate the genius of Eisenhower, whose ego never showed, but whose tenacity drew the whole thing together.

From Portsmouth, we followed the path many ships took to get to the beaches, though our trip was in a calm sea, unlike the 4-foot waves that swamped so many of the floating Sherman tanks and landing craft on D-Day. We arrived in Ouistreham, near Sword Beach. Then on to Bayeux, which was our center of operations for the rest of the trip. L'hotel d'Argouges was a lovely smaller hotel with fine grounds and comfortable rooms. Beverly and I discovered French economy in action when we find the bathroom light was motion sensitive ... no switch ... and came on at odd intervals.

June 8: The Normandy beaches are formed in part by the Cotentin Peninsula; thus, the five beaches where the landings took place are strung out more east-west than North-south. The three easternmost beaches, Sword, Juno and Gold were attacked by the British under Lord Montgomery. The two westernmost, Omaha and Utah, were the American beaches. On this day, we covered the British beaches with a trip to the German bunkers at Longues-sur-Mer, followed by the Musée du Mur de l'Atlantique. The museum is built in a German fire station commanding several batteries of guns on the coast. The process followed was impressive, well planned and complicated. The weakness: complex processes are easier to interrupt than simple ones. French partisans cut phone lines, forcing communication by Enigma, and ... see Bletchley, above.

After the museum, we went the short distance to Pegasus bridge. Readings and lectures so far have made clear the complexity of the project, the effects of weather, and the reality that nearly nothing went as planned. If the Allied effort was often chaotic, the Germans' reliance on Hitler delayed responses that could have changed the course of the invasion. And, of course, not knowing Enigma communications were being cracked almost in real time. Pegasus Bridge was a rare instance of success through perfect execution. Six gliders of British troops arrived shortly after midnight before the beach landings, ordered to control two important bridges. At Pegasus Bridge, the gliders landed in close order with the lead glider ending 45 yards from the bridge itself, and the British captured the bridge.

In the afternoon, we visited the British Military Cemetery at Ranville. We were to visit three cemeteries: British, German and American. All of them helped us understand the weight of sacrifice borne by the men and women who fought. In particular, the markers in British Cemetery bore epitaphs written by the families of the men buried there, giving the cemetery a feeling at once homey and poignant.

On the way back to the hotel for a lecture and a glass of wine, we passed the home of Marie Louise Osmont, whose charming diary of the groups of German, then British soldiers bivouacked in her home was a colorful part of our reading.

June 9: A day of museums and crypt-like German bunkers contrasted with the lovely farm country of Normandy. The countryside was virtually the definition of bucolic, in a good way. Green fields full of cows with a *je ne sais quoi* demeanor; a farmers market, stalls bursting with color. Hard to believe battles that cost thousands of lives were fought here. The buildings are mostly of stone, many look centuries old, many still pock-marked from the invasion. The rebuilt ones are in the same tradition of the older ones, an architectural comment on the steadfastness of the people. We started the day in Ste-Mere-Eglise, where many of the paratroopers of the 505th paratroop infantry landed, including the famous (ah, movies) Sergeant hung up on the steeple. There was a museum dedicated to the airborne war. The museums have been very good, particularly their short videos.

We visit La Fiere bridge, which was held against German counterattacks in a bloody engagement. We have read about many of the places and events in the Beevor book, but seeing the site of the skirmishes makes the extreme difficulty much easier to understand. A number of fellow travelers had military backgrounds and pointed out how the open, marshy land with only one road to the bridge would have been an almost impossible challenge for infantry battle.

We then passed to another excellent museum at Utah Beach. We traveled along the beach itself to where the Free French under Leclerc came ashore and to La Batterie d'Azeville, a major German shore installation. The building was carefully camouflaged with paintings of trees and shrubs. The workings of the guns required major staffs of soldiers and sophisticated organization, reminding us again of the importance of logistics to both the attackers and the

defenders. Back in Bayeux, we shared a dinner table with several other couples at a restaurant specializing in gallettes (Norman buckwheat crepes with, usually, savory fillings).

June 10: A day of many stops along the British Gold, Juno and Sword beaches. The first stop was the Mulberries at Gold Beach, which reminded us yet again that the landing and campaign was a triumph of engineering and technology as well as bravery. The Mulberries are enormous structures, great concrete and steel barges, really. They were made in England, dragged into place, then sunk to create two artificial harbors to facilitate landing the enormous quantities of supplies needed to support the campaign. The Gold Beach harbor still exists in part. The American mulberries at Omaha Beach were destroyed in the Great Storm, which hit the area June 19-22, 1944 and caused untold damage and delay.

We passed along Juno and Sword beaches, noting the German defenses. At strongpoint Cod, one of the formidable turrets was repurposed, postwar, into an apartment house. A modern window, curtained of course, graced the stolid concrete facing. The Normans are nothing if not sensible and practical.

Lunch was elegant in a country restaurant in Colleville Montgomery, a village named for the General. It has been proven several times over nearly all group meals that it's quite possible to serve thirty people something much, much better than rubber chicken, at least in Normandy. After lunch, we passed across Sword Beach to see Strongpoint Hillman. Another example of the engineering that played such an important role in the war on both sides. Hillman is a 50-acre space in which the Germans built a network of large underground bunkers. During the war, there were several thousand yards of open trenches connecting them. Though they are now filled in (Norman farmers are practical), the bunkers still exist. We were met by a delightful gentleman named Daniel, one of fifty volunteers who have cleared out, cleaned up and furnished the

bunkers the way they would have been during the war. Monsieur Daniel's French rendition of the story of Hillman is effusive, enthusiastic and most certainly detailed. Jerry D'Aquin masterfully translated M. Daniel's many words to a few well-chosen English ones. The Normans, who bore the brunt of the invasion ... villages and cities destroyed, thousands of non-combatants killed, herds of lovely French cows destroyed ... are the friendliest people you would want to meet and are to this day grateful for the sacrifices of the Brits and Americans.

In the evening, Tom gave us background on the invasion of England in 1066 and an introduction to the Bayeux tapestry. Interesting to remember that that invasion, like D-Day, was no certain thing. Harold Godwineson had beaten Vikings at Stamford, traveled 270 miles and reformed an army to meet William the Bastard. The battle was uncertain until Harold was mortally wounded, and the Bastard became the Conqueror.

June 11: On this day, we visit Pointe du Hoc, where American Rangers scaled a sheer 100+ ft. cliff to capture German artillery positions. The guns themselves were not in their emplacements; only dummy logs. Even now, after 70 years, Pointe du Hoc is covered with craters from bombing and shelling. Hard to imagine what serving in the German pillbox was like. Our next stop was La Cambe, the German war cemetery, so different from the British cemetery, where families of the fallen often wrote the epitaphs of their loved ones. The German cemetery often has groups of soldiers buried in one grave, often because they became indistinguishable in death. We then moved to the Battle of Normandy Memorial Museum, which had perhaps the best sequential view of the extraordinarily complex actions of the invasion.

The bus let us off for lunch and an afternoon viewing of the Bayeux tapestry. Beverly had the gollywobbles and went to lie down for a bit, allowing as how she could eat some simple soup. At the hotel desk, I asked whether such a soup might be available in one of the restaurants nearby. The desk clerk thought for a moment, gave a small Gallic shrug and picked up the phone. She sent me to a restaurant down the block, where the waitress says yes, the evening soup is prepared. Might I carry some out, I asked. Of course ... *Un moment* ... I sat to wait and watched the proprietor greet incoming guests and sip an aperitif. After several minutes, the waitress emerged from the back to have a conference with the proprietor, directions were given, and she returned to the kitchen. In due course she reappeared with two containers of soup and four small dishes with croutons, cream, sauce, and shredded cheese on a tray. "Follow, merci," she said, walked out the front of the restaurant and down the block to the hotel. At the gate, she handed me the tray. The hotel desk clerk, seeing me arrive, took the tray. Soon, the soup appeared, set out in the garden with silverware and napkins. Beverly ate, I ate, both of us grateful for being far, far removed from the McDonald's concept of carry-out.

Afternoon took us to a viewing of the Bayeux tapestry. It is an astounding piece, in many ways. Perhaps the first-ever documentary, enormous and detailed. Also an interesting experience with respect to business models, marketing and the impact of the Internet age. The tapestry is very popular, and the museum was crowded even this early in the tourist season. As the number of people has grown, the museum has begun using an audio tour that can't be paused or reversed, thus controlling the speed at which people must pass through the exhibit. You see it at flank speed; no time for reflection. The Internet age triumphs, no doubt.

June 12: Today was Omaha Beach. We visited several sectors of the beach. Seeing the hills that had to be climbed made the loss of life understandable. Most of the fortifications were taken from the back, after the soldiers made it up the draws. There has been so much discussion of the colossal mistakes forced by weather, current, dumb luck that it's easy to forget how difficult it would have been, even under good conditions, to secure Omaha beachhead. Standing in the place where so many died, looking up from the 100 yards of unprotected sand toward the now-peaceful hills, one realizes all of this in a flash. Hank Amon reminds us of the famous quote of Colonel George Taylor (U.S. 1st Infantry Division) when landing on Omaha Beach: "There are two kinds of people who are staying on this beach: those who are dead and those who are going to die. Now let's get the hell out of here."

We worked our way along Omaha, then arrived at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial Museum. Again, a wonderful sequential presentation of the campaign for those of us who had been confused by Beevor's detail. At 2:30 precisely, we lay a wreath at the memorial and stood to salute as the the Star Spangled Banner played. Then, into the cemetery ... long, perfectly symmetrical rows of gravestones bring order to the chaos the 22,000 American men who faced the hell of the landing and the following battles and gave their lives. Following the practice of Tom's class, we paused at the graves of each of the five Dartmouth men buried there. Tom brings humanity and meaning to his university class by encouraging each of the students on the trip to find the name a a person from his or her family or home town, research that person, and present a graveside eulogy. Ted Bracken took Tom's class this year. He began researching the five Dartmouth men in the cemetery and, as he said, it became like crack to a junkie. His biographies were extensive ... his bio of Fletcher Burton, a Coast Guard seaman, described both Burton's family life and the naval support of the landing as well or better than anything I had

read. His detailed biographies were the basis for five classmates' eulogies read by '65's who had served in the military. The eulogy for 2nd Lt. Edward T. Jenkins III, '34, was read by George Wittreich; PFC James R. Whitcomb, '38, by Mike Gonnerman; SSgt. James A. O'Hearn, Jr., '41, by Stu Keiller; 2nd Lt Richard Kersting, '42, by Weaver Gaines; and Seaman 1c. Fletcher Burton, Jr., by Ted Bracken. At each grave, readers followed a tradition of filling the incised letters of the marker with sand to make the names stand out, then read the eulogy and laid a single red rose. Finally, a Dartmouth song and a moment of silence followed. They meant resting there were ordinary men accomplishing the extraordinary. They wouldn't have said that. They would just have said they were doing their jobs or protecting their buddies. They did not speak in elevated language, just that they hoped the next day would be a good one, that they would get home to see wife and children, parents and friends. They wouldn't have called it sacrifice, but we knew that they made it possible, as Eisenhower said, for us to live in a free world, love our children and our grandchildren..