



ECHO BEACHES

THE NORMANDY BEACHES EXUDE A SOOTHING SENSE OF COASTAL CALM. BUT THEY STILL

TEXT ALAN HARPER PHOTOS GRAHAM SNOOK

If history could be rewritten, you would only read about the Baie de Seine in magazines like this. It is a good cruising ground. It has some pretty resort towns and excellent beaches. There are a few pleasant, yacht-friendly ports, and the whole area has a sheltered, north-facing aspect that shields the shore from the prevailing south-westerlies and offers a near-guarantee of reliably mild and favourable summer weather – unlike the rain-spattered coast that faces it across the English Channel. The coastal hinterland is famous for its

farming, for its pretty, rolling countryside and for its inimitable, world-renowned produce.

If history could be rewritten, and World War II had never been inflicted on this idyllic rural backwater, the name of Normandy would evoke nothing but vague notions of William the Conqueror and pleasant memories of seaside holidays, Calvados and Camembert.

But 20th-Century history marched all over Normandy in its size nines, and the scars are still there to prove it. You can read about the area in books and magazines of every persuasion, for the D-Day landings and subsequent battles have become, as one historian put it, the most written-about campaign since Waterloo.

It is 60 years this summer since the Allied armies opened their long-discussed 'second front' to assist the Russians in the east and hasten the end of the war in Europe. If the British had had their way, it would have been discussed for even longer, for Churchill was very nervous about the invasion. These days the Americans – with perhaps understandable absent-mindedness – tend to regard D-Day as something they did pretty much alone. And they can, in fact, take most of the credit for getting it on the agenda in 1944 – having (as they saw it) humoured the imperial-minded Brits with their African and Italian campaigns in the Med for quite long enough.

War and peace: the beach at St Aubin-sur-Mer today, and after a busy June morning 60 years ago.



BEAR THE SCARS AND EVOKE THE MEMORY OF THE BLOODY MORNING OF JUNE 6, 1944

The front that the Allied forces opened up on June 6, 1944, stretched 40 nautical miles from Madeleine beach on the Cotentin peninsula to Ouistreham at the mouth of the Caen Canal. Today many of the battlefields are accessible by boat, and with the help of a map and a bicycle all the important sites, and numerous monuments and museums, can be explored. The coastline is tidal and shallow, sandy in some places and rocky in others, but generally a good deal more benign for the approaching cruising boat today than it was for the overloaded landing craft of 60 years ago. If you choose to include St Vaast as the western limit of the cruising ground, there are seven havens in which to base your boat –

although only one, the ferry port of Ouistreham at the eastern extremity, is accessible at low tide.

Madeleine was not where the US 4th Infantry Division were aiming. The landing was intended to take place a mile to the north, but the tide pushed the landing craft southwards during their long transit from the ships to the shore. By great good luck they arrived at the most lightly defended sector of all the beaches, suffering fewer than 200 killed or wounded while putting over 20,000 men ashore. The beach that we now know as Utah, and the deserted sand dune shore are today almost exactly as the troops left them, with the remnants of two blockships visible just offshore and an excellent museum

built over the concrete remains of a German gun emplacement. The Îles San Marcouf, empty now as they were then, were among the first areas occupied on D-Day, American troops taking possession at 0430, two hours before the main force reached the beaches. The uninhabited islands had been mined: several men were killed.

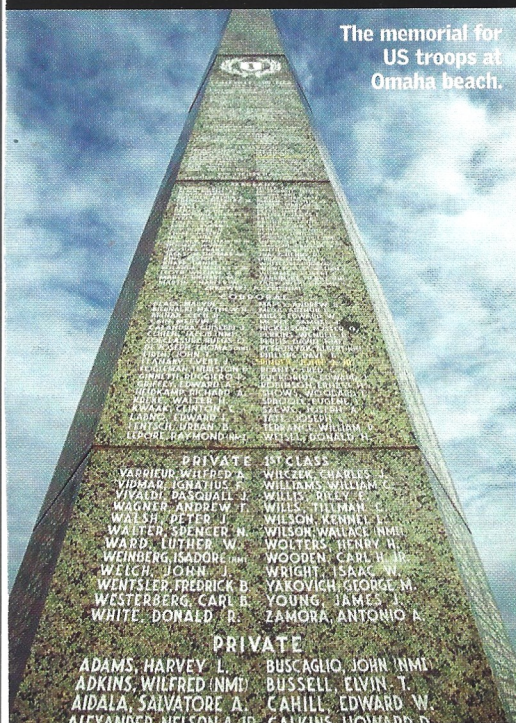
The second American landing zone, Omaha, lies on the other side of the Baie du Grand Vey, where buoyed channels among the sandbanks lead up to the inland ports of Carentan and Isigny. Both towns were badly damaged in the bombardment and the fighting. The advancing Americans took Isigny on June 9 and Carentan three days later.



Utah Beach Museum – built in an old German blockhouse.



Pointe du Hoc – as the 2nd US Rangers left it.



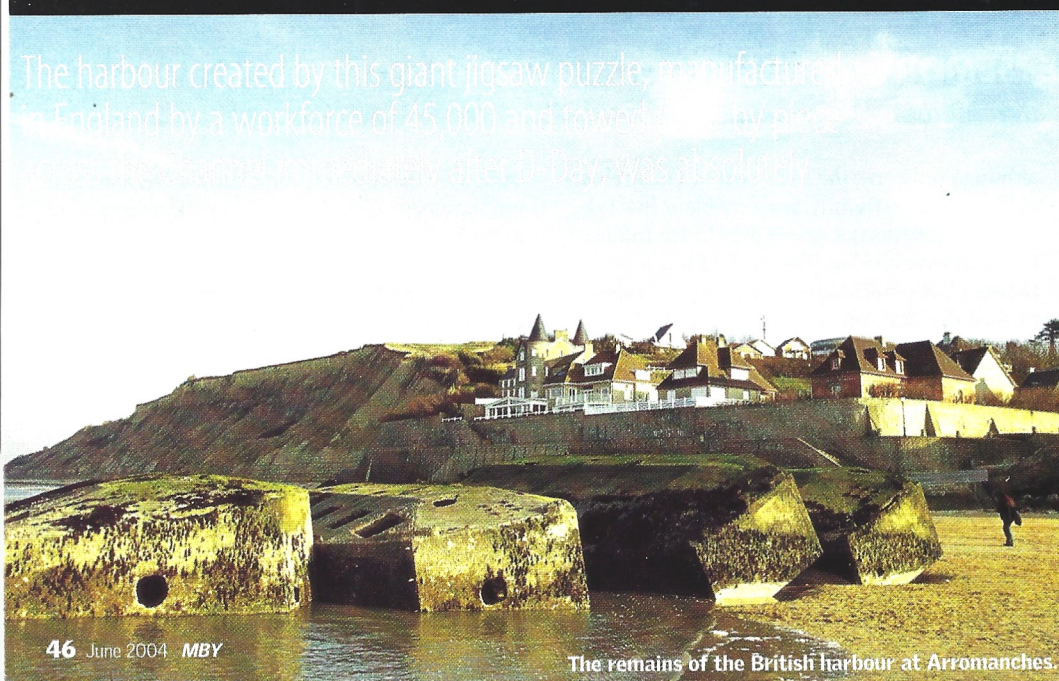
The memorial for US troops at Omaha beach.

On the high ground behind the port of Grandcamp, two German big-gun batteries with a range of 12 miles threatened both bay and beaches before being put out of action on the afternoon of June 6 by the cruiser HMS *Hawkins*. Grandcamp was heavily defended, but the Americans took it on June 9, and Bradley set up his 1st Army headquarters there.

Three miles along the coast from Grandcamp, the jagged headland of Point du Hoc was the scene of much heroic action on June 6 by an American special forces battalion, the 2nd Rangers. After scaling the 100ft (30m) cliffs with ropes, the 225 American soldiers took on 200 German defenders among the heavily fortified gun emplacements on the point, which aerial photographs had suggested would be a significant threat to the landings. Accurate bombardment from air and sea had caused severe damage, but still the defenders held out for two days, and the Rangers lost 135 men killed or wounded. When they finally overran the batteries, they found the guns were not

there. The site has been left untouched to this day, an eerie moonscape of bomb craters and shattered concrete. Normandy's principal German cemetery lies just inland at La Cambe and contains over 20,000 graves.

Both the topography and the experiences of the invading troops at Omaha beach, which stretched from Vierville to St Honorine, could not have been more different from those of Utah. The breeze, a north-westerly Force 3, had had little effect on the seas off Utah, but blowing over 15 miles of open water it kicked up a steep chop off Omaha, which made troops seasick and swamped many smaller landing craft and amphibious tanks. The steep-to shore above the broad strand was heavily defended by more German troops than the Americans had bargained for. A decision to cut short the preliminary naval and aerial bombardment proved to be a costly misjudgement, especially as American heavy bombers, hampered by cloud cover and fearful of hitting their own approaching troops, let their loads fall



The remains of the British harbour at Arromanches.



The American Cemetery at Colleville.



A big gun above Juno.

D-DAY FACTS AND FIGURES

The D-Day invasion was headed by General Eisenhower of the US Army as supreme commander, with Air Chief Marshall Tedder of the RAF as his deputy. The British Army's General Montgomery was Commander-in-Chief of land forces, while Air Chief Marshall Leigh-Mallory of the RAF and Admiral Ramsey of the Royal Navy took charge of air and sea operations. Two armies were landed on June 6, 1944: the US 1st Army, under Lt-General Bradley, and the British 2nd Army, which included Canadian and French troops, under Lt-General Dempsey.

Troops landed on June 6, 1944

Sword beach (3rd British Division) 28,845.
Juno beach (3rd Canadian Division) 21,400.
Gold beach (50th British Division) 24,970.
Omaha beach (1st US Division + 2nd US Rangers) 34,250.
Utah beach (4th US Division) 23,250.

Airborne (gliders and paratroops) on June 6, 1944

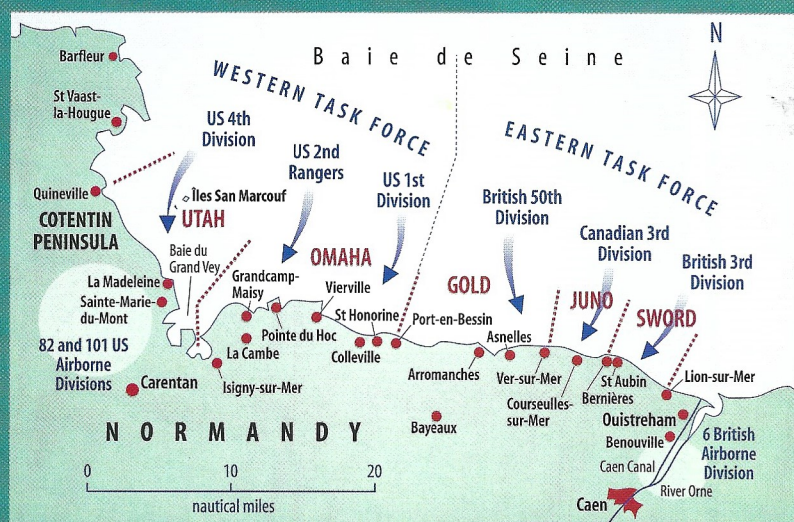
River Orne (6th British Airborne Division) 7,990.
Cotentin (82nd & 101st US Airborne Divisions) 15,500.

Naval forces on June 6, 1944

1,199 warships of all types (79% British, 16.5% US, 4.5% other allies)
4,000 landing craft of all types
441 auxiliary naval craft and small boats
864 merchant navy ships
300+ other small craft

Air forces on June 6, 1944

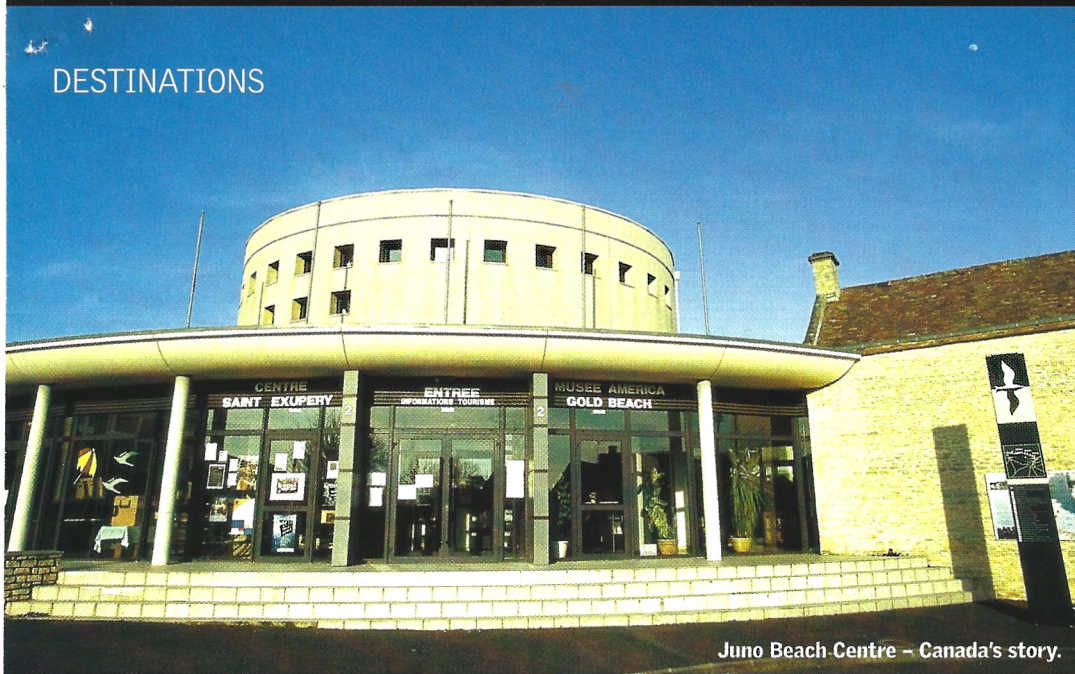
6,080 USAAF.
5,510 RAF and RCAF.
3,500 assault gliders.



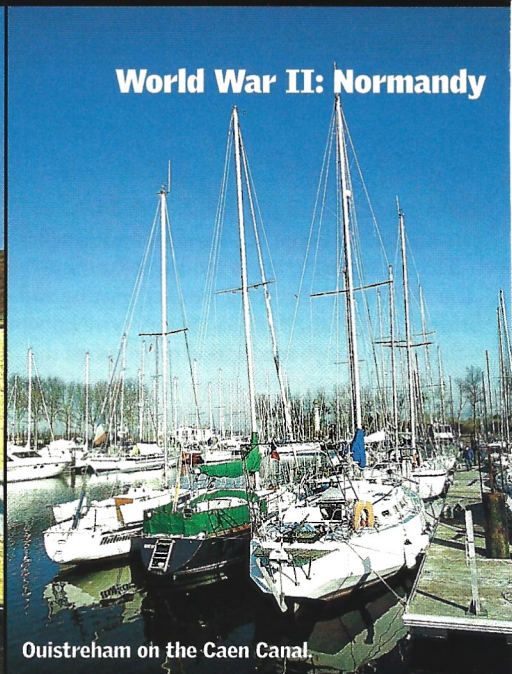
Between June 6, 1944 and the end of the Battle of Normandy in August, nearly 37,000 Allied troops lost their lives, plus over 16,000 aircrew. Exact German losses are unknown, but over 200,000 soldiers were killed or wounded. There are 27 military cemeteries in Normandy, holding more than 110,000 graves. Around 20,000 French civilians were killed, mainly by Allied bombing.



Isigny-sur-Mer has drying pontoon berths



Juno Beach Centre – Canada's story.



Ouistreham on the Caen Canal.

RECOMMENDED READING

There are hundreds of books about D-Day, as a trip to any half-decent bookshop will confirm, especially in this 60th anniversary year. A very good, short, basic and cheap primer is Pitkin's *D-Day and the Battle of Normandy* (ISBN 0-85372-682-5, £3.50). The redoubtable Max Hastings' *Overlord* (Pan, ISBN 0330390120, £7.99) remains perhaps the best standard work on the invasion and the Normandy campaign. For a more American perspective, *Band of Brothers* author Stephen Ambrose can be relied upon to raise British (and Canadian) hackles with his *D-Day – the Battle for the Normandy Beaches* (Pocket Books, ISBN 0743449746, £8.99). An invaluable aid to the D-Day tourist on the ground would be Yves Lecouturier's *The Beaches of the D-Day Landings* (Editions Ouest-France, ISBN 2-7373-2388-6, €15.00), a well-translated town-by-town guide to the region explaining each place's role in the events of 1944. Its French perspective also provides a useful counterpoint to the usual British or American-biased offerings.

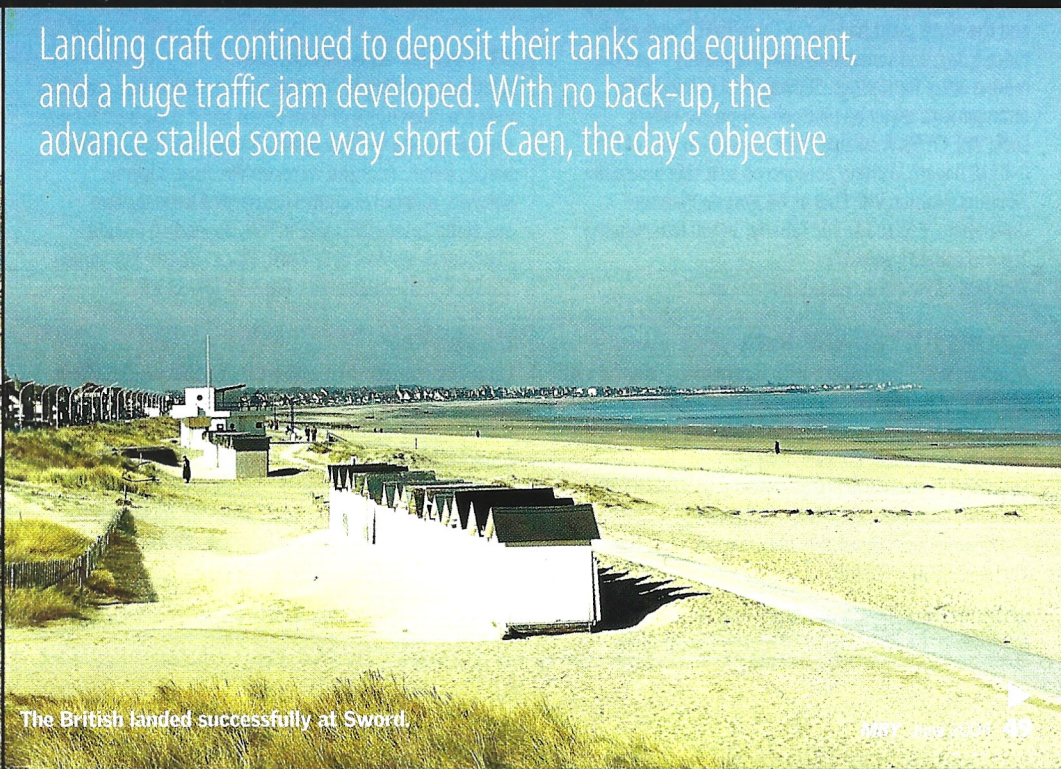
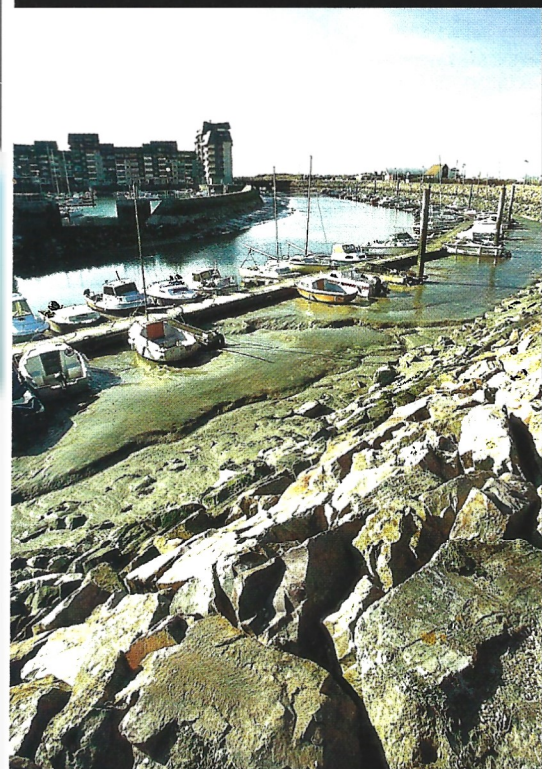
harmlessly too far inland. Soldiers spent hours pinned down among the mined obstacles on the beach, and casualties were heavy. For a while Bradley considered evacuating the beach, but very slowly and with a supreme effort of will the troops fought their way inland and up the sandy bluffs to take on the German gun emplacements, whose shattered remains still watch over the scene today. By the evening of June 6 the Americans were just over one mile inland, when the original objective had been six. At the top of one of the first hills to be taken lies the American cemetery at Colleville.

Off Vierville the remains of the American 'Mulberry' artificial harbour can be seen at low tide. This was assembled over about a fortnight from June 7, but then destroyed in the 'storm' – actually no more than a Force 6, but destructive enough – of June 19-22. The British harbour at Arromanches, on the edge of the British landing zone, fared somewhat better, and large pieces remain to this day, like scattered concrete

dominoes, which can still serve as a relatively sheltered anchorage in fine weather. The harbour created by this giant jigsaw puzzle, manufactured in England by a workforce of 45,000 and towed piece by piece across the Channel immediately after D-Day, was absolutely massive – about the size of Dover's. In the three months after the landings some 2.5 million men, 500,000 vehicles and four million tons of equipment were disembarked there. The Americans, meanwhile, did equally well by unloading ships directly onto the beach.

The American and British sectors met at Port-en-Bessin, which was liberated by British commandos on June 8 and began operating as a supply port a week later, taking in 1,000 tons of gear every day. The westernmost British landings were some miles further down the coast on the other side of Arromanches, on the beach code-named Gold. Heavy gun batteries up the hill above Longues-sur-Mer and under Mont Fleury castle were put out of action by RAF bombs and

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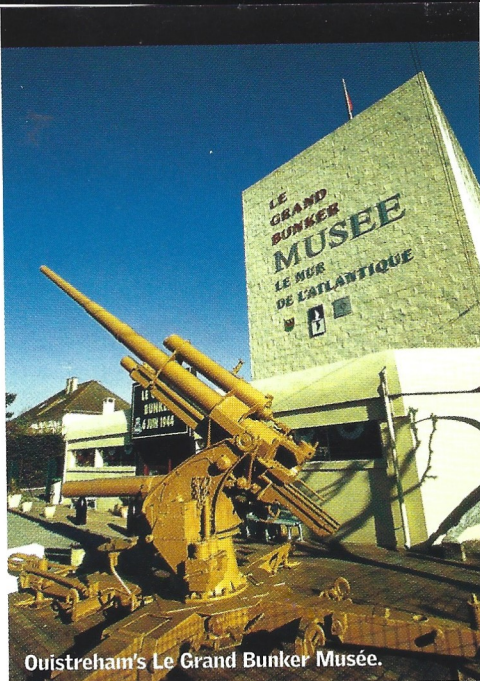
The British landed successfully at Sword.

DESTINATIONS

naval gunfire, while the British 50th Division came ashore between Ver-sur-Mer and Asnelles.

Thanks in part to tanks modified for mine clearance, flame-throwing, bunker-busting and bridge-laying – the ‘funnies’, as they were known – the Allied troops made good progress off the beach. By mid-morning most German defences had been dealt with, and the troops were beginning their move inland towards the day’s objectives, which included Caen and Bayeux and the main road between them.

It was different story just a mile or two to the east, where the Canadians were landing on Juno beach from 0745. The incoming tide covered many of the mined beach obstacles that damaged or sank 20 of the leading 24 landing craft. Most of the ‘swimming’ duplex-drive (DD) tanks made it to the beach, but behind the infantry they were supposed to protect. The assault troops below Bernières suffered 50% casualties in the first 100yds of the beach. St Aubin took three hours to clear of defenders and street fighting in Courseulles went on for most of the day. But by the end of D-Day the Canadians had fought their way inland and joined up with the British from Gold. A DD tank stands as a memorial in the square at Courseulles, and the Juno Beach Centre in the dunes west of the harbour entrance tells the story of the Canada’s war.



Ouistreham's Le Grand Bunker Musée.

The easternmost beach, Sword, extends between the resort town of Lion-sur-Mer and the ferry port of Ouistreham. Here things went surprisingly well for the British at first. Troops and equipment landed on time, from 0725, and mostly in the right order. Mine-clearing tanks advanced up the beach and the DDs often survived their swim. Then as troops started to move inland the tide rose higher than predicted thanks to recent storms, reducing the width of the beach in many places by midday to just 30ft (9m) instead of the usual 30yds. Landing craft continued to deposit their tanks and equipment,

and a huge traffic jam developed. With no back-up, the advance stalled some way short of Caen, the day’s objective. A link-up was achieved with the paratroops that had secured the bridges over the Orne and the Caen Canal in the early hours, but attempts westwards to join with the Canadians were halted by German tanks.

By midnight, though, it was clear that the landings had been a success. Allied troops had penetrated up to six miles inland in the eastern sector and over a mile in the west. On June 10 the front would stretch in an unbroken line from just south of St Vaast to the high ground on the east side of the Orne, and penetrate up to eight miles inland. This was just the beginning: the battle for Normandy would rage for weeks.

Given time, history is rewritten. Momentous events, so significant to survivors and the generations that grow up at their feet, become overlaid with the passing centuries like geological strata. When the story of D-Day is known only to historians, and the name of Normandy only invokes images of beach holidays, the scars will remain. The cratered clifftops and concrete ruins will last as long as the Pyramids – and when, a thousand years from now, those who gaze on them know as little about us and our times as we do of Ancient Egypt, they will still speak silently of heroism and horror. **MBY**

D-DAY NAVIGATOR

OUISTREHAM

The ferry port from Portsmouth, at the mouth of the River Orne and the Canal de Caen, which runs parallel to it. The Orne itself is broad and tidal, with a small-boat slip and yacht harbour just inside the estuary, on the east bank. The main marina is in the canal, a short way upstream of the ferry port and through one of a pair of ship-sized locks. Three lifting bridges (one of them the successor to the famous ‘Pegasus’ bridge at Benouville) lie between here and the small yacht harbour in Caen itself. These open twice a day, and sometimes more frequently – see the marina office for timings. Slipway, fuel deliveries by arrangement, water on pontoons, showers, toilets. Lock: VHF Ch 68. Available three hours each side of HW (–0118 Dover). Waiting pontoon on east side accessible 24 hours. Marina: VHF Ch 9 or 74. Port de Plaisance Ouistreham, Esplanade Eric Tabarly, 14150 Ouistreham. Tel: +33 (0)231 969137. Website: www.ouistreham-plaisance.com

COURSEULLES-SUR-MER

A packed small-boat haven with two marinas, but the only one with places for visitors (just 20) is straight down the *avant port* to the end, through the lock and swing-bridge. Water on pontoons, showers, toilets. Lock: port control on VHF Ch 9 or tel: +33 (0)233 74603. Available two hours each side of HW (–0145 Dover). La Capitainerie, Quai Ouest, 14470 Courseulles-sur-Mer. Tel: +33 (0)231 375169.

GRANDCAMP-MAISY

Large fishing harbour in a locked basin with yacht pontoons (ten visitors’ berths) and a couple of fish restaurants. Water on pontoons, fuel on quay, slipway, showers, toilets. Lock gate operates 2½ hours each side of HW (–0220 Dover). Contact lock-keeper on VHF Ch 9 or tel: +33 (0)231 217177. Bureau du Port de Plaisance, Quai du Petit Nice, 14450 Grandcamp Maisy. Tel: +33 (0)2 31 226316.

ST VAAST-LA-HOUGUE

A famous yachting haven, not really on the D-Day coast but only ten miles north of Utah Beach and a good base for day trips, assuming the tide serves. Handy, too, for Cherbourg and its ferries. Fuel and water on the quay, slipway, showers, toilets. Lock gates are opened between two and three hours either side of HW, depending on tide. Capitainerie du Port de St Vaast, Place Auguste Contamine, 50550 St Vaast-la-Hougue. Tel: +33 (0)233 236100.

CARENTAN

Large commercial town with a comfortable yacht harbour in a capacious, locked canal basin some five miles inland from the sea. Approach two hours either side of HW (–0225 Dover) assuming you draw no more than 5ft (1.5m). Water and fuel on the quay, showers, toilets. Lock operates from two hours before to three hours after HW, on VHF Ch 9 or Tel: +33 (0)233 711085. Port Carentan, BP 450, 50500 Carentan. Tel: +33 (0)233 422444.

PORT-EN-BESSIN

An appealing and busy fishing port with an extensive drying outer harbour and large locked basin, a big boatyard and fish market at the far end, and a reasonable collection of cafes and restaurants to make the visiting yachtsman feel at home. No marina, but pontoons along the stone walls make berthing less of an adventure than it would otherwise be. Water on quay, slipway. Lock open for two hours each side of HW (–0215 Dover). Obey traffic signals. Small boats may be able to squeeze under the swing-bridge. Otherwise contact lock-keeper on VHF Ch 18 or tel: +33 (0)231 217177 for advice on opening times. La Capitainerie, Quai de la Créée, 14520 Port-en-Bessin. Tel: +33 (0)231 217049.

ISIGNY-SUR-MER

Pretty little town some five miles inland up the tidal river Vire. If your draught is less than about 6ft (1.8m) approach at HW (–0225 Dover) and be prepared to take the ground at LW, on one of 60 berths alongside pontoons and the fairly uninviting quay wall. Fuel and water at the boatyard on the quay. Miquelot Marine, Quai Neuf, 14230 Isigny-sur-Mer. Tel: +33 (0)231 221067.

CHARTS AND PILOTS

Tom Cunliffe’s *The Shell Channel Pilot* (Imray, ISBN 0 85288 598-9, £29.95) is very sound on this part of the coast, and pretty up to date. British Admiralty charts: 1349, 2135, 2136, 2613. French SHOM: 7090, 6864, 7056, 7120, 7420, 6874, 7421, 7418. Imray: C32. Stanfords: 1, 7, 21.

BOOKS! CHARTS! LOTS OF THEM!

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