

Pilgrimage to Normandy

by Mollie Day,

youngest sister of the late Bob Palmer of the Essex Yeomanry,
a Sergeant on D-day



As everyone knows D-day, 6th June this year, marked the 60th anniversary of the biggest military task ever undertaken. My friend Sheelah and I were privileged to visit Gold Beach in Normandy with a coach party of Essex Yeomanry veterans who had landed at Le Hamel (Asnelles sur Mer) early on that day. I very much wished to go as my dear brother, formerly Sergeant Bob Palmer, had been part of that campaign and had wanted to return this time, but unfortunately he died suddenly last year. He always valued reunions very much and now having met some of his former comrades, both officers and men, I can fully understand why. There was such warmth of feeling between them all, each having a story to tell with their own memories, experiences and good fortune, to get through this conflict, and now returning again in their 70's and 80's.

Of course I already knew the story of the important part my brother and his crew played on D-day, being told it was imperative he knocked out this big 88mm German gun emplacement, situated just off Gold Beach at Le Hamel, which had already successfully put 6 Sherwood Ranger tanks out of action. My brother's unit (511 battery in 147th Essex Yeomanry Field Regiment) was fortunate in doing this with the second shot from his 25 pounder sixteen self propelled gun mounted on a Sherman tank. The layer, Don Sadler, who actually fired the fatal shot, was in the group with us.

Don said they stopped and fired about 300 yards distance from the Germans. Also others remembered what was said to my brother, and I also recalled my brother's words, "It was very much a team effort and from D-day onwards every day was a bonus". Their action enabled a way forward to be made and the road they made later was renamed Yeomanry Road. They also knocked out two fortified houses and a total of 28 German prisoners were taken from this combined action with the blockhouse being eliminated.

As the sergeant in charge, Bob was awarded the Military Medal and decorated by General Montgomery a few weeks later, at Jerusalem in Normandy. The former blockhouse has now become the memorial for the Essex Yeomanry. At a small ceremony a wreath was laid there, by Don Sadler, in the presence of the Duke of Kent on the 6th June, after our attendance at the Bayeux cemetery service with President Chirac and our Queen in attendance. How smart our veterans were, waiting in anticipation for the service to begin!

This was a very beautiful service with dignitaries from all over the world paying tribute to all those many people that had died in the conflict. It is the biggest cemetery for British soldiers in Normandy. The hymns were very apt "Onward Christian Soldiers", "I vow to thee my country" and "Now Thank We All Our God". Prayers for peace were also emphasised. The weather was kind to us - in fact very hot. One veteran in our group needed to go to hospital as we had a very long wait and it was too much for him. He missed the Essex Yeomanry celebrations that day which was a great shame.

We stayed together at a nearby college close to the cemetery in Bayeux for several days, so Sheelah and I also had the opportunity to visit the town and see the famous Bayeux tapestry

All Saints Alive

made 900 years ago, telling the history of the Norman conquest. Bayeux was the first town to be liberated by the British in 1944. The town was in festive mood, with flags and bunting everywhere. Many Second World War songs were being played in the streets and everywhere there was a great feeling of joy and peace between people of all nationalities. To me it felt like the V.E. day celebrations. I was only 12 then, but it always made a lasting impression on me.

Then Major General Tony Richardson of the Essex Yeomanry, who had kindly organised everything for us, gave very interesting accounts from first hand knowledge, of various military operations that had taken place in Normandy in those early days of combat. We went down many lanes of quiet beauty only to be told where so much opposition had been met. All veterans seemed to recall the bitter and serious conflict at Hill 103. It was hard to imagine the bombardments and loss of life or injury at what are now such pleasant rural beauty spots. Of course some members in the group added their experiences to what Tony Richardson said when they had been personally involved and told of their narrow escapes.

Looking at the vast Normandy beach at Le Hamel where the Essex Yeomanry and other soldiers had landed 60 years ago then, on this commemorative day finding it full of well-wishers almost in party spirit, contrasted with the following day. When we revisited it, few were there except our group. This second visit gave us time to view and inspect the importance of all that had happened there. What huge suffering there must have been 60 years ago. I noticed several old soldiers walking along the beach, and I am sure reliving their own personal private memories. One or two gathered sand or stones to take home as souvenirs to their grandchildren. I will always remember their looks of wonder to still be able to be back there. Yet there must also be great sorrow too in their hearts, thinking of their friends killed or injured in Normandy, or how scared they must have been at that time.

We also attended several small ceremonies at different memorials, and when asked, our Essex

Yeomanry veterans took part in a smart and dignified march past. Everything was carried out with great solemnity and the dead were respectfully remembered. Several people laid crosses at personal graves of former colleagues. It was good to see these graves so well cared for and still honoured.

The Mayor at Asnelles sur Mer also made a speech on this 60th D-day anniversary and handed each veteran a special badge with their individual names on them. He later invited us all to a meal in the gardens nearby where a band was playing. It was a very pleasant ending to a very eventful day.

Throughout all these various events most people wanted to say something about the past, and how they now felt. I was lucky, at one point, to talk to our poet laureate, Andrew Motion, who had accompanied his father, a captain in the Essex Yeomanry on D-day, so he was valuing the important part his parent had played.

On top of being with these worthy veterans, who had readily accepted us both and called us "the girls" and our enjoyment of their banter, we also quite by chance met a French mother and her two daughters. The mother had lived through the German occupation near Bayeux and well remembered being liberated by our British soldiers. The family invited us into their home on our last night in France. They expressed deep friendship and love for the British. Long may this warmth of friendship continue to flourish, so what our military forces achieved is never lost. forgotten or obliterated.

