Bonjour - Welcome to France!

Let me show you my personal photos and share my knowledge of D-Day and WWII. I spent a week splitting time in Paris and Normandy with a small class from Eastern Michigan University to study this cataclysmic and climatic event. It was a major turning point for not only the outcome of WWII but all of world history. The next frame will show some of the sites I visited in Normandy and a map so you can place them as you go along.
Eastern Michigan University
Operation Overlord: D-Day and Beyond

- Paris
- Bayeux
- Utah Beach
- Pointe du Hoc
- Sainte Mere Eglise
- Chef du Pont
- Omaha Beach

THE INVASION BEACHES

Statue in the Normandy Cemetery, Colleville - sur - Mer
Utah Beach

Utah was one of five beaches named for the invasion by the Allies on June 6th, 1944. Utah and Omaha were the American invasion beaches. Walking on the beaches today you will find sand, seashells and shale stones. You will also see remnants of Hitler’s Atlantic Wall and maybe even find pieces of barbed wire. German general Erwin Rommel was assigned the task of constructing the wall as well as placing mines and other obstacles on and around the beaches.
Paul Woodage, our guide and Normandy expert draws a diagram in the sand on Utah Beach.

**Invasion Plans**

The squares in the diagram represent Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP) or Higgins Boats coming ashore to unload the men. Because of strong currents and choppy water many boats were set off course further down the beach than where they were supposed to land. It turned out helpful as it avoided a large gun emplacement and concentration of German troops. Once on the beach, General Theodore Roosevelt Jr. exclaimed, “We’ll start the war from right here.” He was later killed and is buried at Colleville sur Mer above Omaha Beach. He was awarded the Medal of Honor.
Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel (LCVP)

Into the Jaws of Death: This famous photograph taken on D-Day by Robert F. Sargent vividly shows men of the 1st Infantry exiting a Landing Craft at Omaha Beach. Also known as the Higgins Boat after its creator, about 5,000 were used to bring men ashore in separate waves on all five invasion beaches. As the ramp door opens about 30 men jump into cold, waist deep water or deeper carrying a 60 lb. backpack and 20 lb. rifle and other equipment. In the background is the beach the men must get up peppered with obstacles and heavy German machine gun, artillery and mortar fire from the bluffs above. Many men met death in the water and on the beach that day for the ultimate sacrifice.

For a short video on the landing click on the picture.
The Atlantic Wall

Hitler's army, under the supervision of Erwin Rommel, poured millions of tons of concrete and built hundreds of these gun boxes called pill boxes. The French coast became a fortress to defend against an invasion and repel the Allied troops. This one is on the bluff of Utah Beach overlooking the English Channel.
Imagine American landing craft coming ashore to unload thousands of men. A large gun would be pointing outward to shoot and blow any craft and men from the water. It makes for a nice picture window view today.
Beach Obstacles

**Belgian Gate**
Many of this type of obstacle was placed on the beaches and prevented tanks and equipment from moving forward. Special demolition teams were trained to blow holes through them and create a pathway up the beach.

**Tetrahedon**
This obstacle was either concrete or steel and had a mine fastened to the top. Any landing craft that moved over it at high tide would be blown up along with the men inside.
The Hedgehog

One of the most popular and widely used obstacle was the Hedgehog. Thousands of these were made by criss - crossing and welding or riveting steel together. A close look shows that they have “teeth” cut into them. At high tide landing craft would have their hulls torn or ripped open causing them to sink. At low tide men going up the beach were known to take cover behind them. This was extremely dangerous and left men vulnerable as they took on gun fire from Germans above the beach. It was best the men kept moving forward even in the face of heavy gun fire or they would face certain death.
Imagine this beach with Hedgehogs, Belgian Gates, Tetrahedon’s, and telephone poll type posts tipped with mines, along with boats, tanks and hundreds of soldiers wading and running ashore.

All day long men were crying and dying. It took 18 hours to finally secure Omaha for the allies and start moving equipment inland. At low tide it is 300 yards long.

Rommel looking over the dunes toward the water inspecting the fortifications at Normandy.
This iconic photograph was taken by Life Magazine’s Robert Capa. He was the only still photographer to wade ashore with the 34,250 men at Omaha Beach. Twenty two year old Huston Riley had his landing craft shelled by Nazi guns on the bluff at which point he jumped into the deep surf and held his breath under water. Struck several times by gunfire it took him a half hour to reach the shore as he saw his friends and fellow soldiers being killed around him. Of the photos that Capra took and could be developed they came out in this grainy look. To find out more about Robert Capa click on the picture.
The 29th National Guard or Blue and Grey Division was assigned this section of beach to invade and take out German guns and troops.

**Saving Private Ryan**

With a beach town in the background, this gun box now serves as a memorial honoring the 29th Blue and Grey Division made famous by the movie Saving Private Ryan. Walking down the path on the left an elderly Frenchman heard a classmate and I talking. He was very appreciative of Americans. Even though we were not alive during WWII he continued to thank us for freeing their country from the Nazis and Hitler’s reign of terror. It was a truly humbling moment for us. It makes one stop and think deeper about the sacred and hallowed ground here and the importance of D-Day. These men did not sacrifice their lives for nothing and did not die in vain.
Shale Stones on Omaha

Would you hide behind these? Soldiers, if they made it 300 yards past obstacles, German artillery, mortar and machine gun fire, found this as their last place of cover before getting off the beach. Many were pinned down by German guns being too sacred to move forward up the bluff to complete their mission.

The Big Red One or 1st Division was assigned this section of beach to invade and take out German guns and troops.

M1 Helmet
A Crescent Shaped Beach

German artillery, mortars and machine guns reigned fire down upon the beach blowing landing craft or Higgins Boats to shreds as well as troops trapped on the beach. Five miles in length its crescent shape made it possible for Germans to fire down the length of the beach from both ends using enfilading fire to maximum advantage. Although not visible, down below is the shale stone some men of the 1st Division hid behind. At the far end (west) is were the Blue and Grey Division invaded. On D-Day there were thousands of allied ships out in the water.

Above: This view is from the same spot except it is on June 6th -7th, 1944.

A Tobruk: Built by the Germans to either fire mortars down onto the beach or fix machine guns. Underneath are tunnels to crawl through.
This beautiful cemetery overlooks Omaha Beach in Colleville Sur Mer. There are about 10,000 Americans buried here. It was gifted to the United States in 1956 as appreciation for helping to liberate France from Hitler and the Nazi’s and preserving freedom for millions of oppressed people throughout Europe. A visitor to the cemetery must be checked and passed though customs as it is United States soil. The grave markers are measured precisely so that they will have a uniform pattern from all views. It is a somber feeling to walk through this cemetery when knowing and understanding history. Stars of David are on two markers above. A telling symbol underscoring these soldiers sacrifice for freedom when contemplating the events of the Holocaust.
Jimmie W. Monteith is just one of thousands of soldiers who sacrificed their life for freedom on D-Day. He was killed in a farm field above and just past the bluffs of Omaha Beach were I was sitting in the tobruk. With quick thinking, bravery and courage, he climbed the high bluffs of Omaha as he was being fired upon by German guns. Before he was killed he took out the guns using hand grenades, his rifle and pistol. He saved many lives for his heroic actions and was important in allowing the invasion of Omaha to be successful. Please remember him and all of the others who fought for our freedoms we enjoy today. All Medal of Honor recipients have gold lettering on their grave marker.
German Cemetery in France
Grave stones of Nazi soldiers

The German cemetery in France is run and cared for by the French government although funding it is difficult. A careful look will show that flowers, cards, flags, photographs and other tokens are placed by the graves by admiring visitors. The top stone is for Michael Wittmann a highly decorated German Waffen -SS Panzer tank commander. He was a devoted Nazi to Hitler’s cause including his anti –Semitic views. A telling and sad sign that Hitler and his ideas are still held in high regard even today.
The Rangers of Pointe du Hoc

Pointe du Hoc is between Utah and Omaha Beaches. This is a view of Pointe du Hoc and cliffs looking west from Omaha Beach. Utah Beach is past the point and to the left. It was determined that massive German artillery guns were situated above the 100 foot cliffs. Germans were to fire these guns down on both Utah and Omaha taking out landing craft in the water and men on the beach. Continue for a closer view of the point. Recruited for this mission were specially trained Rangers to take out these guns.
At Pointe du Hoc

Specially trained soldiers called Rangers were to land here from Higgins boats. **Their mission:** Scale the 100 ft. cliffs to take out the German guns. Do this under heavy gunfire and stick grenades tossed down on them. To climb up they used specially designed ladders and grappling hooks attached to ropes as well as free climbing. Sound easy? After the battle, of 225 Rangers only 92 survived. That is about a 40% survival rate. As it turned out the German guns were not even there. Still, the Rangers were a very important part of D-Day.
German Defenses at Pointe du Hoc

Tobruk

Gun Box / Pill Box
Can we have class outside?

Yes. A classroom lecture held “inside” a circular gun emplacement given by Paul Woodage. On D-Day the Rangers found out the Germans had moved the guns about a mile back into an apple orchard. But it was not until they reached the top and started fighting their way inland did they learn this. The English Channel and the Pointe du Hoc Memorial is visible in the background.
Can you hear me up there!?

Bomber planes dropped tons of bombs before the Rangers went to work. The bombs were to destroy as much as possible to give the Rangers a better chance for success. This is one of many craters made from the bombing runs.

As it looks today from an aerial view

A German gun box in the distance
Evidence of German Construction and Destruction at Pointe Du Hoc

Aerial bombardment in the early hours of D-Day decimated the gun emplacements atop Point du Hoc.

Bags of cement left behind by German construction crews that have hardened over time.
Pointe du Hoc Memorial

This memorial sits atop the Point to remember and honor the Rangers for their valor on June 6th, 1944.

President Ronald Reagan gave one of his most famous speeches here on the 40th Anniversary of D-Day. It was the year 1984.

Click the on the memorial to listen to and watch President Reagan give this important speech.
General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces was responsible for the planning and execution of D-Day. Above he is seen inspecting and motivating paratroopers of the 101st Airborne. He is well respected among the men. A close look at the picture reveals men with painted faces and uniforms with many pouches and pockets filled with equipment. Helmets are painted with unique marks signifying the company they belong to.
Airborne Museum – Sainte Mere Eglise

Paratroopers get ready under the wing of a C-47 Transport Plane. The plane used to fly over Normandy for the paratroop drop. Black and white invasion stripes are painted on the wings to show they are allied planes. Paratrooper equipment is laid out around them as they get ready. The men have shaved Mohawk haircuts and are painting their face in the tradition of Indian or Native American warriors.
Early in the morning thousands of paratroopers were dropped in the French countryside to secure roads, bridges and rails so Germans could not use them. Hundreds landed by accident into small towns and were shot by Germans in the air and on the ground. These highly trained and elite men were the first to enter France in the early hours of D-Day. Above is an ancient medieval church in the town of St. Mere Eglise. Many towns in Normandy have similar churches. If you look carefully you will notice something caught hanging atop the church.
In honor and remembrance

In the town of St. Mere Eglise a figure of a paratrooper is permanently hung from the church to honor the men who helped free the town from Nazi occupation.

The real soldier was shot and wounded but survived hiding up in the bell tower.

For a movie version of the paratrooper landing on the church and getting caught click the picture.

The clip is from the movie the Longest Day and is considered a classic about the invasion of Normandy.
Paratroopers were scattered all over as most did not land where they were supposed to. Germans flooded areas behind the beaches and many drowned in the water when they landed. The bridge and road was a site of intense fighting between German troops and tanks and American paratroopers using rifle, machine gun, and bazooka rocket fire. Several American paratroopers stood their ground and fought till their death at the edge of the bridge. This prevented Germans from moving closer to the beaches on D-Day.
Evidence of fighting in Norman towns

A bullet lodged into a post that surrounds a church cemetery. A bullet that hit and dented a fence post next to a sidewalk and street.

These battle scars are left for those to remember the liberation of France from German occupation.
**Paratrooper Medics** - In a small Norman church, medics from the 82nd and 101st Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) worked around the clock tending to wounded and dying men including German soldiers.

A blood stained pew in the church is kept as is to remember the events of D-Day.

A stained glass window honoring troops of the 82nd is part of the church today.
The Hedgerows

German soldiers used Hedgerows as conceal and cover when shooting at American troops moving off the beach and into the Norman countryside. As you notice they are high banked earth works. For centuries French farmers piled brush, tree stumps, rocks and dirt to section off plots of farm land and to keep cows and other livestock from wandering. These were the obstacles soldiers had to get through once off the beaches. It was a very difficult and challenging task for men and battle tanks to cut and slice through.
The D-Day Academy is where WWII vehicles are still operational and can be driven. Front and center is a Wiley’s Jeep an iconic vehicle of WWII. On the top left is a Deuce and a half transport. At top right is a half–track with machine a gun mounted in it. Other vehicles plus weapons of WWII are available to look at and handle.
Weapons of D-Day and WWII

The German MG 42 machine gun was a feared, widely used and incredibly effective gun. Placed in machine gun nests it shot down on the beaches as part of the Atlantic Wall.

The American Thompson machine gun used by some paratroopers.

An American “grease gun” was another machine gun used by troops in WWII along with other assorted weapons of war.
My D-Day Class

Standing in front of a Hedgerow
EMU students, the professor and his wife, and D-Day Tour Guide Paul Woodage on the right
Questions and Notes

1) Identify and list the code names of the five beaches. Which two were used by Americans to invade France? What region of France where these beaches located? What was the date?

2) What was the name of the Landing Craft (LCVP) used to get men ashore? Approximately how many men did each hold?

3) What was the name of Hitler’s cement fortress guarding the coast of France? Name at least three obstacles used on the beaches to slow down the invasion. Which one was most used?

4) Who was the photographer of the soldier wading ashore? What made his picture(s) so memorable? How does it show/tell about the challenges the men faced?

5) Describe the geography of Omaha Beach. What made it so deadly for men trying to secure it? How long did it take? Who had the advantage - Germans or the Allies?

6) Where is the Normandy Cemetery located specifically? About how many are buried there?

7) What were the Rangers trained for? Did they accomplish their mission? Why or why not?

8) Name the president who gave a speech at Pointe du Hoc? What was the speech about?

9) Who was the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces? What was he responsible for?

10) What where the names of the two parachute regiments? Besides jumping out of airplanes what was their mission? Compare them to the Rangers and the soldiers on the beaches. Who in your view had a more challenging mission? Why? If you had to choose of the three, which would you do?

11) Tell at least four ways the French people of Normandy appreciate, remember, or honor the events of D-Day. Which in your estimation is most impacting or meaningful?

12) Make a list of words or adjectives that could be used to best express, describe, explain and understand the men and challenges of D-Day.
Hitler took over Europe using the lighting war or Blitzkrieg tactic. The Swastika with the eagle (above) was the symbol of the Third Reich - a term Hitler used to believe Germany would last for one thousand years. The holes in the eagle are from Soviet machine guns from when they took control of Berlin to end WWII in Europe. A Soviet (Communist) flag is seen being raised in the background. Hitler would soon commit suicide as a result of the Soviet take over of Berlin. (Picture from the Imperial War Museum in London, England)
Change Your Life. After WWII the Berlin Wall was constructed to separate East Berlin from West Berlin – the West being free and democratic and the East Communist. It was a real symbol that separated people who lived with freedom from those who didn’t. It stood for 28 years before it was smashed and torn down by those seeking freedom. When I saw these words it is yet another inspiring reminder to understand history so we can make changes to better the future. How about your own history? How about your future?
Merci Beaucoup
thank you very much

On my trip I took 866 photographs and tried to use the ones that might tell the story of D-Day best giving you an idea of what it looks like today and what the men had to endure. An understanding of this event helps me, and my hope is for you, to appreciate all the freedoms we have and what most Americans take for granted each day.