



WHERE HEROES FELL

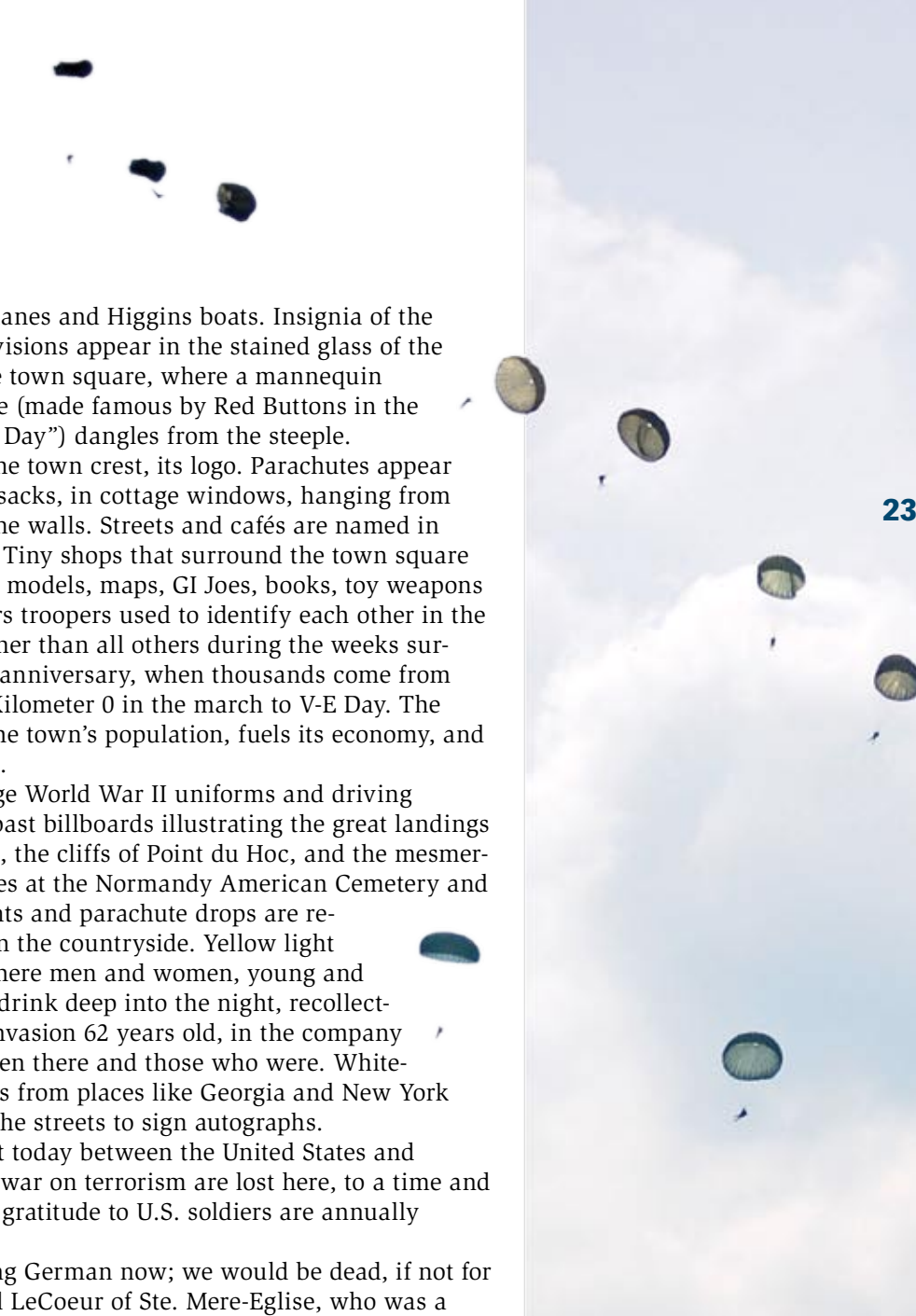
American
soldiers
who fought and
gave their lives
at Normandy
are forever
connected to
a culture
they saved.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JEFF STOFFER

STE. MERE-EGLISE FLOATS ON A TAPESTRY FIRST WOVEN IN THE TIME OF WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR. Among dozens of villages scattered across the Cotentin Peninsula of northwestern France, it is a place where long-distant memories are etched into the architecture, landscape and way of life. Dairy pastures are stitched together by impregnable hedgerows on a verdant patchwork known generally as the *Bocage*. Great stoic churches – 1,000 years and older – coldly preside over the graves of parishioners dead for centuries. Traditional dance is still performed here by women in cumbersome headdresses and maidens shouldering brass urns. Brisk ciders and strong brandies are brewed from recipes handed down through generations. Evening mist rises from deep grasses, and twilight lingers, soft as the focus of an impressionist painting. Monet was drawn here, to this tapestry known as Normandy, a place rich in hue, flavor and heritage – all of which stood to be erased forever if not for the blood of U.S. soldiers who came to fight on D-Day.

Ste. Mere-Eglise was the first town liberated in the Allied march across Europe during World War II. Residents had spent nearly four years under German occupation. They were forced to give up the largest portions of their homes to the Nazis, who hung a swastika flag above the town hall across from the church and seized all the radios to prevent locals from hearing news from the outside world. Farmers forfeited their crops, milk, livestock, trees and innumerable hours of hard labor as the Germans ate and drank and fortified their defense against invasion while contemplating their own conquest of England. Few among those in Ste. Mere-Eglise at the time – Germans included – believed the Allies would choose this stretch of the Normandy coast for the greatest amphibious landing in the history of warfare. Then, in the early-morning hours of June 6, 1944, paratroopers from the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions floated like leaves through the darkness into the town and five other drop zones surrounding it, announcing to the world that the United States was coming to end the reign of Adolf Hitler. By 4:30 that morning, the swastika was down, and the U.S. Flag flew in its place.

And so, alongside renderings from the time of crossbows and catapults, today in Ste. Mere-Eglise are indelible images of paratroopers,



C-47s, Willys jeeps, glider planes and Higgins boats. Insignia of the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions appear in the stained glass of the Roman-Gothic church in the town square, where a mannequin representing Pvt. John Steele (made famous by Red Buttons in the epic 1962 film “The Longest Day”) dangles from the steeple. Parachutes are drawn into the town crest, its logo. Parachutes appear in little places – on grocery sacks, in cottage windows, hanging from ceilings and carved into stone walls. Streets and cafés are named in honor of U.S. war veterans. Tiny shops that surround the town square sell vintage Army uniforms, models, maps, GI Joes, books, toy weapons and “crickets” – little clickers troopers used to identify each other in the field. American flags fly higher than all others during the weeks surrounding the annual D-Day anniversary, when thousands come from around the world to salute Kilometer 0 in the march to V-E Day. The annual observation swells the town’s population, fuels its economy, and turns back the clock to 1944.

They come wearing vintage World War II uniforms and driving authentic military vehicles past billboards illustrating the great landings at Omaha and Utah Beaches, the cliffs of Point du Hoc, and the mesmerizing presence of 9,387 graves at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial. Machine-gun fights and parachute drops are re-enacted on the square and in the countryside. Yellow light glows inside the Stop Bar where men and women, young and old, in uniforms and boots, drink deep into the night, recollecting 10,000 details from an invasion 62 years old, in the company of those who wish they’d been there and those who were. White-haired World War II veterans from places like Georgia and New York and Illinois are stopped on the streets to sign autographs.

Whatever differences exist today between the United States and France regarding the global war on terrorism are lost here, to a time and place where French vows of gratitude to U.S. soldiers are annually sanctified and renewed.

“We would not be speaking German now; we would be dead, if not for the Americans,” says Gerard LeCoeur of Ste. Mere-Eglise, who was a



Images of paratroopers from the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions appear in the stained glass of the Roman-Gothic church in the town square.

toddler when his mother swept him up and took cover in a ditch, saving his life, sacrificing hers to a Nazi gunman, on D-Day.

FEW MOMENTS IN U.S. MILITARY HISTORY have been so carefully analyzed and reinterpreted as the Normandy invasion. It is a subject that runs in the veins of people like Tommy McArdle, a police officer from New Jersey and former paratrooper with the 7th Special Forces Group. He has made 14 trips to northwestern France over the years to march in the boot-steps of his military ancestors. In his vintage uniform, mingling with dozens of other D-Day enthusiasts and re-enactors, McArdle can recite without pause nearly every movement, engagement and challenge faced by U.S. forces dropped behind enemy lines that night.

“(Historian Samuel Lyman Atwood) Marshall said this was the bloodiest small-arms action ever fought by an American Army unit,” McArdle says, gazing through squinted eyes at the ancient stone LaFiere Bridge over the Merderet River, a critical chokepoint fiercely defended by the Nazis on D-Day and in the days that followed. The bridge was built at the end of an elevated road – a causeway – that was surrounded by pastures the Germans deliberately flooded as a measure of defense. “Many men were killed and wounded here,” McArdle says, reverence thick in his voice. “The Germans were dug in, firing artillery. It was a 750-yard dash down the causeway, with German machine guns zeroed in. They could step nowhere without stepping on a body or a piece of a body. That’s how many guys were killed here. Imagine you’re a guy with a heavy machine gun or a mortar, and you have to run that gauntlet. The wounded would slip down the embankment and drown in the water. Guys seeking shelter clogged the way. The guys who didn’t get hit never stopped running.”

By D-plus 3, the Americans had taken the bridge, opening a route from the beachhead to the French interior. Today, a larger-than-life statue of a stoic soldier known as “Iron Mike” stands sentinel near the battlefield where the memories of troops who lost their lives there, by drowning or by enemy fire, are paid unflinching homage. In a museum in downtown Picauville, just a few kilometers from Ste. Mere-Eglise, the mission’s degree of difficulty is reflected in words that accompany a framed drawing of a paratrooper floating to earth:

*Don't say that you are an airborne soldier
Until you have jumped at night
Behind enemy lines
Carrying one hundred pounds of equipment
While being shot at.*

PARIS-BORN JACQUES PIGNOT WAS 17 YEARS OLD when he arrived in Ste. Mere-Eglise in 1941. Conditions were so bad under Nazi rule that the town, he says, was offhandedly regarded as “Ste. Miserables-Eglise ... a poor village. The first preoccupation was to find something to eat. Not much bread. Not much meat. Not much anything. You had to give your milk to the dairy, and the dairy gave the milk and butter to the German army.”

Prior to D-Day, Pignot had been assigned by the government to work as an assistant tax collector. After D-Day, he became a body collector.

“The first day – June 6, in the morning – I saw a patrol coming with a

sergeant and six or seven men,” he recalls in French-doused English, seated at a dining-room table where the placemats are adorned with D-Day art, and little plastic paratroopers dangle from the ceiling. “I started to talk to him. I understood him. He understood me. At 7 or 8 in the morning, I saw the mayor coming with an American. He said, ‘We are going to the German major’s house, and we want you to come with us.’ They used me to break the door down. I knew the German major was not there. The evening of the 5th, I saw him going away. But there could have been booby traps.”

Pignot would never forget the scene that morning. He saw the bodies of dead Nazis and American paratroopers who had been shot out of the sky, some of whom had been illuminated by a structure fire in the night, making easy targets. Pignot saw a paratrooper’s body snagged in a tree, likely that of Pvt. Charles Blankenship of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, whose brother Jim is a regular D-Day anniversary visitor of Ste. Mere-Eglise. “These guys were sitting ducks,” Jim Blankenship says. “The first time I came, I brought my son. I stood in the square, and tears came to my eyes. It’s a bittersweet memory.”

Pignot remembers how the morning of June 6, 1944, unfolded and hearing the voices of his fellow Frenchmen. “People said we are free.”

Within days, he was put to work searching the *Bocage* for parachutes, munitions and any other equipment he could gather from the drop zones and battlefields. “When the water went away, we found the bodies,” he explains. His next assignment came via the American Graves Registration Service. “We were searching for bodies, to know that the families would have their son or their brother. Sometimes it was difficult to identify the guy. We tried to find a piece of paper or something. A number. We bagged them. A couple hundred of them. We got used to it, doing it every day.”

THE PEOPLE OF STE. MERE-EGLISE, guided by Mayor Alexandre Renaud and wife Simone, devoted themselves to respectful treatment of their fallen liberators. Three cemeteries – two inside the town and one three kilometers away – provided temporary resting places for approximately 15,000 U.S. troops. Townspeople, though economically drained after four years of Nazi exploitation, took up collections and painstakingly tended the graves. The Aug. 7, 1944, issue of *Life* magazine included a photo of Mme. Simone Renaud placing flowers on the grave of Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt Jr., a founder of The American Legion, who died of a heart attack five weeks after the D-Day landings.

A statue of a stoic soldier known as “Iron Mike” stands sentinel near the battlefield where the memories of troops who lost their lives there are paid unflinching homage.



A MUSEUM GUIDE WHO WAS THERE

Tom Blakey, a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division who fought on D-Day and in combat across Europe in 1944, spent nearly six years providing firsthand perspectives as a volunteer guide at The National World War II Museum in New Orleans. At 85, he continued to answer questions and tell the story of a war he was surprised so few visitors understood.

“I’ve had people ask me, ‘What side were we on? ... Did we win the war?’ I used to look down my nose at that. Then I realized that these people have never really been taught anything about World War II. A good day is when people come in here really interested in learning.”

He admits that many from his own generation of veterans were more interested in getting on with their lives, careers and families after the war than in sharing the details of their service in uniform.

In 1946, when he moved to New Orleans, he met regularly with other World War II veterans who “most of the time didn’t talk much about the war.”

Altogether, Blakey has visited Normandy 11 times. “Once on the government and 10 times on me.”

Nearly 1,000 visit the national museum in New Orleans, now in Phase 1 of a \$300 million expansion.

www.ddaymuseum.org



After the *Life* photo appeared, Mme. Renaud found herself besieged with mail from the United States, much of which read like this letter from Pennsylvania:

*"Dear Madame ...
... If I am not asking too much and in order to ease the suffering of a heartbroken mother in this country, would it be possible for you to look up the grave that I am listing below and place flowers on same, also if you could let my wife know that you have done this, it would help. She is heartbroken over the loss of this boy"*

Personally responding to one request at a time, Mme. Renaud made it her life's work to deliver solace to families on the other side of the ocean. She personally wrote letters and poems and exchanged photographs with hundreds of American families for 44 years, working eight to 10 hours a day. "Her letters to the many mothers and fathers, who would never see their sons again, gave them peace of mind that his grave was well cared for and their son, who gave his life for freedom, shall never be forgotten," writes Robert Murphy, who jumped with the 82nd Airborne on D-Day.

"Her story is of a loving woman who reached out to the veterans of World War II and their families," says Bill Tucker of Massachusetts, who landed in a field near the church. "She was very warm and lovable, but she could be tough, too. If you crossed her, you were in trouble."

Mme. Renaud was among many in Ste. Mere-Eglise who were not happy that a permanent cemetery would soon be built and managed by the American Battle Monuments Commission more than 30 kilometers away, overlooking Omaha Beach. The remains of World War II veterans that were not repatriated to the United States would be exhumed from the cemeteries in and around Ste. Mere-Eglise and reburied at the new site. By 1950, the graves were relocated, but the relationship between Ste. Mere-Eglise and U.S. veterans was far from over. Mme. Renaud's letters, poems and photos continued to flow as a daily devotional until her death in 1988. After the war, she became close friends with surviving veterans and a catalyst of D-Day anniversary events in the town. Gens. Dwight Eisenhower and James Gavin were regular visitors. CBS televised a 1963 meeting where she and Eisenhower sat together in front of the church and reflected on the day that changed the course of history.

Her story – including dozens of interviews with veterans of the invasion, exclusive photos, letters and footage – is the subject of a documentary film titled "Mother of Normandy" (www.motherofnormandy.com) now in production by Doug Stebleton of Los Angeles, in association with the International Documentary Association of Los Angeles. A music publisher who has poured himself into World War II history in recent years, Stebleton says gratitude is his inspiration. "Someone paid a price for every day I have," he says. "With this project, I have been able to rub elbows with people who made the choice to lay down their lives so I could be here today. I am very conscious of that."

An aspect of the story that comes to light in the documentary is Mme. Renaud's role in the creation of postwar sister cities. The photo in *Life* inspired such a relationship between Ste. Mere-Eglise and Locust Valley, N.Y., near the home of Theodore Roosevelt Jr. Residents there collected and delivered clothing, medical supplies, schoolbooks, candy and toys for the war-battered town from 1946 until 1952. The program was called Operation Democracy. "It was intended to supplement the Marshall Plan," says Cathy Soref of Locust Valley, who hopes to resurrect Operation Democracy to connect U.S. communities with sister cities in

the Middle East. "You select a town in Iraq or Afghanistan, or anywhere for that matter, that needs encouragement and help in its effort to democratize. And you work citizen to citizen in a personal fashion, as sister cities."

At a Ste. Mere-Eglise D-Day ceremony hosted last June by Maurice Renaud, son of the D-Day mayor and Normandy matriarch, signs greeted a small delegation from New York. "Merci, Locust Valley!" they exclaimed six decades after the first load of goods came for the families of the French town. "Locust Valley was our Christmas, our Santa Claus, I remember," says Renaud, who traveled to Locust Valley last year to help dedicate a monument there, honoring the relationship. It included a brass plaque with the poem "Locust Valley," written by Mme. Simone Renaud in 1948. Within its lines can be found the spirit that guided her.

*Never can we forget your kindly aid
Our children raise their hands for you in prayer
The more because our sons with you are laid
In Norman earth together sleeping there.
Oh may the flowers we lay upon their graves
Distill their perfume on your distant air ...*

In the viscous Normandy twilight, veterans of the 82nd and 101st Airborne mingled at the ceremony with re-enactors, active-duty soldiers, French politicians, Norman dancers, grateful townspeople, and others. A giant U.S. Flag was displayed. A vintage parachute was hung from a tree. The late Maureen Kennedy Salaman, a best-selling author and television personality whose father was a World War II combat veteran, delivered one of her final performances at the request of Renaud, her longtime friend. She spoke of men she called heroes. "Heroes were everywhere you looked," she said. "Giants rose out of relative obscurity to cast long shadows across this land. Strangers from all walks of life were suddenly caught in the crosswire of war. They put their lives on the line to preserve the lives of others. Most of them remain nameless to us, but their undaunted faces are engraved forever upon our hearts."

"This is the biggest thing in any of our lives," says Tucker, who served in both the 101st and the 82nd Airborne Divisions and later worked on the congressional campaign of John F. Kennedy. Massachusetts may be home to Tucker, but, "When somebody says to me, 'Where are your roots?' I say it isn't Boston. It's Normandy."

Frank Bilich of Chicago, at 81, has been back five times since he jumped on D-Day. A heart surgery after the 55th anniversary made his returns more frequent in recent years. He brought his grandson for the 60th. On his last night in Ste. Mere-Eglise for the 62nd anniversary, he left the Stop Bar to a chorus of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" from a group of Scottish soldiers who had come to enjoy the anniversary and perhaps meet some D-Day heroes.

"Heroes," Bilich says. "That term is used too loosely today. It's a term that should be reserved for the guy who makes the ultimate choice. You wanna talk about heroes? Then you gotta go to the cemetery. I gave some time, but they are the guys who made the supreme sacrifice."

And they are the guys Mme. Renaud spent her life threading deep into the tapestry of Normandy, forever connecting them to a time, place and people they made free. 🌿

Jeff Stoffer is managing editor of The American Legion Magazine.



Personally responding to one request at a time, Mme. Renaud made it her life's work to deliver solace to families on the other side of the ocean.



A mannequin representing Pvt. John Steele (made famous by Red Buttons in the epic 1962 film "The Longest Day") dangles from the steeple.