

# Normandy Wreck Week

**14th September 2014**

Group breakfast, mingle, say a few hellos and off. Whole group had a similar plan, head to Arromanche, and Pegasus Bridge, home by 5, sort kit, and head for a meal at a small local café that Catherine our French based trip organiser had arranged for the whole group.

We established that Roger had forgotten his medical certificate, which started a domino effect of small problems. No way we can dive without it so Catherine compiled a list of doctors that we would have to ring tomorrow morning to try and get one. This meant that Dawn had to drive us about to the doctors, and as I speak passable French, (bit rusty after 20 years.), I was the appointed call maker and general translator. It meant that three of us missed the start of the week's diving but c'est la vie. Got to be done.

But for today, off to Arromanche. And the sat-nav saga begins. Dawn sets up the destination, then ignores it consistently and goes with the "straight line" approach, while we keep pointing at roads she should have taken. Another favourite, sat-nav wants to turn right, so we turn right, but not the right the sat-nav suggests....why? Because she has another sat-nav screen on the driving console that she does not quite understand, and follows that one. We saw a lot of things twice. Dawn has different view that seems to involve myself and Roger not being able to read a map. We really didn't see it like that!

We opted to go to the 360 degree cinema at Arromanche, which showed 20 minutes of footage from the war. Very moving as all footage from the era is, made more poignant due to the setting we now found ourselves in. Incredible to see operational footage of the fake harbour of the 146 caissons. The genius of it all. A quiet 15 mins was needed afterwards and some fresh air on the cliff top, looking out over the ruins that remain there. The more I see the more questions I have. Find myself wanting to know what it was like to live under German occupation for 4 years. Yes I must have seen the films and had the history lessons in school, but now I think I would remember it far more.

We walked along Gold Beach, then Juno Beach. Monuments, sculptures, plaques, tanks and guns dotted as reminders in the dunes, Took a break for a beach side café coffee, decide to eat, and Dawn wanted mussels. I decided there was nothing I wanted, all agreed with me, so Dawn reluctantly binned the mussel idea. I walked into the bar to the loo, spotted crème brulee on the menu board, YES...ordered one, with 4 spoons, how kind am I! Excitedly returned to the table, proud of my communal food contribution. " Ram your crème brulee...minging...I wanted mussels. You order crème brulee when you said you didn't want anything, and I don't get mussels..!" I think she was upset...This emotion was re-lived many times through the day. So bitter! That'll explain the wrinkles.

Hermanville-sur-Mer, British cemetery. So much smaller than the American cemetery we visited, but still cared for, plants and lawn tended. The British cemetery differed due also to the presence of grave stones, rather than crosses, with birth to death dates, age at death and messages from family and friends. A much more personal feeling, which almost made you feel as if you were intruding.

We chose to have some bread and cheese in the van outside the cemetery. Of all the amazing beaches and viewpoints we have stopped at, we chose to eat lunch by a fly soaked kerb-side, where Dawn, yes again, moaned about the mussels. God I hope there are some on the restaurant menu tonight!

On to Pegasus bridge. Amazing story and another moving site. I am continually stunned by how much the war and the liberation are remembered here, visible everywhere, random paintings, artefacts, memorials, constant. Very humbling and sobering, and makes you realise how embedded those events are in the general psyche, to this day. The museum next to Pegasus Bridge which housed the original bridge was also fascinating. Everyone had different memories. For me, the gliders, made of plywood? Around 10000 soldiers were brought in by these plywood gliders! The taking of the bridge by this precision flying and landing, the value the glider pilots, who were then, if they survived the fighting, sent back to do it all again, no we can't imagine it.

The difference between American and British parachutes? The British did not carry back-ups. Why? Because they were RARELY expected to fail. So they were unnecessary. Reality was bound to be cost but never-the-less, unbelievable. However, the tricky mechanism for release on the Americans chutes meant that lots drowned trying to free themselves from it. Single shot "pen guns" given to the French resistance, so that they could kill one German and relieve him of his weapon. (Also probably used for suicide if needed, I predict). More information just raised more questions. It never stopped. Exhausting.



*The new Pegasus bridge, a very close updated replica of the old*

Dawn's memory was the impressive speed at which the Bailey Bridges were built. Twenty-five meters of bridge in 36 minutes. Hitler sent Donald Bailey a Xmas card as he was so impressed by the bridges.

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