

D-Day for Daniel Levy as he hits the Normandy beaches



Daniel Levy

I recently visited the sites of the D-Day landings in Normandy and was particularly moved to think how the battle had turned on the actions of a few soldiers, at different times and places, who were prepared to die for their country. As I walked through the British cemetery at Ranville I was

surrounded by the white headstones of 2,240 Allied servicemen killed in the invasion of Normandy. Men from the Army, Navy and Air Force are buried under the white headstones which seem to go on forever and ever. Amongst the mass of headstones I found seventeen Jewish graves nestling in the manicured lawns. Earlier I had been to the American cemetery at St Laurent, where one hundred and forty nine Jews are buried, and photographed all those headstones displaying the star of David which I passed. It should not be forgotten that the Jewish soldiers also played their part in this amazing victory.

On entering the cemetery I saw many headstones engraved with the emblem of the Parachute Regiment. It was soldiers from this regiment who were dropped into the area on the eve of D-Day. As the elite of the British Army their task was to take some of the most heavily defended areas just inland of the beaches; particularly the bridges crossing the Orne river and canal and Merville artillery battery (a massive gun emplacement which would rain destructive shells onto the landing beaches at the time of the invasion).

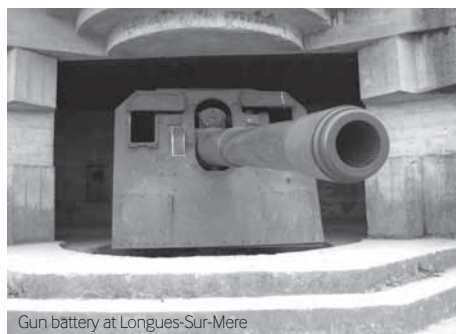
At the Orne canal bridge a few minutes after midnight six gliders carrying a company of paratroopers lead by Major John Howard landed. The men dashed out, hosing the German defenders with sub-machine gun fire, successfully taking the bridges within half an hour. In total, only two men were killed and



American Cemetery at St Laurent



American Jewish Headstone



Gun battery at Longues-Sur-Mer

fourteen wounded.

At Merville, French commandos with a battalion of paratroopers were to take the gun battery before the Allied troops could begin landing. Only 25% of the expected troops actually arrived at the battery with one heavy machine gun and very few barbed-wire shredding "Bangalore" torpedoes. Nevertheless, the commanding Colonel, John Otway ordered the attack to go ahead. The troops crossed two strips of barbed wire and a minefield, blasting their way through the German garrison of 130 troops with Sten guns to overcome the defending coastal artillery (these were actually more powerful than the aerial photographs had predicted). These acts of heroism helped to secure the success of the beach landings hours later.

Further along the coast, the weather was appalling with large waves and strong currents making the landings seem impossible to the American troops who were to be landing at the most heavily fortified beach: Omaha.

At Point Du Hoc, a few miles down the coast from Omaha Beach, a heavy gun battery was located which could easily have shattered the attempts to land on both Omaha and Utah beaches (the Americans had two beaches to secure).

A battalion of American Rangers (an elite formation of troops in the U.S Army) were assigned to neutralise the defending guns. These were situated on the top of an extremely tall and steep cliff and for this, the Rangers had been training intensively in England for year. Just after the main landings had started, they sailed to the small

beach at the bottom of the cliff in landing craft and disembarked, laden with ropes, mortars, explosives, weapons and ammunition.

The ropes had grappling hooks attached at one end and were fired into barbed wire with specially modified rocket launchers. The German defenders had been unaffected by the bombing raids from the previous two nights, having sheltered in the concrete bunkers which still exist today. As soon as the Rangers started climbing up the cliff the German soldiers started shooting downwards, dropping grenades and cutting the grappling hooks out of the wire. The Rangers still managed to get to the cliff top, sustaining heavy losses. Running from bomb crater to bomb crater for shelter from the snipers and machine-gun fire, they found the guns had been removed from Point Du Hoc to a location just behind and were ready to fire. The Rangers destroyed the guns and stayed there under continuous enemy fire until two days later when they were relieved by supporting forces.

Only one Victoria Cross was awarded for bravery on D-Day itself. The recipient was Sergeant-Major Stan Hollis. After landing on Gold Beach (one of the British beaches) Hollis' unit was assigned to clear out pillboxes containing German snipers. As they advanced, Hollis' Captain noticed that one had been overlooked and Hollis was assigned to investigate. When he was twenty metres away, a German MG42 (machine-gun capable of firing thousands of bullets a minute) opened fire on Hollis and his unit. Hollis ran forward, threw a grenade through the hole

from which the gun was firing and sprayed the inside of the pillbox until he had to change the magazine in his weapon. He then took the survivors prisoner and cleared a trench of Germans without any support. Later, his unit was assigned the task of neutralising a field gun. Hollis charged it with an anti-tank missile and was shot at repeatedly by a sniper but only his cheek was grazed. He then destroyed the gun and returned to his lines. A few hours later some of his men were under heavy fire from a German machine-gun nest, pinned down in a foxhole. Hollis charged it with a Bren machine gun, firing it as a diversion. Because of that diversion, his men were able to escape, as did Hollis who remained unharmed.

For me, these are the most stirring accounts of bravery on D-Day. They show the determination of the men involved to overthrow the Nazi tyranny in Europe and restore freedom to the world. Stan Hollis twice charged a type of gun which fired so many bullets in such a short time that he should have been vaporised. He knew the risk he was taking and willingly stepped forward.

At Point Du Hoc, the Rangers were having grenades thrown at them down a cliff face when they were in a vulnerable position but they continued to climb up. Even though at the top of the cliffs there were machine-guns aimed at and firing at them, they carried on running forward and took the gun batteries.

The paratroopers at Merville sprinted through a minefield without thinking about what would happen to themselves even as the bullets whizzed around them and mines went off under their comrades.

At the Orne Canal, Major Howard's troops held off German counter-attacks for over twelve hours despite being exhausted, hungry and running low on ammunition.

Such heroism still continues today. A few years ago in Iraq, a British soldier, Private Johnson Beharry was driving a vehicle which was hit by a rocket propelled grenade. Despite having massive facial injuries and being unable to see, he carried on driving forward so that his comrades could be in a safe area. He was awarded a Victoria Cross for his actions and like all the people mentioned in this article, he risked everything for a cause he believed in and went beyond what could be expected.

As I continued my walk through the British cemetery, looking at the rows and rows of headstones, I considered all of these things and the resulting massive losses in the Normandy campaign.

To end our trip, we visited Longues Sur-Mer, above which stands an abandoned 150mm naval gun emplacement. The huge cannons are still inside the concrete casemates and their vast size gives a rough idea of how enormously powerful they were and we could only think how much damage one shell would have caused. Today, they stand as a silent reminder of how terrible the Second, and hopefully last, World War really was.

Daniel Levy