

Normandy

## TOUCHING THE HEART OF D-DAY

### DIANE COVINGTON-CARTER RELATES HER FATHER'S UNIQUE EXPERIENCE OF NORMANDY IN 1944

The 'Dog Green' sector of 'Omaha Beach',  
landed by American forces on June 6, 1944.



**DIANE COVINGTON-CARTER'S** award-winning writing and photography has appeared in *Reader's Digest* and *More* magazines, among other publications, and on National Public Radio.

Her memoir, *Reunion, Finding Gilbert*, will be available mid-2014.

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**D**ad was an officer in the Sea Bees, the Civil Engineer Corps of the United States Navy, and I grew up hearing stories about his time in France during the Normandy Invasion. The Sea Bees' motto was: "we build, we fight" and their mascot, an exuberant looking bee, carried a drill and a gun. My Father spent over four months on the Normandy coast, first building the Navy camp on the cliff above Omaha Beach, then rebuilding bridges and carrying out a number of other reconstruction projects in the surrounding areas.

He liked to tell stories about his interactions with the French people during his time in Normandy. He'd studied French in a country high school in South Dakota, where the teacher had never even heard French and stayed one chapter ahead of her students. So Dad's accent made 's'il vous plaît' sound like 'silver plate'.





Dad would hold up his sugar packet to a friendly Frenchman and ask, ‘*Soocray n’est pas?*’ The Frenchman, at first bewildered, would then nod and beam, ‘*Ah oui, sucre*’. Then Dad would point to his butter and say ‘*booray*’, again meeting incomprehension, then a relieved ‘*Ah oui, le buerre*’. Dad’s French improved a great deal from these encounters.

He told stories about France at dinnertime and would say, “Eat your vegetables. During the war, the French people didn’t have enough to eat.” Dad grew up on a farm and hated to see good food go to waste, and said that there was lots of that at the Sea Bees’ camp. So when it was his turn to oversee the mess tents, he’d load up pans of steaming meat, potatoes, vegetables, bread and pie, and head down the narrow lanes to a nearby farmhouse. He’d knock, point to the food, gesture and say ‘*pour vous*’.

The excited recipients would respond in a torrent of French, which Dad couldn’t understand. But he understood their gratitude. The next night, Dad repeated the same ritual, at a different farmhouse.

These stories were as much a part of my childhood as the yellow Formica table in our small yellow kitchen which we would crowd around to eat dinner. I never minded hearing the same stories over and over.

The one I loved the most was when Dad talked about the seven-year-old orphan, Gilbert Des Clos, who lived with a caretaker just above the Sea Bees’ camp. Dad had noticed the shy, skinny little boy hanging around the gate to the camp and thought that he looked like he could use a good meal. So using his best French, Dad invited Gilbert to go through the food line with him at lunch one day. ◆◆



Diane's Father, Lieutenant Donald K Johnson, United States Naval Reserve, 1944

The shared lunch became a daily ritual and soon Gilbert began to follow Dad around as he carried out his duties, unloading the huge Navy ships or overseeing the camp's construction and maintenance. Then, when the long, warm days of the summer turned into the short, crisp days of autumn, Dad's orders changed. After more than four months in Normandy, his battalion was being sent home for a short leave and then on to the Pacific.

By this time, my Dad and Gilbert had become so close that he looked into adopting him to bring him home to America. But the French authorities said no. Dad and Gilbert had to say goodbye. I adored my Dad, so when I'd hear this story, I'd wonder what happened to the little French boy who had also loved him.

In 1991, just before my Dad died, he spoke again about his time in France in the war and the orphan Gilbert Des Clos. Dad always said Gilbert's name with the soft 'g' sound, the way the French said it, '*Geelbear*', and his voice took on a gentle tone. His words brought back memories of the familiar stories from my childhood, and made me realise how powerful Dad's time in France had been for him. I noted too, that he had never forgotten Gilbert.

Maybe because of my Dad's tales about France, I fell in love with the French language, studied it in high school and at university, and through the years, I worked to keep it up using books, tapes and classes.

In 1993, two years after my Dad's death, I travelled to Normandy to tour the 'invasion beaches' and learn all I could about D-Day. I was writing a story in my Dad's honour, describing my experience of the invasion through his stories. That article, which appeared in newspapers on

## "My Dad and Gilbert became so close that he looked into adopting him"

June 6 1994, the 50th anniversary of D-Day, also mentioned the orphan Gilbert Des Clos.

In June 1994, my 19-year-old daughter and I began a month-long tour of France, including visiting Normandy for the ongoing D-Day 50th anniversary celebrations. In a moving ceremony at the Mairie in Caen, I received a medal in my Dad's honour. The Mayor, with tears in his eyes, delivered a short speech in front of each of us, first in French, then in stilted English, as he pinned on our medals.

While in Caen, I placed a '*petite annonce*' in the local newspaper, *Ouest France*, to look for Gilbert Des Clos. I had thought that it would be impossible to find the man after 50 years, but the press *attaché* from the French consulate in San Francisco, who had read my article, encouraged me to try. "The French don't move around like '*les Américains*'," she reasoned. "Chances are, he'll still be right there in Normandy."

She was so right. The next morning, Gilbert Des Clos read my '*petite annonce*' and wept. He'd been waiting 50 years for some word from my Dad. Because I had thought it might take months or even years to find ➔

### D-DAY 2014 EVENT CALENDAR

On June 6 1944, over 5,000 ships, 11,000 planes and 150,000 Allied troops converged on Normandy for the 'D-Day invasion'. June 6 2014, the 70th anniversary, will see the last remaining D-Day veterans remember this historic event. If you can't make it to Normandy on June 6, you can still create your own itinerary or book guided tours which include all the beaches, museums, cemeteries and other sites. **► For up-to-date details of the planned remembrances, visit [www.normandie-tourisme.fr](http://www.normandie-tourisme.fr)**

#### FEBRUARY

From February 1

- **Grandma, What Was It Like During the War?**
- Exhibition: Juno Beach Centre, Courseulles-sur-Mer

#### MARCH

March 2

- **Freedom Walk**
- Asnelles, departure at 9am
- Until October
- **Leaving the War Behind – From the Battle of Normandy Through to Reconstruction**
- Exhibition: 14 towns in Calvados

#### APRIL

April 6

- **From the Gun Batteries of Azeville to Cricqueville**
- Walk: Utah Beach
- Until September 1
- **Cherbourg... and Freedom Came from the Sea Exhibition**
- La Cité de La Mer, Cherbourg

#### MAY

May 1

- **Life at a German Gun Battery**
- Tour: Azeville Gun Battery, Utah Beach

May 8

- **'39-'45 Tour Conference**

• Fécamp

May 10

- **Freedom Came from the Sea**

• Walk: Omaha Beach

May 16

- **Evening of Remembrance**

• Conference: Château des Matignon, Torigni-sur-Vire

May 26-June 5

- **The Price of Freedom**

• Conference: Museum of The Liberation, Cherbourg, 6.30pm

Until September 30

- **Rebirth of a Town**

• Exhibition: Rue Torteron & Place de la Gare, Saint-Lô

Until December

- **100 Photos by Tony Vaccaro**

• Exhibition: Caen Memorial

Until December

- **100 Objects of the 100 Days of the Battle of Normandy**

• Exhibition: Caen Memorial

Until December 15

- **So that we Don't Forget Them & Anglo-Canadian War Correspondents**

• Exhibition: Pegasus Memorial

#### JUNE

Until June 15

- **Remains of the Atlantic Wall**

• Exhibition: Dives-sur-Mer

Until August 31

- **Life Under The Occupation**

• Exhibition: Fermanville

Until September 30

- **Through Stories**

• Exhibition: Cresserons

June 2-4

- **The Freedom Tattoo**

• Procession and parade: Louis Villemer Sports Stadium & Saint-Lô town centre

June 2-September 30

- **The Greatest Generation**

• Exhibition: History Centre of The Parachutists of D-Day,

Saint-Côme-du-Mont

June 3, 10, 17 & 24

- **In the Footsteps of the Commandos**

• Walk: Sword Beach

June 4-11

- **Saint-Hilaire-Petitville Remembers**

• Exhibition: Recreation Hall, Saint-Hilaire-Petitville

June 5, evening

- **They Were the First**

• Documentary: Pegasus Memorial, Ranville

June 6

- **Concert for Peace**

• Sainte-Mère-Église, 8.30pm

June 6

- **D-Day Normandy 1944**

• 3D Imax film: Caen Zénith

June 6-8

- **They Didn't Know it was Impossible**

• Tour: Gun Battery, Merville-Franceville-Plage





**Clockwise from top left:**

Bayeux, the main town in the area where Diane's Father served; Diane placed a collage of photos from 1944 on Gilbert's coffin; US Army Ranger Ivor Jones (centre) and a grateful French couple during the 60th Anniversary of D-Day remembrance events; Gilbert and his friend Georgette being held by American soldiers in 1944; the American Military Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, where 9,387 soldiers were laid to rest







The memorial to the American troops who landed at Utah Beach

him, if I found him at all, I had put my home address in the ad. So Gilbert wrote to my address in California.

My sister was picking up my mail and saw the large envelope from France and the name Gilbert Des Clos. Knowing how important it was, she faxed the letter back to France, to a number I had given her on our itinerary. Two days before my daughter and I were to fly back to California, we had a tearful reunion with Gilbert and his family. All of those years I spent studying French paid off – Gilbert and his family spoke no English. When we parted, I vowed that we would never lose touch again.

For two years, we stayed connected through regular letters and phone calls. Then I returned to France with other family members for a *grand fête* in the town hall of Gilbert's village. The Mayor attended and the local paper ran an article, with photos, about our joyous day. The next year, Gilbert and his family spent two weeks in California, where some 40 members of our family celebrated the miracle of our reunion with dinners and picnics, including an intergenerational, cross-cultural soccer game.

I felt wonder and awe that somehow my Dad's stories from my childhood had caught up with my real life. And Gilbert did become my French brother, just 50 years later than originally planned. As the years passed, I visited Gilbert and his wife Huguette often and kept in touch with frequent calls and letters.

For the 60th anniversary of D-Day in 2004, I travelled to France with Stephen Ambrose Historical Tours, as a guide and translator for a group of United States Army Rangers and their families. I had the touching job of translating between the grateful French and the *'vieux soldats'*, the

*“I was struck how my Dad’s kindness still reverberated 64 years later”*

elderly soldiers who had journeyed back to Normandy. I also spent time with Gilbert and his family.

I had planned an extended visit with Gilbert for early 2008 and we all looked forward to it. Sadly, in November 2007, Gilbert was diagnosed with liver cancer. I so hoped that I could get there in time but he died just hours before I was due to arrive. By travelling non-stop, I was able to attend his funeral.

Friends and family filled the church in Gilbert's village on that cold February morning. I sat in the front pew with his family, and as part of the service, placed a frame with a photo of my Dad and one of Gilbert from 1944 onto the casket. They were both gone now. That chapter of the story had ended. But as I watched the candle light flickering across the pictures of the young American lieutenant and the little French boy, I was struck by how my Dad's kindness – reaching out his hand to a hungry youngster – still reverberated 64 years later.

My Dad had wanted Gilbert to become a part of our American family. If he had come to America, the story and our tie to France would have ended. Instead, I sat as part of Gilbert's French family, in an ongoing story of love and connection. **FT**

**D-DAY 2014 EVENT CALENDAR cont...**

June 7

► **Giant picnic, Omaha Beach**

- Saint-Laurent-sur-Mer

June 7

► **Ceremony of Peace**

- Sainte-Mère-Église Town Hall

June 8

► **The First Football Match in Free France**

- Henri Jeanne Stadium, Bayeux

June 8

► **Parachute Show**

- La Fièvre, Sainte-Mère-Église

June 8

► **'39-'45 Tour**

- Conference: Fécamp

June 8

► **Concert for Freedom**

- Lisieux, 8.30pm

June 8

► **Service for Peace**

- Merville gun battery, 10.30am

June 8-August 16

► **Heroes or Martyrs, Tourouvre in Torment**

- Exhibition: Les Muséales de Tourouvre

June 9

► **The Atlantic Wall**

- Conference: Azeville Gun Battery, Utah Beach

June 14-September 14

► **The Lights of Liberty**

- Sound and light show: Bayeux Cathedral, at nightfall

June 28-August 31

► **Torigni in Torment**

- Exhibition: Château des Matignon, Torigni-sur-Vire

June 28

► **Liberation Ball**

- 40s meal & dance, Fermanville

June 30

► **The Occupation of the Châteaux**

- Conference: Château de Carneville, 8pm

**JULY**

Until August 31

► **Reconstruction of Flers**

- Exhibition: Media Centre of Flers Country

July 2-September 11

► **Walks Between Arromanches and Merville-Franceville**

- Wednesdays, from the Coastal Station or the Historical Site

July 5, 12, 19 & 26

► **'39-'45 Tour**

- Conference: Fécamp

July 8 & 22, Aug 5 & 19

► **In the Footsteps of the Commandos**

- Guided walk: Sword Beach

July 12-13

► **Freedom Celebrated**

- Festival & firework display: Bolleville, 10am-12 midnight

July 18

► **Wavelengths of War**

- Sound tour by torchlight, Cape Fagnet, Fécamp, 3pm

July 31

► **70th Anniversary of the Liberation of Jullouville**

- Procession and parade, Jullouville 10am-4pm

**AUGUST**

August 2, 9, 16, 23 & 30

► **'39-'45 Tour**

- Conference: Fécamp

August 9-17

► **Exhibition of a Panther tank and German motorcycles**

- Montormal Memorial

August 15-16

► **Operation Paddle 1944**

- Exhibition, Guy Môquet Hall, Dives-sur-Mer, 10am - 6pm

August 20

► **Historical walk**

- Departing from Ouistreham, 9.30am

August 22

► **Jazz concert**

- Place Lemerrier, Touques, 7-9pm

August 22-23

► **Grand Music Show**

- Le Quai des Arts, Argentan

August 23

► **Day of Discovery & Activities**

- Mont-Ormel

**SEPTEMBER**

September 7

► **'39-'45 Tour**

- Conference: Fécamp

September 11

► **Historical walk**

- Departing from Ouistreham, 9.30am

September 14

► **March of Peace & Reconciliation**

- From the Memorial of Montormel to Tournai-sur-Dives, 9.15am-5pm

September 20

► **The Atlantic Wall & Operation Jubilee by Jérôme Prieur**

- Documentary: Le Grand Cinema, Fécamp 9.30pm

**D-DAY 70TH ANNIVERSARY** *A selection of things to see and do*



The Caen Memorial Centre

► **Caen Memorial Centre for History and Peace**

The essential museum for everything you need to know about World War 2, in particular those concerning the D-Day Landings and the Battle of Normandy. The Caen Memorial has recently inaugurated a new exhibition space which recreates General Richter's subterranean bunker, with inventive staging that highlights the military aspects of the German Occupation, as well as the history of the Atlantic Wall.

Among the events marking the 70th Anniversary are an international exhibition of press illustrations (April 4-6), the 100 photos by Tony Vaccaro exhibition (May), a Battle of Normandy conference (May 21-23) and also two monumental paintings by the artist Jef Aérosol (June 3-4).  
*Caen, Calvados*  
[www.memorial-caen.fr](http://www.memorial-caen.fr)

► **Arromanches 360°**

Starting in February 2014, the Arromanches 360° circular cinema is showing a new film, *Normandy's 100 Days*. This retraces the history of the battle, from the preparations for the D-Day Landings to the Liberation of Paris and was produced by the makers of the hugely successful French television series, *Apocalypse. Arromanches-les-Bains, Calvados*  
[www.arromanches360.com](http://www.arromanches360.com)

► **Azeville Gun Battery**

For a truly lifelike reconstruction of the great moments of the Battle of Normandy, the Azeville Gun Battery at Utah Beach has been repainted in its original camouflage colours. These have been recreated through archive photographs dating back to 1944.

On May 1, a special tour will take place on the theme of Life in a German Gun Battery during the Occupation.

*Azeville, Manche*  
[bitly.com/Azeville-Battery](http://bitly.com/Azeville-Battery)

► **The Pointe du Hoc Visitor Centre**

The cliff-top Pointe du Hoc Visitor Centre was transformed in 2013, moving into a stylish contemporary building which doubled its space. It was on this exceptional site that United States Army Rangers scaled the 100-foot cliffs, destroyed a vital German gun battery and took possession of this strategic position, giving them control of the coast road, and thereby playing an important role in the Allies' D-Day success.  
*Criqueville-en-Bessin, Calvados*  
[www.isigny-grandcamp-intercom.fr](http://www.isigny-grandcamp-intercom.fr)

► **American Military Cemetery**

Some 9,387 American soldiers were laid to rest in the American Military Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, overlooking Omaha Beach. A chapel, memorial and a garden of remembrance honour their memory.  
*Colleville-sur-Mer, Calvados*  
[www.abmc.gov](http://www.abmc.gov)



The American Military Cemetery

► **La Cambe Military Cemetery**

Situated in the North-West of Calvados, this German Military Cemetery is a poignant site with 21,300 graves. It features a visitor centre, a permanent exhibition space and a garden planted with 1,200 maples – living symbols of peace.  
*La Cambe, Calvados*  
[www.volksbund.de](http://www.volksbund.de)

► **Gun Battery of Longues-sur-Mer**

Situated between Arromanches and Omaha Beach, Longues-sur-Mer is the only gun battery above the D-Day

Landings beaches to be officially listed as a historic monument. It is also the sole battery which is still equipped with its original guns. The site features a command post and four casemates, each housing an artillery piece.

*Longues-sur-Mer, Calvados*  
[www.bayeux-bessin-tourisme.com/blog/visiteguide/batterie-delongues-sur-mer](http://www.bayeux-bessin-tourisme.com/blog/visiteguide/batterie-delongues-sur-mer)



The Gun Battery of Longues-sur-Mer

► **Cherbourg... And Freedom Came from the Sea.**

From April to September, La Cité de la Mer stages this exhibition which, using photos and archive films, explores the work of United States forces in the days after Cherbourg was liberated, which included mine clearance, reconstruction of the quays, etc.  
*Cherbourg, Manche*  
[www.citedelamer.com](http://www.citedelamer.com)

► **Driving tour of Falaise-Chambois.**

This 12-mile driving tour with ten stops explains the Battle of the Falaise-Chambois pocket and starts from the Memorial of Montormel in the heart of the area where the action took place. This was the largest confrontation of World War 2 and its outcome led to the liberation of the rest of Europe. The route takes you along part of 'The Corridor of Death', through which the German forces withdrew.  
*Mont-Omel, Orne*  
[www.memorial-montormel.org](http://www.memorial-montormel.org)

► **Operation Jubilee**

This memorial exhibition to the Allied troops who took part in the bloody Operation Jubilee raid on the port of Dieppe on August 19 1942, a failed attempt to make a temporary bridgehead in occupied France. The

exhibition brings together an array of documents, objects and models which evoke the exploits of the soldiers, sailors and pilots who took part, and the museum tour concludes with a gripping film about Operation Jubilee.

*Dieppe, Seine-Maritime*  
[www.dieppe-operationjubilee-19aout1942.com](http://www.dieppe-operationjubilee-19aout1942.com)

► **Bruneval Memorial '42**

On the night of February 27 1942, some 120 British soldiers from the 2nd Battalion of the Parachute Regiment were dropped over the Cap d'Antifer to carry out an assault on a radar station. Operation Biting, the first airborne operation carried out by the Allies in occupied France, was a success. A new memorial, inaugurated in 2012 in the *commune* of Saint-Jouin-Bruneval, pays tribute.  
*Saint-Jouin-Bruneval, Seine-Maritime*  
[www.bruneval42.com](http://www.bruneval42.com)

**NEW**

► **Overlord Museum**

Dedicated to June 6 1944 and the Battle of Normandy, this brand new museum boasts a unique and exceptional collection of over 10,000 objects and documents. These valuable artefacts have been carefully gathered from across Normandy, over the course of more than 40 years, by a first-hand witness to the conflict.  
*Colleville-sur-Mer, Calvados*  
[www.overlordmuseum.com](http://www.overlordmuseum.com)



The Overlord Museum

► **Guided Tours**

For an in-depth experience, companies such as Stephen Ambrose Historical Tours offer all-inclusive tours with a historian, both during the anniversary and throughout the year.  
[www.stephenambrosetours.com](http://www.stephenambrosetours.com)