

Remembering Veterans at Juno Beach



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Being at France's Juno Beach on Remembrance Day 2009 was nothing like the Allied assault on Juno Beach of 1944. On this day, the sun was shining, the surf and the seagulls were the only noises at the water's edge, and the welcome mat was out for any and all Canadians. The 1944 reality was apparently closer to the opening scene from the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. Veterans don't like to watch that movie.

The ten or so veterans I was with on November 11th were Métis, there as guests of the Métis National Council. We were at Juno Beach to unveil a tribute to the thousands of Métis who had volunteered, fought and proudly served alongside other Canadians in the war. Of course, we were also there to remember and honour the many, many soldiers (and in the case of the veterans, friends and countrymen) who never returned to Canada, but lay beneath French soil in immaculately-kept gravesites, row on row.

It was my first visit to Juno. We drove out from Paris on Remembrance Day morning, stopping first to lay a wreath at the Bretteville-sur Laize Canadian War Cemetery, where 2,793 Canadian soldiers lie buried. We were escorted around the site by one of the local mayors, who spoke reverently of Canada's sacrifice some 65 years ago. "Look at their ages", he kept saying, as we looked at the tombstones. "So young. So young". We stopped by one grave marker that the mayor singled out. It showed the age as 16 years old. "He was actually only 15 years and 9 months old", said the mayor, who seemed to know every detail of Canada's sacrifice. "He lied about his age to join up. He was the youngest Allied soldier killed".

We left the cemetery and joined the veterans for lunch at a Juno Beach restaurant. There was lots of laughter and tears too as the emotional rollercoaster continued for us all. The veteran sitting across from me had joined the service at 14 years old, and was only 19 when he stormed ashore. I sat beside "Francis", who was dressed in his original WWII uniform. Captured shortly after landing, he spent the next 11 months as a POW. "It was horrible", he said, "but it's down at the beach where I have the worst memories. I don't like to go to the beach. It brings back the nightmares".

After lunch we had time to stop at the Beny-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery where another 2,049 soldiers are buried. More local mayors were waiting to show us around, and a police escort was there, too. Deep respect for Canada was evident everywhere. My Assistant Deputy Minister Fred Caron was with me (he is still involved in the military as a Honourary Colonel with the Canadian Grenadier Guards, and he was in full dress uniform) as we laid another wreath at the memorial. While I searched out and paid tribute to the soldiers from Chilliwack buried there, Colonel Caron wandered off from the delegation to lay wreaths at the tombstones of several members from his own Regiment. He also stopped, I noticed, to salute the graves where brave Grenadiers were interred; one soldier honouring another.

Back to the beach we went where the ceremonies would take place only 100 meters or so from the high tide mark. By now there were 7-8 mayors in attendance, a representative of the French government, our own Ambassador, with many locals and visitors in the crowd. One of the veterans- his hands shaking but his voice strong- closed the speeches by reading out the famous, 'they shall not grow old as we grow old.....we will remember them". Dozens of wreaths and flower sprays were laid. The veterans, the Métis, and the French certainly remember as did the entire crowd.

We cut the ribbon on a Métis exhibit in the Juno Center, then Deb and I took a moment to find her Uncle Merle's name on the memorial plaques outside. Merle had survived landing on the beach, but had been seriously injured taking out a machinegun nest in the days that followed. He lived, but only one of his arms was ever functional, the machinegun bullet having smashed his other elbow beyond repair. He enjoyed a good long life back in Canada, and I remember him as a cheerful and positive man. He didn't talk about the war a lot.

Our final visit that day was with the mayor of Caen, the local town- about Chilliwack's size- that was basically obliterated during the war. By now it was late in the day, but the mayor stayed and waited in order to show us around one of the few buildings that survived the war, a former monastery that was now his city hall.

The mayor was a gracious host, and made sure our delegation understood the gratitude his countrymen felt towards Canada. Again, it was humbling to think that 65 years after the war, our veterans were still being revered. In the Council chambers at Caen, a Canadian flag flies beside France's flag. They haven't forgotten the sacrifice of the thousands of soldiers who liberated their city.

The trip to Juno was the first time since I was elected in 1993 that I missed Remembrance Day ceremonies in my own electoral district. Part of me was worried that by leaving my own riding on that day, I wouldn't be there to pay tribute to our local veterans. In retrospect, for this one day, being overseas with our veterans to honour them at the scene of their sacrifice was the right thing to do. To say the least, it made a lasting impression on me.

God willing, next year I will honour our veterans on Remembrance Day at a local cenotaph. And when I do, I'll remember the veterans I met in France and the commitment of the French people to never forget their sacrifice. For me the significance of the ceremony will be a little greater and my emotions that much closer to the surface.

"At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them."