

Normandy: From Dieppe to D-Day

Part Two

August 2015



The next morning we checked out Pegasus Bridge. Here took place one of the smoothest, most successful operations of the war on all fronts. Paratroopers bookended the landing beaches, Yanks to the west, Limeys to the east.



In the middle of the night the Limeys somehow landed in a glider on this spot only 50 yards from this bridge over the Orne south of Caen and in minutes took the structure. It was played out in *The Longest Day*.



The coastal road is still a relaxed rural single lane.



Next stop was the incredible Mulberry artificial harbor the Allies built and hauled over. Unfortunately a four day storm blew it all to hell.



But remnants of it still form a semi circle. If you look carefully.



The other half.



This is probably the best shot of the whole semi circle from further west where there's four bunkers still with guns. The only ones.



...Uh, this isn't indicative of anything, really, honest....



Ahhh, yes. Much more like it.



This must have made one hell of a bang, especially in an enclosed place like this. I sold my .30-.06 because it was too loud.





Then we came to the big one. Omaha. Again, a long time resort beach and it is so damned beautiful.





Pictures are lousy at conveying size – but it's not *that* big. From the headlands bookending it it's only four miles wide. Four miles of utter hell.



I wanted too – and did – stand in the surf at low tide and look at what the Yanks faced. They actually started out 200 yards behind me where their landing crafts dumped them, sometimes over their heads. Then this stretch had to be crossed with those steep bluffs bristling with weapons.



The tide's almost in, but the bluffs are clear.





The last time I saw the brilliant opening sequence in *Saving Private Ryan* I was startled to notice that Spielberg got the sloped poles with teller mines atop pointing in the *wrong direction!* In later shots it's corrected. This is a period Boche picture.



The sand is sometimes firm but just as often soft. And if you know anything about wet, soft sand, it's damned hard to walk in, much less run carrying 90 pounds of gear. While being shot at with everything from MG-42 machine guns to 88s.



There's casements everywhere, especially on the four draws that had to be taken.



Some 9,400 lie in the American cemetery at the top of the bluffs. 37,000 Allies died in this theatre and 55,000 Krauts (according to the cemetery). This war was black and white, unlike most since. You could easily tell the bad guys. They wore black helmets, like Darth Vader.



Today the beach is back to traditional use.



A family of Wop tourists picnic on a bunker that once spit death.



Old men play bocci. Other old men take pictures of old men playing bocci.



For two nights we parked the Frogmobile on the promenade. The sound of surf drifts in as I type this bit, with the odd squawk of seagulls. Otherwise it's silent. It's 6:40am, the tide is out and the moon full. The same as on that fateful morning I call the most important day of my life, and I wouldn't even be born for another 14 months. But this day, more than any other, decided the course of my life. Our lives. And it was a close thing.



The most heroic action I have ever heard of anytime, anywhere, was at Point du Hoc whose big guns could reach Omaha, Utah and the big ships out at sea. They had to be taken out.



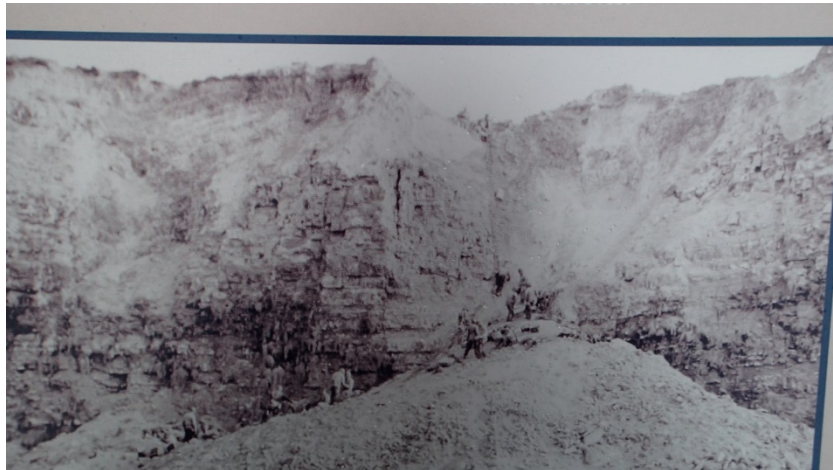
To do it Rangers had to scale these 30 meter cliffs directly below, about where the sandy beachette is. It was Mission Impossible. But Rangers don't think that way.



The air force did earlier drop the TNT equivalent of Hiroshima on the point. (Aside: note the tiny fields, surrounded by high hedgerows. Each field took three days to take once the advance began according to one soldier on film at a museum.) Because of its vital position the Nazi concentrated defences here.



It didn't stop the Rangers. Despite potato mashers raining down on them it took them just 10 minutes to shoot grappling hooks and climb that impossible cliff. This scene recounted an actual one.



To their surprise, the guns were gone! Replacing them were logs. Because of the intense aerial bombing, the sneaky Boche had moved them a kilometer inland behind a hedgerow. It didn't take the Rangers long to find and take them out. Mission Impossible accomplished.



They made their HQ and medical station here.



They still had to fight back vicious counter attacks which went on for 48 hours before Rangers from Omaha beach broke through. Of the 225 who started out, only 90 survived. Unbelievable.

These guys had balls the size of cannonballs.



Utah beach, if anything, has the tide go out further than the others. With the Mulberry harbour blown to bits, Utah took up the slack bringing in supplies until Cherbourg was taken. Today it's a favorite of sand yachters. Paragliders use the cliffs off Omaha.



That's the visitor center on the right. Yanks spell it that way. Center. Brilliant as usual, with interviews with *Band of Brothers*'s hero Dick Winters on loop. Ambrose wrote that one too.



We happened on a statue of him not far from where his platoon took out that artillery in one of the most dramatic sequences of the series. This is where the airborne were dropped on this flank, of course.



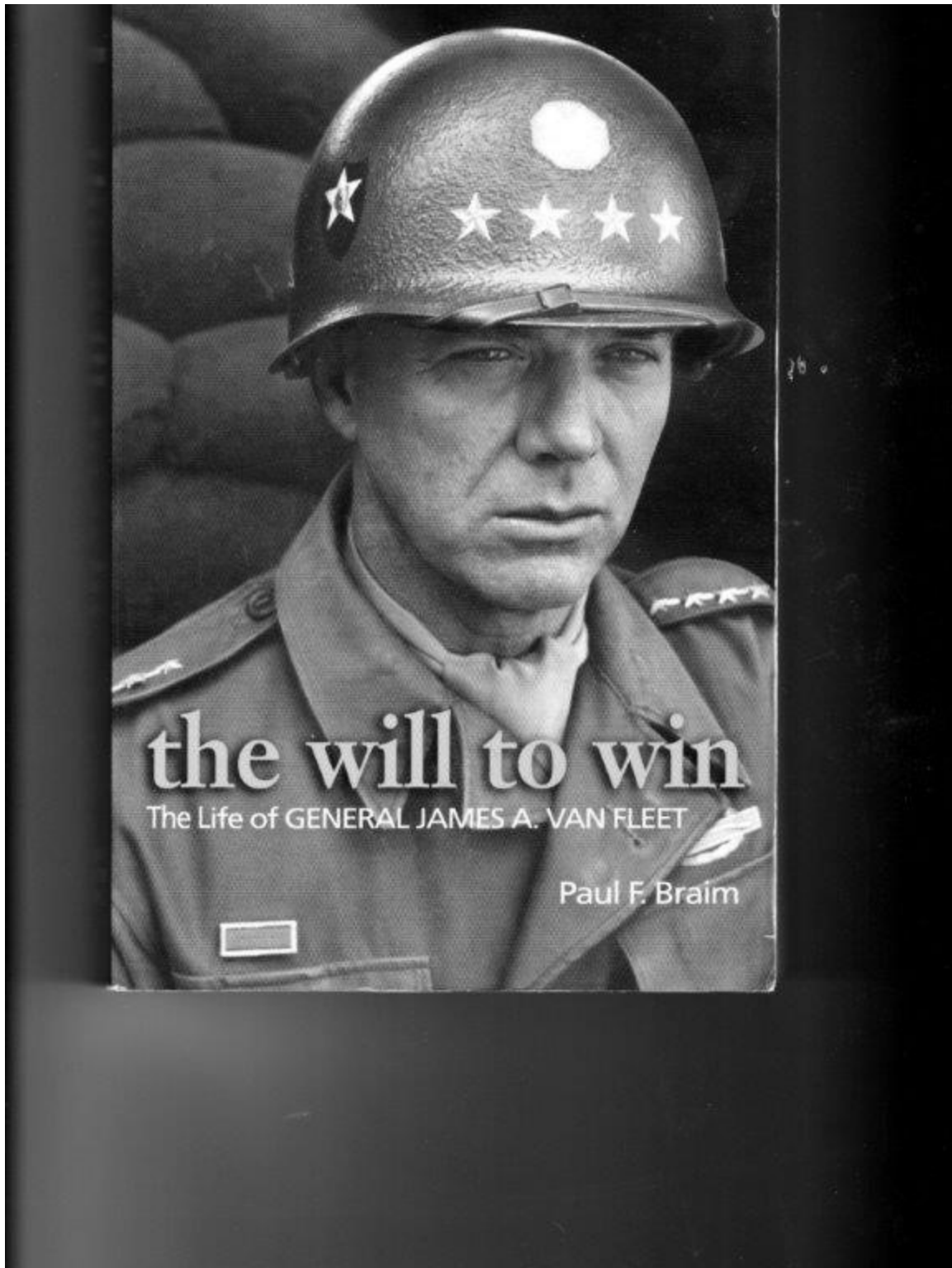
Because Rommel had flooded the area, leaving only a narrow strip of beach like Miami, the four causeways had to be protected, or they'd be trapped and blown to bits.





The visitors center is where the end of that long road ends at the beach. There's Kraut bunkers all over the place.





Here I have the only family connection to D-Day, though it's distant. General Jim and I are sixth cousins, four times removed. We are linked to one hot and heavy roll in the hay in New Amsterdam in the 1600s. He led the breakout with such ferocity that by August he was bumped up to a general. Patton called him "hand's down" his best subordinate. Truman said he was the

“best combat general of the war.” After the war in ‘48 he sent Cousin Jimmy to Greece to blow out the commies, then to lead UN troops in Korea.

issues lead to heavy losses during the Battle of the Falaise Gap in Cotentin.

Between D-Day and the end of July 1944, the division changes command three times before joining with the 3rd Army under General Patton. The division gains new momentum under the command of Major General Raymond McLain, and later Major General James Van Fleet.

During its 11 months of action, which end on May 9, 1945, the 90th Division fights and wins difficult battles, erasing from memory its chaotic debut. By the end of the war, it is considered one of the best infantry divisions on the European front. Of the approximately 40,000 men who fight in this division, 3,340 are killed and 18,051 wounded.

A monument at Utah Beach honors the memory of the men of the 90th US Infantry Division.

He rates copy in the museum. Most accolades are directed to the grunts in the field, as they should be. The real heroes fighting the war.



Jimmy served under General Teddy Roosevelt Jr., a colourful figure. He was one of the few generals to go ashore in the first wave on any beach. Jim wasn't colourful. His talent was leadership and motivating men and here he was a genius.



But now, so sad, please don't cry, but it's time to wave goodbye as we come to the end of another too long Blah Blah.

