

# The Maid Of Utah Beach



By Wendell Bell

**W**e had just about given up waiting for the museum to open when we saw her. She walked up the long block between the two lines of desolate houses, from one of which she must have come. Drifting sand swirled at her feet. She moved in the early April sun, deep in thought, not expecting anyone to be waiting—not this early in the year, certainly not at this hour of the morning.

The low-lying sun stretched and narrowed the shadow that moved with her. She wore a tailored dark-blue suit with a pillbox hat to match, a light blue shirt and black shoes: the understated uniform of a museum attendant. Under her left arm she carried two flags, one American and one French, folded into small triangles of red, white and blue.

When she saw us standing there, she quickened her pace. A few seconds later we

heard a musical "*Bonjour, monsieur et madame.*"

A few yards from the small museum were two flagpoles, newly painted white. She smiled at us and began to attach a flag to the lines of one of the poles. I went forward to help. It was a lonely ceremony, raising one then the other flag on the deserted Normandy coast, with only the three of us to watch each one slide up the pole and lift out full in the off-channel breeze.

Across from the museum was a large parking area in which our car stood alone. Fifty yards or so from the museum on the side away from the houses was a lunch stand not yet open for the summer season. The rest was beach, patches of determined grass amid the dunes, smooth wet sand stretching to the foam of the waves as they washed ashore, and jeeps, tanks, trucks

Forever rooted at the intersection of present and past, she has taken it as her mission in life to preserve and recall for thousands of visitors the memories of the great Allied invasion of 1944.



and landing craft all askew, quietly rusting. A tiny monument stood on the rise above the beach.

The museum itself was what had once been a German bunker, a large, hollow chunk of cold concrete. Small boxy additions had been added from time to time. More remains—some sunken caissons and small craft—jutting up in the water some yards from the beach. A road, now repaved but still named after the American GI who engineered it in 1944, thrust itself off the beach at right angles and disappeared inland.

Listening to the wind, I thought I could hear, ever so faintly across the years, the roar of the trucks and shouts of the men as they moved the ammunition, gasoline, rations, medical supplies and equipment off the beach on to the road. It must have been something to see: within three months

400,000 long tons of freight had been delivered from the Normandy beaches along the "Red Ball Express" over distances extending up to 700 miles.

"Étiez-vous ici?" she asked.

"What?" I said, not understanding her.

"Were you here, on D-day? June 6th, 1944?"

"Oh, no."

I would have added that *my* war had been in the Philippines and that, when I was not flying, I spent my time fighting mosquitoes and the creeping crud in a tropical hole far from what I imagined was the more glamorous life of off-duty pilots in Europe; that in order to fulfill some yearning and curiosity my wife and I were here now to see the major European sites of World War II, that we had started a few days ago at another Normandy beach.

But she was too quick for me. "Do you

have relatives who were here? Friends? Someone you knew?"

Sorry now to disappoint her, I looked away and said, "No. I wasn't here."

She turned and faced the museum, gesturing for us to come closer. "Venez."

"This part," she said, "was built by the Germans. A blockhouse. Lookouts were here," she pointed, "guns here, communications corner there. Only a few men were assigned to this blockhouse."

We followed her into the museum. The walls were lined with photos of the invasion, of ships, men, landing barges, piles of supplies on the beach, trucks. Glass cases were filled with rifles, grenades, bayonets, pieces of uniforms, insignia, jagged chunks of shrapnel. Mannequins dressed in various uniforms of the American, British, Canadian and Free French armies stood in the corners. Others were in German uniforms.

Ghosts of the past were there: five infantry divisions landing at five different beaches and three airborne divisions behind them; 11,000 aircraft, 1,000 minesweepers and auxiliary vessels, about 1,000 merchant ships and smaller craft, over 350 warships and other combat vessels—the greatest armada ever assembled.

The U.S. 4th Infantry Division was the first to hit Utah Beach.

**T**hen, it all came alive. At first, she described the German occupation. She had been afraid of the German soldiers, but they had treated her kindly. Even the German colonel in charge of the area had spoken to her softly. She lost her fear. The Germans were simply people.

Then the Allied invasion came. A high whine came from her lips imitating the falling bombs. Shells whistled in and exploded. Ear-splitting booms, bursts of fire and smoke, crashing buildings, flying dirt and metal pierced her description of the destruction. Up from the indelible memories of the past it came.

Then she was sobbing.

She paused a moment, then said, "I was here. I was ten years old."

Her father had refused to leave the area, even after he knew the Allied invasion was



on the way. So she had been there: through the pre-invasion bombing and shelling and through the invasion itself. Fear rose again as she brought the scalding memories forth. From the mature woman before us came the reruns from the eyes of a young girl—what she had seen on Utah Beach, what she knew of the whole Normandy invasion.

She was wide-eyed, panting, shaking, with perspiration beading on her upper lip, seeing it all again. Astonishment. The incredible sight of the assault troops on their way to the beach. The massiveness of it. She made us hear and feel the noise and confusion. Machine guns yammering. Mortars landing, a shrill, long cry followed by deafening sound. Distant shells landing. Carump! Carump!

She threw herself on the floor, showed us how a boy from Iowa aimed a submarine gun, fired and killed a boy from Munich. She was talking fast now, we could hardly follow all she said. "*Alors, et puis, et puis,*" on she went.

She conveyed the numbing fear, the haunted faces of the boys coming in the landing barges. Stoic, subdued, sober they stood, victims of their time and place—boys who were to age in minutes into men before her eyes, men bonded together by mutual dependence and the searing intensity of emotion, by their helplessness and fear.

Somewhere inside her, over 30 years later, they lived. The scenes now gushed forth for us to know how it had been: the beach crawling with people, the geysers in the water, the sinking ships; barges crashing against the concrete hedgehogs, a derelict landing craft discarded; the thin, high howl of diving planes; the groans of wounded, eviscerated men, spurting blood; the adrenaline rushing to pumping

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hearts and racing pulses; the turmoil, confusion and chaos; the thunderous rumbles of explosions; the terror and excitement; the dry mouths and wool-covered tongues; the torn and mutilated flesh; the rows of blanket-wrapped bodies and the smells of death.

She paused to catch her breath.

We thought of the dead. My mind went back to the evening before, when my wife and I had visited the American cemetery behind Omaha Beach. Perfectly lined up, there are 9,385 white crosses or, upon occasion, Stars of David, made of Carrara marble from the mountain near Pisa where da Vinci and Michelangelo selected their sculpting materials.

Amid closely cropped, beautifully green grass, acres upon acres they line up along the columns, rows and diagonals, even, orderly, smooth. Most of the graves can be identified, some of the dead are unknown. A large sculpted figure on a pedestal, arms outstretched, held one arm upward, head up, eyes looking toward the sky. Nearby, the victor's ideals—or perhaps illusions—"Freedom," "Hope," "Peace," "Justice," "Humanity."

**L**ater, we had lost our way to Sainte-Mère-Église where we had planned to spend the night and happened upon a German cemetery. There were no closely cropped edges of grass or Carrara marble here, no lofty sentiments.

Instead, there was stark reality: rough-hewn, black granite crosses; splashes of orange day lilies. In the center stood a circular mound of green grass-covered earth, atop it a large black cross towering over two shrouded figures of black, looking down. There were no illusions here, only the simple truth of war: "Death."

But the small museum at Utah Beach is not for the dead, but for the living.

"They come back," she said. "They bring their wives and their children. Look." She pointed to some photos that had been autographed.

"They come back and find themselves in the blown-up picture of the invasion. Sometimes relatives come, to remember lost sons, husbands, brothers."

"They come back," she continued, "the Americans come. The Germans. The Free French. The British and Canadians. *Regardez.*"

She showed us an American Legionnaire's cap, left by an ex-soldier on a reunion trip; a wallet left ten years later that had been carried onto the beach in 1944; photos of her with German tourists, some of whom had been part of the occupying

force; an old uniform that he had worn on D-day brought by an American GI on his second trip in order to please her; a letter to her from the German ex-commandant, a prized possession; photos of wives and children, then newly acquired by the survivors of Utah Beach; more postcards, letters and photos with words of greeting, love and appreciation to her.

This museum was alive, up-to-date. More extensions, more space will be needed to hold the mementos of what has happened since the war. The past is pulled into the present, the present into the past—and into the future: plans for reunions are under way. In a few years, the 40th reunion group will pose with an aging ten-year-old girl for photos that will later hang on the museum walls; gentle friends, born out of insane confusion, each living with the same aching memories.

The realities of Utah Beach are lying under white marble and black granite. They are also the warm, breathing people whose distant lives are cemented together—and to her life most of all—by an incomparable experience, matched by nothing else that has, or will, ever happen to them.

For as long as she lives it may be so. This fragment of the Normandy coast will not die. She was married at ten, like a bride of Christ, to a small piece of history that happened at this sandy place.

As we leave and cross the parking lot, she stands there at the doorway to the past. Still remembering, she steps out into the swirling sand, the sun now high in the sky. When we reach the car, we turn once to wave good-bye. The two flags on their white poles flap as the breeze quickens. She waves to us, the maid of Utah Beach, then returns to her calling, being there and waiting—waiting for them to come back. ☞

## True Faith

**D**uring World War II, chaplains were equipped with "traveling churches": collapsible organs, portable altars, public address systems and complete kits for dispensing communion and the like. To cope with all his equipment, the Army chaplain was authorized, whenever possible, a ¼-ton truck and a ¼-ton trailer.

One day, after weeks of struggling with all the chaplain's gear, a frustrated assistant said, "Sir, I believe even the Lord traveled lighter than this."

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