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# D-DAY TOUR

We tour Normandy on the anniversary of Operation Overlord



The gun battery at Longues-sur-Mer was rendered useless on D-Day, but the 152mm guns are still impressive

Words: John Sootheran & Will Hawkins





Will and I are here to explore the area and find out more about this momentous event in which two members of our families were involved. Only one survived it

» It's hard to imagine, as we approach the Normandy coast on Brittany Ferries' luxurious Normandie super-ferry, what this very spot must have been like 74 years ago. Back then, over 130,000 Allied troops – including 53,000 Brits – must have been terrified as their cramped and puke-filled landing craft, rocked and rolled their way towards the unwelcoming shores of northern France. Despite days of intense Allied bombing, the Nazi's coastal defences remained largely intact, so that, even if they survived the deadly heavy-artillery bombardment from the Longues-sur-Mer and Merville batteries a few miles away, they would face unremitting machine gun fire from 'impenetrable' concrete bunkers the moment the bow ramp was dropped.



I look across the deck and see some of those old soldiers taking in the view. Now in their 90s, I wonder what they must be thinking.

Normandy has been defined by the events of 6 June 1944, yet this is a region with so much to offer, from beaches and architecture to great food, history and culture. Will H and I are here in a spacious Caravelair Antarès 480 tourer to explore the area and find out more about this momentous event in which two members of our families were involved. Only one survived it.

Here are the D-Day stories of Pilot Officer Arthur Sootheran and Captain Guy Hawkins; plus our favourite places to visit for a flavour of what happened here in 1944. Read on, especially if you plan to visit in 2019 for the D-Day 75 Anniversary.



The 480 is ideally laid out for great cooking and dining

**ABOVE LEFT**  
Remembrance ceremony at Colleville-Montgomery on D-Day

**ABOVE CENTRE**  
Brigadier Lord Lovat statue at Sword Beach

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Ranville Cemetery, close to Pegasus Bridge, is a wonderfully tranquil place

**BRITTANY FERRIES**

The easiest way to get to Normandy is by Brittany Ferries on its Portsmouth to Caen route. These high-quality crossings actually dock in the pretty town of Ouistreham, right in the middle of D-Day country and a 10-minute drive from Pegasus Bridge.

The crossings are a little more expensive than Dover to Calais, but they save three or four hours towing in France, and the ships are unbeatable for crossing the Channel.

On board, we recommend the canteen-style breakfast, which is both tasty and well-priced, there's loads for kids to do, plenty of sun

decks and even two on-board cinemas and a duty-free shop.

I've crossed a dozen or more times on this five-hour service and only had one journey that was even slightly rough.

Recommended.

W [brittany-ferries.co.uk](http://brittany-ferries.co.uk)



...and it made a versatile and comfortable base for our D-Day explorations



## Caravelair's D-Day Tour



### LET THE TOUR BEGIN...

Our first stop was the brilliantly-located Côte de Nacre campsite which we booked through the Caravan & Motorhome Club – always a guarantee of quality and cleanliness.

Our huge pitch was located close to the very clean and modern facilities and there is good separation between pitches.

After sorting the lightweight and easy-to-manoeuvre Antarès, we suddenly heard the unmistakable sound of bagpipes wafting across the site. Ordinarily, this would make me run for the hills, but the sound seemed softer than normal and less ear-grating than bagpipes are usually perceived to be. On investigating, we discovered an impromptu musical performance by The Band of Liberation Army taking pace outside reception. Strangely, this musical ensemble was not



Scottish, but Dutch... and they were brilliant.

There were several veterans there and a few tears were shed as the amazing music whisked them back 74 years.

### COLLEVILLE-MONTGOMERY

#### Drive along the D514 coast road north-west from Ouistreham

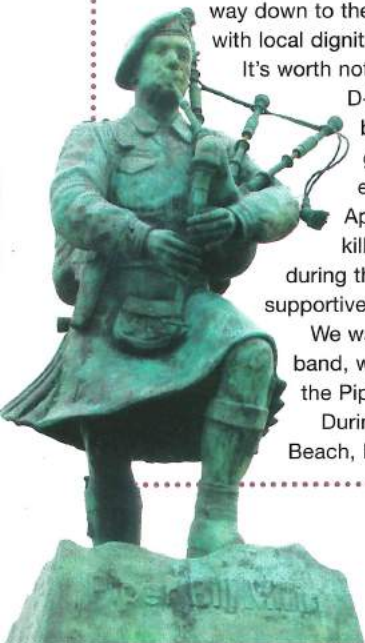
We stumbled across a remembrance ceremony as we drove through Colleville-sur-Mer in the Colleville-Montgomery 'commune' near the campsite. This small coastal region, named for the Allied commander, Bernard Montgomery, better known as Monty of Alamein, celebrates his achievements with a statue. Another marching band provided a musical backdrop to the moving service which was carried out in English and French, before the band and a number of veterans made their way down to the sea, past a platform positively loaded with local dignitaries.

It's worth noting that the French totally embrace the D-Day commemorations. Yes, it is big business for this region, but they really go to town with their efforts in the events and decorations departments. Apparently, 160,000 French civilians were killed by the Allied bombing and artillery during the invasion, but they remain resolutely supportive of these amazing tributes.

We walked down to the beach with the band, where another monument is located, the Piper Bill Millin statue.

During the landings in this sector of Sword Beach, Brigadier Lord Lovat, chief of the 1st

Special Service Brigade, and a Highlands chief, ordered his personal piper, Bill Millin, to pipe his commandos ashore. You can only imagine what the German forces must have thought as an 'unarmed man in a skirt, wrestling a screeching octopus' led the attack against them! Yes, you'd run too.







## ARTHUR GEORGE SOOTHERAN

Pilot Officer with the Royal Canadian Air Force

My sister was walking her dog through the village of Newton on Ouse near York, when she noticed a small memorial plaque at the side of the road. When she looked more closely she was surprised (given the rarity of the name) to see an Arthur George Sootheran listed on the plaque, which commemorated the crew of a Halifax bomber that crashed in the village in 1944.

Ruth knew this wasn't a member of the immediate Yorkshire Sootheran clan, so we researched it online.

Turns out, AGS was a Canadian Sootheran, a Pilot-Officer of the RCAF. He was stationed in Yorkshire and, ironically, ended his days less than 10 miles from where his ancestors lived from the 14th century to the present day, around Easingwold and Ampleforth. I doubt he would have known any of this, or even that my dad was a six-year old growing up in the village of Crayke just a few miles away.

His plane, J for Johnnie, part of the 426 Thunderbird Squadron, crashed while returning from a mission to bomb a rail marshalling yard in Mayenne, France. 70 Halifax bombers and 10 Lancasters dropped 289 tons of bombs early that morning in June.

In the days surrounding D-Day, thousands of tons of bombs were dropped on key targets in northern France in an attempt to obstruct German reinforcements and supplies reaching Normandy. It was a key part of the liberation strategy.

J for Johnnie was flown by Pilot Officer Neal Craig and was supposed to have six other crew that night. Tragically, an aircraft on the adjacent dispersal point

developed a fault and couldn't fly. A new pilot on that plane, who was there to gain experience before taking command of his own aircraft, ran across to Craig's plane and jumped on board, much to the surprise of the crew. This was to prove a disastrous decision for Flying-Officer Douglas Rendall Parker.

Having left RAF Linton-on-Ouse at 10.59pm, the entire flight took place in poor weather. At 4.10am the following morning, 9 June, after a successful mission, Arthur's Halifax approached RAF Linton-on-Ouse, but, as the weather was so bad, they were told to divert to Nutts Corner in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the plane didn't have enough fuel remaining to divert, so, on seeing a break in the cloud, the pilot attempted to land.

He lowered the undercarriage and was in a slow glide at 800 feet, when the number two cylinder suddenly blew off the starboard inner engine causing engine failure and a wing fire. At such low altitude, there wasn't time to react and the plane plunged into houses in Newton-on-Ouse, completely destroying one of them.

The mid-upper gunner was thrown clear of the devastation virtually uninjured and rescued the badly-injured pilot from the wreckage. The remaining crew were all killed in the crash.

The Camamile family, including two small children, one just four days old, who lived in the devastated cottage were miraculously rescued unharmed.

Arthur George Sootheran died, aged just 23, on 9 June 1944, having given his all for the liberation of Europe. He, and the Canadian crew who perished with him, are buried in Stonefall Cemetery, Harrogate.

JS



## CAEN MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Esplanade Eisenhower, 14050, Caen

This is a very impressive building and museum with thought-provoking permanent exhibitions and a world-class selection of touring exhibits.

As you walk through the front doors you're dramatically confronted by a Hawker Typhoon fighter-bomber diving straight towards you. This is a precise replica of a plane that was downed on D-Day defending allied troops on the Normandy Beaches.

The Memorial is built above command bunkers used by the Germans throughout the invasion.

## MERVILLE BATTERY

Place du 9ème Bataillon, 14810 Merville-Franceville-Plage

This artillery emplacement is a few kilometres from Ouistreham, on the eastern side of the Orne estuary.

It's well kempt and truly fascinating, thanks to an intrepid attack by Allied parachutists in preparation for the D-Day landings.

Military intelligence led allied forces to believe that the battery housed large-calibre artillery. However, after a bloody battle for the site, it was discovered that only 100mm cannons made by Škoda were sited there. With a range of 8000m, these could still hit Sword Beach, though distant targets were not visible from Merville and fire had to be directed by spotters positioned nearer to the targets.

600 soldiers were sent in by parachute and Horsa glider, but only 150 actually made it to the assembly point.

The Merville Battery comprised four gun casemates with six-foot-thick, steel-reinforced-concrete walls and roofs.







Allow 20 minutes to wander through these before grabbing a drink at the café or visiting the touring exhibitions. We saw the World Press Photo gallery with its powerful and evocative images blown up to huge proportions, and the thought-provoking and fascinating Cold War exhibition which transported us back to our 1980s childhoods, and will take others back further.

General admission to the museum, bunker and memorial garden is free, with some exhibitions and cinema shows charged for. Check the website to see what's on when you visit.

**W** [normandy.memorial-caen.com](http://normandy.memorial-caen.com)



Each was designed to protect the First World War-vintage Škoda artillery. Other buildings on the site included a command bunker, a building to accommodate the men, and several ammunition stores. The battery was defended by a 20mm anti-aircraft gun and 15 machine guns positions.

Following a bloody battle, the allies were victorious, but only 75 men survived.

The Merville battery is definitely worth visiting, with plenty to see – including a period Dakota DC3 troop-carrying plane – but, like those brave Allied soldiers, you may well be disappointed that no large calibre cannons are located at the site. For that you need to head north-west up the coast to Longues-sur-Mer.

**W** [batterie-merville.com](http://batterie-merville.com)

## CAPTAIN GUY HAWKINS RN

### Royal Navy Officer in World War 2

My grandpa, Guy Hawkins, was a Royal Navy Officer in World War 2. He had a crucial role in the Normandy Landings on 6 June 1944.

Grandpa was given the role of Fleet Gunnery Officer for Operation Neptune, the naval element of the plan, Operation Overlord. His role was to plan the naval gunfire for the landings. Guy Hawkins was the chief architect behind the greatest naval bombardment in history.

His planning office was in Norfolk House in St James's Square, London. The offices were the headquarters for SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force), commanded by General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

When Guy Hawkins began the role, he arrived in his office and was surprised to find it empty. Normally, when he took over a new role, he'd arrive and have a 'handover' from the officer leaving the role. But, this was, of course, unprecedented. Grandpa had to start from scratch. There were no maps, documents or handbooks to explain what to do.

To enable the troops to get ashore, the Royal and US Navies had to bombard the German positions ashore. The bombardment would have to either keep the Germans pinned down, so they could not fire at the Allied troops, or it would have to destroy their positions.

To be effective, Guy Hawkins needed to know where the Germans had placed their defences. He gathered intelligence from RAF reconnaissance flights, resistance fighters and special forces troops.

With this intelligence, he built a picture of the positions along the landing beaches codenamed Gold, Juno, Sword, Omaha and Utah. Guy had a map in his offices onto which he pinned the positions. From this, he selected targets for the navies to

shell and the RAF to bomb. The Allies used over 1200 combat ships on D-Day.

You can still see one of the Royal Navy ships used on D-Day to bombard the Germans. HMS Belfast is moored on the Thames near Tower Bridge, and one was of the first ships to open fire at 05.27 on that momentous morning.

The battery at Longues-sur-Mer is typical of the German defensive positions. It had four 'casemates' each containing a 152mm naval gun, and sits between Gold and Omaha beaches. The casemates, which you can still see today, are two-metres thick, making them extremely resilient.

After the initial bombing raids on D-Day, the Naval shelling began. A French cruiser, Georges Leygues, with its nine 155mm guns; and an American battleship, Arkansas, with its 12 305mm guns, began to fire at the battery.

Later, British cruisers, HMS Argonaut and HMS Ajax disabled three of the guns, but only after the Germans had fired 170 shells from the battery at the Allies.

The final gun was disabled when troops from the Devonshire Regiment (the regiment I served in 43 years later) attacked it. The German crew surrendered to them, allowing more troops to land ashore safely.

My grandpa's part in the D-Day Landings helped make Operation Overlord a success. He said afterwards, he was amazed at how the Allies fooled the Germans on the location of the invasion.

When you visit the D-Day beaches, you too will be amazed at what the Allies achieved on that day, especially when you see what they faced. **WH**





## Caravelair's D-Day Tour

### OUR VAN

#### CARAVELAIR ANTARÈS 480

£18,995 including delivery  
W [marquisleisure.co.uk](http://marquisleisure.co.uk)

Berths 4  
Body 6.25m  
Overall 7.31m  
Width 2.3m  
Headroom 1.95m  
Heating Truma Combi 6  
MIRO 1327kg  
MTPLM 1500kg  
Min towcar weight  
Novice 1764kg  
Expert 1500kg



The 480 combines luxury with light weight, meaning you can tow this home-from-home with most standard saloon cars.

It's the ideal option for couples or 2+2 families, where the kids (or occasional guests) can sleep on the front sofas or vast make-up double bed, while you enjoy the spacious and comfy fixed double bed with all-round access.

The quality kitchen makes cooking for four a pleasure, while the lovely U-shaped lounge, with fold-up tabletop, ensures couples' or family dining is roomy and pleasant.

A decent-sized washroom with Belfast-style basin, loo (with legroom) and super-stylish shower completes this superb touring package.

The single-axle Antarès is also a delight to tow (even without electronic aids), and a doddle to manoeuvre on site. *C'est magnifique!*



The Germans had only finished building this site, part of the Atlantic Wall, a month earlier in May 1944



#### LONGUES-SUR-MER BATTERY

39 Rue de la Mer, 14400 Longues-sur-Mer

If you want to see the 'big guns', this site, 40 minutes west of Ouistreham, is the one for you. Set on cliffs between Omaha and Gold beaches, there are four reinforced-concrete casemates, each one protecting a 152mm gun, capable of destroying troop ships and warships many miles out to sea.

The Germans had only finished building this site, part of the Atlantic Wall, a month earlier in May 1944, and following the bombing and naval gunfire mentioned in the Captain Guy Hawkins panel, the guns fell silent.

184 Germans surrendered to Allied soldiers the following day. Half of them were aged over 40, as Hitler had moved his best troops up the coast to the Calais region, where the Germans had been fooled into thinking the main invasion would be taking place.

The Allies had luck on their side that day. As soon as the commanders in Normandy realised a major attack was imminent, they contacted Hitler's residence to get approval for troop and artillery movements. Hitler was asleep and, legend has it, his staff were too afraid to wake him. Most were convinced that the main attack would be in Calais, and that this was just a decoy.

Confusing messages poured into the Nazi HQ that morning: "I can see 6000 ships approaching the Normandy coast" ("Of course you can, soldier. Now stop drinking the heater fuel!").

"Thousands of parachutists are dropping into Calais!" (They were dummies on parachutes.)

Hitler finally rose from his drug-induced slumber at 4pm, by which time it was too late; the Longues-sur-Mer guns had been virtually eliminated, a beachhead had been established and Allied aircraft ruled the skies over Normandy.

**DON'T MISS THIS**

See our Caravelair  
D-Day video at  
[caravan.ma/dday1](http://caravan.ma/dday1)



**Caravan  
TV**

»»



## WE STAYED AT



### CAMPING SANDAYA THE CÔTE DE NACRE

17 Rue du Général James Moulton  
14750 Saint-Aubin-sur-Mer, France  
T 00 33 231 971445  
W [caravanclub.co.uk](http://caravanclub.co.uk)

Six miles west of Ouistreham, Cte de Nacre has an extensive pool complex, a shop stocking most essential provisions and super-sized pitches. It's also ideally located for exploring the Normandy Beaches and Pegasus Bridge, and a short drive into pretty Caen for lunch. Book through the CAMC.



### Caravan & Motorhome Club Sites in Normandy

Here are eight more recommended campsites in the Normandy region.

- N03 – Camping le Point du Jour
- N10 – Camping Riva Bella (This is more of a transit site)
- N06 – Camping Château de Martragny
- N01 – Camping Le Brévedent
- N09 – Camping Port'land
- N04 – Camping Le Colombier
- N12 – Camping Le Cormoran
- N14 – Camping l'Anse du Brick

*NB Caravans longer than 8m should contact the campsite for information.*

W [caravanclub.co.uk/overseas/france/](http://caravanclub.co.uk/overseas/france/)

### NORMANDY BEACHES

This region's vast beaches reflect the local weather. They can be wild and windswept or golden and sunny, depending when you visit. Numerous monuments and statues stand along the coast from Ouistreham to Quinéville, between which the five landing beach zones are located.

We visited Sword Beach at low tide on a grey day, close to the Monument Français Libres on Boulevard Aristide Briand, Ouistreham. The flame-like monument is built atop a cast-iron German machine gun emplacement which was perfectly positioned to spray the beach with up to 1500 rounds per minute from its advanced MG42 machine guns.



### THE GRAND BUNKER, OUISTREHAM

**Avenue du 6 Juin, 14150 Ouistreham**

It may be an eyesore in a pretty residential street, but this 'brutalist concrete block' was arguably the highlight of our trip to Normandy.

This is an original command post in the Nazis' Normandy defences. Inside the 52-foot-high building are rooms recreated to look like they would have done during WW2. There's a generator room, air filtration system, kitchen, bunkroom, command centre, armoury and a lookout post atop the heavily-fortified tower.

When the allies invaded, they took heavy machine gun fire from the bunker and stick grenades were thrown from the top... so they



**RANVILLE CEMETERY**

Recommending a cemetery seems a little odd, but, if you want to visit one place, which sums up the vast sacrifice of those few days in June 1944, Ranville is the one. This British cemetery can be busy on anniversaries, but otherwise it is beautiful, tranquil and immaculately kept.

Walk among the seemingly endless rows of pristine, white gravestones and you'll see that some of those we entrusted with the liberation of Europe were barely out of boyhood. This includes Private Harry Allcock of the Parachute Regiment, who didn't even see his 19th birthday.

Over 2500 brave souls rest here, including 232 German soldiers.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission should be commended for its excellent work.

W [cwgc.org](http://cwgc.org)



simply skirted around it, leaving its occupants totally surrounded.

A few days later, on 9 June, Lieutenant Bob Orrell of the Royal Engineers, led an assault on the bunker. Accompanied by three men, he set explosive charges to penetrate the bunker's thick steel door. After four hours of using increasingly powerful explosives, they finally managed to blow it open! Realising their hopeless position, the Nazi garrison of two officers and 50 men inside surrendered immediately. The liberation of Ouistreham was complete.

There's so much to see and learn inside, this museum is a 'must see'.

W [museedugrandbunker.com](http://museedugrandbunker.com)





## Caravelair's D-Day Tour



### ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

#### D-Day Tour August 2018

##### CAMPSITES

**Camping Côte de Nacre**  
17 Rue du Général James  
Moulton, 14750 Saint-Aubin-  
sur-Mer, France  
T 00 33 231 971445  
W [caravanclub.co.uk](http://caravanclub.co.uk)

##### OTHER CLUB SITES

N03 – Camping le Point du Jour  
N10 – Camping Riva Bella  
(This is more of a transit site)  
N06 – Camping Château de  
Martragny  
N01 – Camping Le Brévedent  
N09 – Camping Port'land  
N04 – Camping Le Colombier  
N12 – Camping Le Cormoran  
N14 – Camping l'Anse du Brick

W [caravanclub.co.uk/  
overseas/france/](http://caravanclub.co.uk/overseas/france/)

##### BRITTANY FERRIES

W [Brittany-ferries.co.uk](http://Brittany-ferries.co.uk)

##### WHAT TO SEE

##### THE GRAND BUNKER

Avenue du 6 Juin, 14150  
Ouistreham  
W [museedugrandbunker.com](http://museedugrandbunker.com)

##### LONGUES-SUR-MER

**BATTERY**  
39 Rue de la Mer, 14400  
Longues-sur-Mer

##### MERVILLE BATTERY

Place du 9ème Batallion, 14810  
Merville-Franceville-Plage  
W [batterie-merville.com](http://batterie-merville.com)

##### COLLEVILLE- MONTGOMERY

Drive along the D514 coast  
road north-west from  
Ouistreham  
W [collevillesurmer.fr/](http://collevillesurmer.fr/)

##### CAEN MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Esplanade Eisenhower, 14050,  
Caen  
W [normandy.memorial-caen.  
com](http://normandy.memorial-caen.com)

##### D-DAY CEMETERIES

W [cwgc.org](http://cwgc.org)

##### RECOMMENDED EATERIE CASSEROLE & BOUCHONS

70 Avenue de la Mer, 14150  
Ouistreham (amazing lunch!)  
W [casseroleetbouchons.fr](http://casseroleetbouchons.fr)



##### PEGASUS BRIDGE & MUSEUM

##### Bénouville, Normandy

The story of the attack on Pegasus Bridge, shortly after midnight on 6 June 1944, is one of the most enduring and incredible in military history.

The bridge, over the Caen Canal, was of major strategic importance, as, if the Allies controlled it, they could prevent enemy forces reaching the main battle zone, and also use it as a route to push out from Normandy across France.

In one of the boldest aerial assaults in history, 181 troops in six Horsa gliders landed close to the bridge... the nearest stopping less than 50 yards away. Give that pilot a 'ceegar'!

This silent approach meant that the German garrison guarding the bridge was taken completely by surprise, and just two British soldiers were killed before the bridge was overrun.

Pegasus Bridge has become a magnet for D-Day 'tourists' and is always busy. The nearby Pegasus Museum is well worth a visit, especially as the original bridge was moved there in 1994, when the canal was widened.

Café Gondrée, right next to the bridge, serves food and drinks, and was one of the first properties to be liberated in France. Mme Gondrée, who still resides there, was a small child when the invasion happened and has run the café ever since. It's a pretty cool story, but, in our experience, it's a rather expensive and unfriendly place. We can't recommend it.

Lieutenant Den Brotheridge was mortally wounded fighting his way across the bridge and became recognised as the first person to die in the D-Day invasion. He is buried nearby in Ranville cemetery. <<