



# D-DAY GREENLANES

John Pearson drives the tracks used by Allied and German forces in the bitter Battle for Normandy that followed D-Day in June 1944

PHOTOS: JÉRÔME ANDRÉ

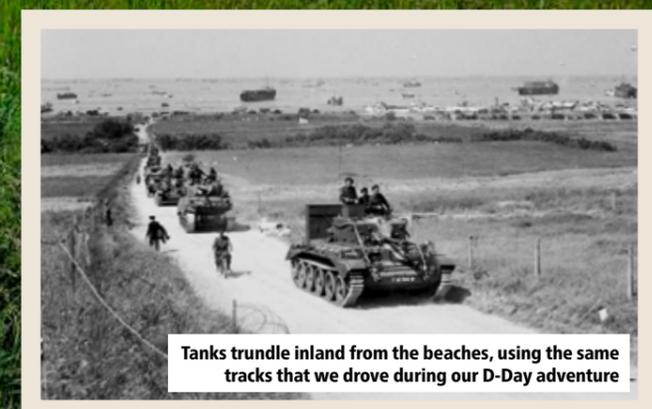
**O**ur convoy pauses on a clifftop track west of Arromanches-les-Bains. The sky is cloudless, the sea is deep blue and there's just a single fishing boat making its way across the horizon.

But it was a very different scene here 71 years ago, on June 6, 1944. The D-Day landings were underway and the scene in front of us would have been absolute mayhem and undoubtedly terrifying for those involved.

The sea along a 50-mile stretch of Normandy coastline was crowded with vessels; 1213 battleships with their guns pounding the German coastal defences, 736 ancillary craft, 864 merchant ships and 4126 landing craft packed with Allied soldiers unloading on to the beaches. The defending German infantry were said to have commented that the horizon turned black with the number of boats they could see. Other witnesses said the sea turned red with blood.

About 185,000 brave soldiers from Britain, America, Canada and other allied countries had to fight their way past barbed wire, wooden stakes, metal tripods, mines and withering machine-gun fire to capture the beaches. Thousands died or were badly injured, but many more continued inland to liberate France and then ultimately march on to Berlin to end the conflict the following May.

To keep the troops supplied with ammunition, equipment, food and fuel, the Allies had to build a port. To capture an existing one at Cherbourg or Saint-Malo, was impossible; the Germans had them all securely defended. So Britain's Prime Minister and war leader Winston Churchill had the brainwave of creating massive concrete floating harbours and towing them in sections across the Channel to Normandy.

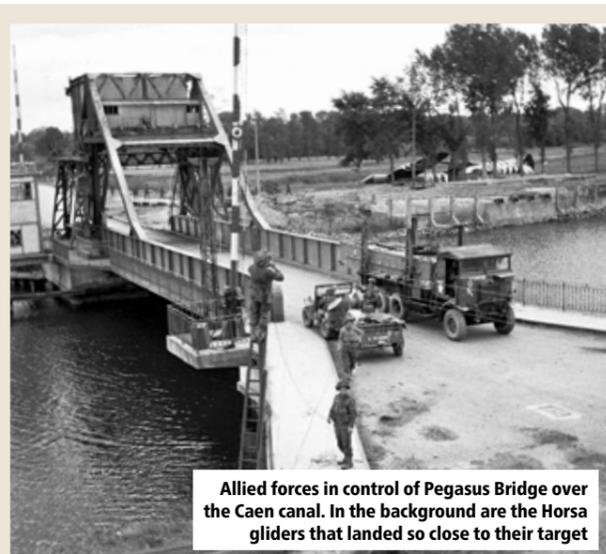


Tanks trundle inland from the beaches, using the same tracks that we drove during our D-Day adventure

Remnants of these so-called Mulberry harbours are still visible in the sea and on the Arromanches-les-Bains beach below our clifftop viewpoint today.

**Day 1**  
Pegasus Bridge to Arromanches  
**Highlight:** A moving ceremony

We're with a group of Land Rover enthusiasts on battlefields by 4x4's D-Day adventure in Normandy, France. Like the Battle of the Somme adventure I did with the company in »



Allied forces in control of Pegasus Bridge over the Caen canal. In the background are the Horsa gliders that landed so close to their target



The original Pegasus Bridge, now a museum exhibit, hosts a D-Day commemoration



'We look north towards the sea, on a track that 71 years ago saw British tanks head inland'

2014, this is a greenlaning trip with a difference. We're driving tracks and trails that were used by the troops 71 years ago, and visiting places of significance to WW2's Battle of Normandy.

Our adventure starts on D-Day minus one, June 5. We meet the rest of the group and battlefieldsby4x4 trip leaders Carl Liversage, Nigel Stevens and Nick Gage at what became known as Pegasus Bridge, near Caen. Carl and Nick are founding members of the Four Wheel Drive Club who combine their 4x4 hobby with their passion for British military history. Carl and Nigel also work for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which looks after cemeteries and memorials in 154 countries.

Where we're standing was a key location to the success of the D-Day landings. Men of the 6th Airborne Division came by parachute and flimsy wooden Horsa gliders, in what was codenamed Operation Deadstick. They landed here to capture intact two adjacent bridges over the Orne river and Caen canal. Their aim was to stop the Germans from crossing the bridges to attack the landing beaches, and they had to prevent them from being demolished: they were the only route eastward the advancing troops could take from the nearby beach, codenamed Sword.

The bridge over the canal was renamed Pegasus, after the shoulder emblem worn by

the British airborne forces, and the Orne bridge later became the Horsa after the gliders that facilitated their capture.

Today there's a ceremony taking place in the grounds of the Pegasus Memorial Museum, and the unassuming stars of the show are the D-Day veterans. Many, now in their 80s and 90s, are frail, but they wear their medals with pride. It brings a tear to your eye to see them laying wreaths to their fallen comrades.

From the bridge we take the short drive to the village of Ranville, the first French village to be liberated after D-Day, and where many of those who died in Deadstick are buried. Around the edge of Ranville church's graveyard are the 48 bodies of soldiers who were brought here from the battlefield by locals. Among them was Lieutenant Herbert Broderidge, who was the first casualty of D-Day. There's also an adjacent CWGC cemetery, with 2236 Commonwealth and 323 German graves.

As with all of the CWGC cemeteries, it's immaculately maintained, with cropped grass around the perfectly aligned headstones, and a colourful variety of roses and other English country garden flowers.

On the road again, we re-cross the bridges and head north-west towards the village of St-Aubin-d'Arquenay where we join a series of tracks.

One really good aspect of the battlefieldsby4x4 adventures is that while you're driving through what is now peaceful French farmland, Nigel Stevens' informed commentary takes you back to the violence and commotion of 1944. He helps you create a mental picture of where troops were marching and the German gun positions they were attacking.

The tracks take us to what the Allies called Fort Hillman, near what became Colleville-Montgomery – named after the commander of the Allied ground forces, the then General Sir Bernard Montgomery. This German stronghold was one of the key initial targets on June 6, along with other locations that will be familiar to old car enthusiasts: Morris, Daimler and Humber.

We park at Hillman, climbing to the top to see the view over to the landing beaches that the Germans would have had, before descending into the underground bunkers that had to be captured by the Allies. On the bunker walls are boards that tell the fascinating, very moving personal accounts of the men from the Suffolk Regiment who captured it.

We head west along roads and tracks through wheat and barley fields near Perriers-sur-le-Dan, then turn north-west along what was a defensive ridge that Nigel tells us was heavily bombed by the RAF on the build-up to D-Day.

We continue west on tracks through cornfields flecked with bright red poppies, that emotive symbol of remembrance. As we drive along a series of bone-dry tracks Nigel tells us of the bad conditions that faced the Allies on D-Day. 'They'd had horrendous weather for 24 hours, but only had a brief gap when the tides would be perfect or they'd have to wait a month.' So it was a rough crossing of the Channel – and these tracks would have been very muddy for the troops.

We pass through the village of Basly, which was liberated on June 6 itself, and take more tracks past Fontaine Henry and Villers-le-Sec before turning north past Bazenville. Here we look north towards the sea, along a track that was used by British tanks heading inland.

We drive into Arromanches-les-Bains on the D614. Looking out from the clifftops over the harbour we can see the Mulberry sections; and up here are two of the pontoon bridge sections that connected the harbours to the beach.

## Day 2

It's D-Day

**Highlight:** Plenty of greenlaning

A bugle plays reveille, the traditional military wake-up call, reminding us what happened here

71 years ago today. Our campsite is packed with military re-enactment enthusiasts here for the D-Day celebrations and it's bustling with period Jeeps, ambulances, trucks and people in uniform. By the way, D-Day is the name given to the actual day when something important is going to happen, like Operation Overlord, codename for the invasion of the Normandy beaches.

After a quick drive down to the beach, our first greenlane on this historic day is on top of the cliffs to the east of Arromanches – overlooking what was Gold Beach, one of the two that British forces attacked (see map overleaf).

We head out of town on the D205 before turning on to a track that Nigel says would have been used by troops coming inland after breaking clear of the beaches. We turn on to a grassy greenlane before stopping at Ryes cemetery, west of Bazenville. Only a short distance inland from Arromanches, the first burials were made here just two days after D-Day. It contains 652 Commonwealth graves, one Polish and 335 German.

From here we travel by road and track south-west towards Bayeux. Nigel explains that unlike WW1, which was literally bogged down in muddy trench warfare, WW2 was faster-moving and the Allies had better equipment, better training and the resources to advance at speed.

## D-DAY ADVENTURE NEED TO KNOW

- **LANGUAGE:** The organisers are English, but include fluent French-speakers.
- **CURRENCY:** Euro.
- **COST OF FUEL:** €1.21-€1.25/litre (£0.86-£0.89) at supermarket filling stations. At least 10p per litre dearer on autoroutes.
- **CAMPING:** Camping Municipal, Arromanches (camping-municipal.org). Near shops, restaurants and D-Day museum.
- **MAPS:** Fully guided adventure, so maps not needed but, if you want to follow the route, IGN's Serie Blue is the French equivalent of UK's OS 1:25,000. I bought an IGN Normandy D-Day commemorative map (1:100,000), which covers everywhere featured on the tour. From stanfords.co.uk or Amazon.
- **DURATION:** Four days (two full days, two half-days – but three full days in 2016).
- **PAPERWORK:** Passport, of course; and ensure your insurance covers you overseas. Overseas breakdown cover is a wise investment. Carry your V5.
- **YOU CAN DO IT TOO:** Battlefieldsby4x4.com runs five tours – Arras 1917, The Tank 1917, one-day Calais Opal Coast, The Somme 1916 and this one, D-Day 1944. They can arrange combination tours and customise tours to visit a relative's grave, where possible. Our tour cost £449, which included campsite fees and entry to two museums. See battlefieldsby4x4.com for next year's dates.
- **HOW WE GOT THERE:** Portsmouth-Caen with Brittany Ferries. Three sailings daily, including one overnight, from £158 return for a Land Rover and two people (brittanyferries.com, 0871 244 1400).



Quiet, gentle Normandy countryside is at odds with the violence and turmoil of 71 years ago

The Germans anticipated that the Allies would invade at the Pas-de-Calais, so greater defences were focused there than in Normandy. The D-Day invasion caught them by surprise and it's said that they initially thought it was a diversion for a real attack further east.

On June 7, Bayeux was the first major town to be liberated, and without serious bombardment. This meant many of its buildings and the historic 11<sup>th</sup> century Bayeux Tapestry were undamaged.

We visit its excellent Battle of Normandy museum before crossing the road for another poignant ceremony of commemoration at the Bayeux cemetery, the largest Commonwealth cemetery from WW2. It contains 4648 burials, and there's a memorial that commemorates the 1800-plus Commonwealth troops who died in Normandy and have no known grave.

The ceremony is packed with representatives of the armed forces, the British Legion and the British Ambassador to France. Again, it's the sight of elderly D-Day soldiers laying wreaths that provide the most poignant moments. Before long there will be no veterans left.

Heading out east from Bayeux, we drive a number of greenlanes. On one track we look across to a tarmac road in the distance and experience a time-travel moment: a solitary WW2 Jeep is trundling along, the occupants decked out in American GI uniform.

We take more tracks around St-Gabriel-Brécy and Coulombs, an area that saw a number of tank battles, then pause for a drink break on a greenlane, where Carl takes the opportunity to show us a moving video on his iPad about young British soldier, Jack Banks.

Fifteen-year-old Jack, from Darwen, Lancashire, lied about his age so he could join up. He arrived in Normandy, moving inland with his comrades in the Durham Light Infantry to the hamlet of Jerusalem, near the village of Chouain. Jack volunteered for a mission to clear a farmhouse, but was hit by a German mortar. He succumbed to his injuries on Friday July 21, 1944, aged just 16. His grave is in the Jerusalem cemetery to the south-east of Bayeux. It is the smallest war cemetery in Normandy.

Next we're on to a mixture of roads and greenlanes towards Tilly-sur-Seulles, spotting a section of WW2 tank track that's lying by the side of a lane that runs out of the town.

From here we continue east to the cemetery at Fontenay-le-Pesnel, which is located alongside a track off the D139. It contains 460 Commonwealth and 59 German graves. At the end of the track is a large memorial to the 49<sup>th</sup> West Riding division.

Then we turn back towards Bayeux and then north to Arromanches, for an evening of D-Day celebrations. These include parachutists landing on the beach, a fly-past by historic D-Day aircraft and a spectacular fireworks display.

### Day 3

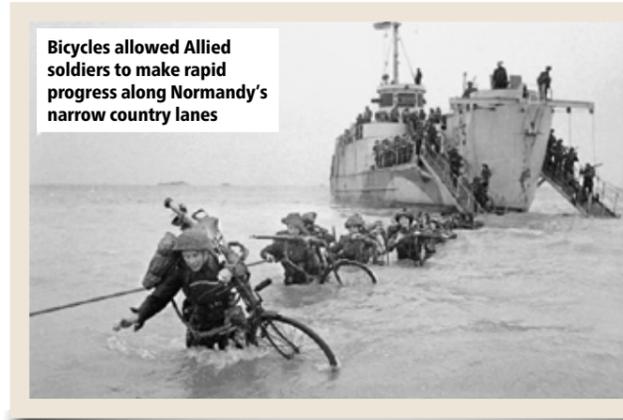
German defences and the American beaches

**Highlight:** Pointe-du-Hoc

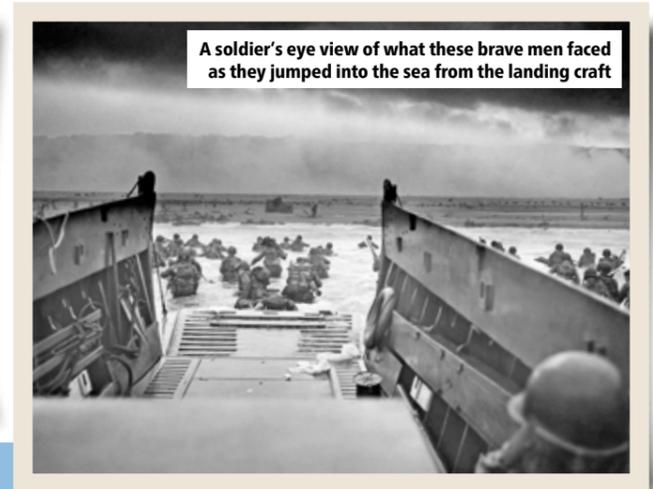
We're heading west from what was Gold beach, one of the British landing sectors, towards Omaha, which was an American zone.



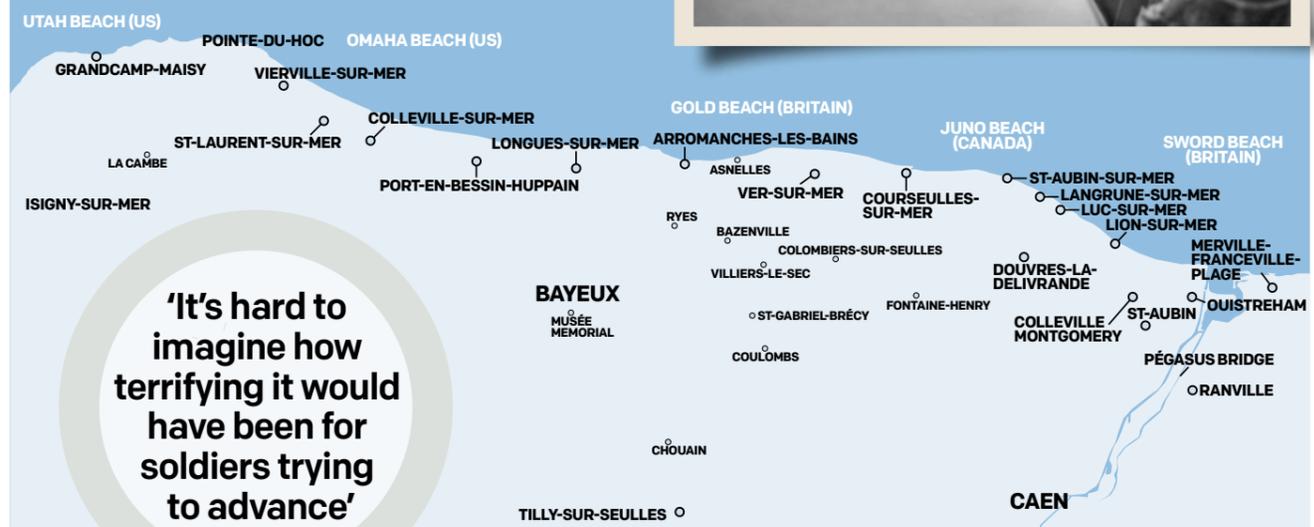
Pretty, grassy lanes near St Gabriel-Brécy



Bicycles allowed Allied soldiers to make rapid progress along Normandy's narrow country lanes



A soldier's eye view of what these brave men faced as they jumped into the sea from the landing craft



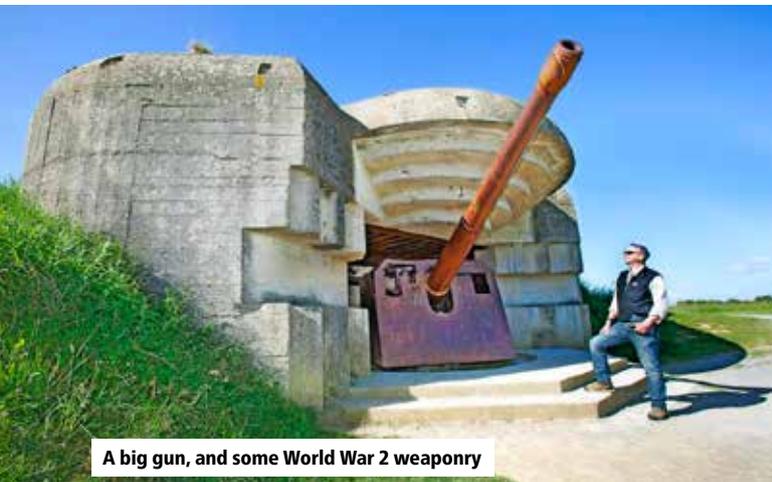
'It's hard to imagine how terrifying it would have been for soldiers trying to advance'

Commemoration ceremony at Bayeux, the largest WW2 Commonwealth cemetery





**'The whole area is pock-marked with craters, a legacy of the Allied shelling support'**



**A big gun, and some World War 2 weaponry**



**Many of D-Day's first casualties lie in Ranville cemetery**

From Tracy sur Mer we turn on to the track I mentioned at the start of this story, which looks out over the Mulberry harbours off the beach at Arromanches. It's hard to imagine how terrifying it would have been for the Allied soldiers advancing across the beaches in a hail of enemy shells and bullets.

At Longues-sur-Mer we stop to visit some of the German gun battery emplacements that still

exist. These giant 152mm guns were exchanging fire with Allied destroyers six miles off the coast. There are bullet holes in the concrete casement, and one gun has a large chunk missing where a shell had ripped into it.

We continue west on tracks and tarmac to the Normandy American cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer. The endless rows of white crosses here show the terrible losses suffered by American troops in the Normandy landings on what was codenamed Omaha beach (where losses were especially catastrophic) just below, and Utah beach further west. There are 9387 burials here, and there's a memorial to the 1557 who have no known grave.

Further along the coast we park and walk down to Pointe-du-Hoc, which was the location for an incredibly daring and crucial raid by the Americans. A squad of brave men crossed the beach and scaled a 30m (100ft) cliff with ladders, grapples and ropes to capture what was a vital observation post and gun battery. As you approach the promontory the entire area is pock-marked with craters, a legacy of the Allied shelling support.

Our journey continues through Grandcamp-Maisy, then south on the D199 to the German cemetery at La Cambe. Containing more than 21,000 graves, this was originally an American cemetery, but they were moved either to Colleville-sur-Mer or back to the US and the

Germans were brought here from other locations throughout France.

## Day 4

### The Museum

#### **Highlight:** You got it – the museum

We've finished the greenlaning part of the adventure, but there's still time to visit the D-Day Museum in Arromanches. Here we see a film of the incredible task of building the floating harbour. Then among the museum's many interesting exhibits, there are glass cases with models of the harbour – from which you then look up through the windows and out to sea to see the remaining sections still out there.

And that's it. This has been another fascinating, informative, occasionally moving journey to places that are peaceful today – there are few more peaceful corners of France than rural Normandy – but 71 years ago saw some incredibly violent activity.

Apart from the informed commentary, what's also good about this trip is the relatively low mileage. We came into France with Brittany Ferries from Portsmouth to Caen, just over 20 miles up the coast from the base camp at Arromanches. And my total journey on the whole adventure and to and from the ferry in the UK was less than 650 miles. **LRO**

## RECOMMENDED PLACES TO VISIT

- **Pegasus Memorial, Ranville.** Museum, plus original Pegasus Bridge and a recreated Horsa glider ([memorial-pegasus.org](http://memorial-pegasus.org)).
- **D-Day Museum, Arromanches-les-Bains.** Displays include working models of the Mulberry harbour, the site of which the museum overlooks. Excellent 15-minute film of archive footage from D-Day itself ([arromanches-museum.com](http://arromanches-museum.com)).
- **Memorial Museum of the Battle of Normandy, Bayeux.** Display includes photos, vehicles, uniforms, equipment. The website ([bayeuxmuseum.com](http://bayeuxmuseum.com)) also gives info on visiting the Bayeux Tapestry.
- **Arromanches 360 circular cinema.** Total surround imagery showing the battle from period films ([arromanches360.com](http://arromanches360.com)).