



PHOTOS: JAMES ROSS

In the early morning of June 6, 1944: 14,000 Canadian troops stormed this 10-kilometre stretch of sand code-named Juno. By the end of the day, 359 would be dead.

It is hard to imagine. As I walk out onto the sandy expanse of Juno Beach in Normandy, France, I feel like I am treading on hallowed ground, greeted not only by the tranquil beauty of this coastline but also by the poignant echoes of history.

The ocean is calm today, small waves curl softly on the gently sloping shore. This was not the case in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, when 14,000 Canadian troops stormed this 10-kilometre stretch of sand, part of a D-Day landing force of more than 156,000 Allied soldiers.

I shut my eyes and try to get a sense of the sounds of that day — of aircraft overhead, bombs exploding, the crashing waves, landing craft dropping their doors, shouting men jumping into the surf, bullets whizzing by. This peaceful setting would have been a whirlwind of chaos. On that Longest Day, the Canadians suffered 1,074 casualties, including 359 killed. In all, the Battle of Normandy claimed more than 5,000 Canadian lives.

The Germans knew they were coming. The Normandy invasion was launched earlier at the American landing beaches to the west but the Canadians assigned to take Juno Beach and the harbour town of Bernières-sur-Mer had to wait for a rising tide to get across offshore shoals. They faced a beachfront well-fortified by German machine-gun posts and gun batteries.

Despite dreadful casualties during the first wave, the Canadians succeeded.

I feel a little sheepish. My own journey to Normandy has been a whole lot easier. My pilgrimage was also by water, not across the angry English Channel but on a comfortable river cruise up the tranquil Seine River. I had embarked in Paris on AmaWaterways' luxurious ship *AmaDante* for a cruise north to the French coast. On this path, the romantic Seine flows through idyllic scenery and a whole lot of history on its journey to the sea: past prehistoric encampments, ancient Roman towns, Viking strongholds, medieval chateaus, abbeys, and inspiring gardens, before reaching the coast and the D-Day battlegrounds.

After departing from the City of Light, our elegant ship docked in Les Andelys, within walking distance of the Chateau-Galliard, ramparts built by Richard the Lionheart in the late 12th century high on limestone cliffs overlooking the Seine. At Vernon, I cycle into Giverny on one of the ship's bikes to experience the colourful splendour of Claude Monet's magnificent gardens. Strolling among the water lilies, Japanese bridges and graceful willow trees was like walking into one of Monet's impressionist paintings.

The next port is Rouen. It was one of Europe's wealthiest cities in the Middle Ages. In the "city of 100 spires," as writer Victor Hugo characterized this capital of Upper Normandy, Monet lived in an apartment across from the Cathedral of Notre Dame, and Joan of Arc was burned at the stake in the market square in 1431.

I visited the Medieval Quarter, known for its lovely half-timbered buildings and historic streets. Sailing northward, we reached the coast and the

An 'unforgettable experience'

You can't help but wonder about those who gave their lives on the sands of Juno Beach

James Ross



From top, the water lilies, Japanese bridges and willows of Claude Monet's gardens in Giverny is like walking into one of his paintings; the charming seaside harbour town of Honfleur; and the Juno Beach Centre, a beacon of remembrance and education.

charming seaside harbour town of Honfleur.

While my weeklong voyage down the Seine from Paris was splendid, it was the opportunity to visit the Normandy coast and beaches that had enticed me. We moored in the coastal town of Harve and set off with our knowledgeable guide to Juno.

Tributes honouring the role Canadian soldiers played can be found across the Normandy countryside, from Canadian flags that flutter in seaside towns to memorials in the villages and on the bridges that were taken and held, from solitary wreaths laid on a stretch of sand to the beauty of a well-tended cemetery.

Canada House is a two-storey building with timber trim seen by millions on documentaries about the Second World War. It wasn't called Canada House then, of course, but was the summer beach house of George Hoffer, a Paris optometrist. On D-Day, it was full of heavily armed German soldiers who requisitioned the home in 1940 when France fell to the invading Nazis. Within 30 minutes of hitting the beach, Canada House became the first home in Nazi-held Europe to be liberated.

Overlooking the beach, the Juno Beach Centre is a beacon of remembrance and education. Through interactive exhibits and personal accounts, the stylish museum offers a comprehensive look at the role played by Canadian Forces during the landings and throughout the war, and demonstrates that, despite the destruction on D-Day, Juno Beach has since become a symbol of hope and resilience.

The Bény-sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery is a place of solitude and reflection. Located a few kilometres inland from the beachhead, this patch of bucolic countryside would become the final resting place for some 2,049 soldiers who fell during the Normandy campaign.

A warm breeze stirs the leaves of the majestic maple trees that stand like sentries over the gravesites. Walking among the headstones, I am struck by the sheer scale of the sacrifice and the profound sense of loss. Reading the inscriptions on the headstones, I am moved to tears. They came from every corner of Canada. Many were just kids, still in their teens.

The legacy of those heroic soldiers will live forever here in Normandy, remembered in the cemetery, and etched into the sands of Juno Beach. Their bravery and sacrifice on D-Day make a visit to these distinguished beaches an unforgettable experience, both evocative and sobering — and hard to imagine.

Postmedia News

IF YOU GO

I chose an in-depth and educational itinerary with AmaWaterways. Journeying along the Seine River from Paris to Normandy aboard the *AmaDante* offered a wonderful means of experiencing northern France and the D-Day beaches. The smaller ship (138 guests) lends itself to a very intimate experience, and the friendly staff and excellent guides exceeded expectations. Information: amawaterways.ca.