

## What Normandy Taught Me About Ground Zero

It was Sept. 12, 2002, just a year and a day after the attacks on America, and I was in northern France, in the province of Normandy. The Greatest Generation recognized Normandy by other names - Omaha, Utah, Gold, Sword and Juneau - beaches where the Allied invasion of Europe was launched on June 6, 1944, better known to the world as D-Day.

Normandy transported me to another time, when a good fight raged over freedom — and the destiny of Europe, and ultimately the world, hung on its outcome. At the battlegrounds of Omaha Beach and Pointe Du Hoc, time and tides have washed away the carnage but could not erase the aura of sacrifice that permeated the air, for these sacred grounds owned the final moments of many young lives. Standing watch like a sentry over Omaha Beach and the English Channel is the American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, and I paid my respects to the 9,387 of the D-Day fallen who found their earthly resting place on this sacred plot of land. A stop at the cemetery's visitors center catapulted me back into the present, for in the midst of the chronicled history of the D-Day invasion stood a picture of downtown Manhattan with the still-standing towers of the World Trade Center. Here, on Normandy's hallowed ground, the world-changing reality of June 6, 1944, collided with the world-shaking reality of Sept. 11, 2001.

I possessed a potent connection to the twin towers. I watched them rise through the windows of my high school; studied their engineering brilliance in college, and fell in love with a handsome Navy pilot atop this pinnacle of New York City. When the towers fell, I took it personally: as an American, a native of New Jersey, and a naval aviator's widow who cradled a folded American flag much too early in life.

Finding the twin towers at Normandy reframed my view of the Sept. 11 attacks. On that fated day when mass murderers turned hijacked airplanes into weapons, the World Trade Center ceased being an office complex, an international hub of commerce and trade. Baptized with jet fuel and blood, the World Trade Center lost its identity, as ground zero emerged from the smoldering debris. It now belonged to history, joining the ranks of Normandy, Gettysburg and Pearl Harbor as a significant historical site that demands — and deserves — the reverence of sacred ground, for ground zero is the touchstone to the living and the dead of the World Trade Center attacks, especially the 1,100 victims whose bodily remains have never been identified, roughly 40 percent of those killed at the twin towers on Sept. 11. While the Pentagon and Shanksville, Pa., attack sites are also sacred ground, equally deserving of reverence and respect, it is ground zero that continues to resonate as the international icon of those senseless attacks.

Almost 10 years have passed since Sept. 11, 2001. Justice, honor and resiliency motivated America forward. The attack sites were cleared, the Pentagon repaired, and memorials erected. Navy SEALs delivered justice to Osama bin Laden's doorstep. Through this passage of action and time, the indelible identity of ground zero has endured, even as the beginning of a new office complex takes root in lower Manhattan, with the footprint of the fallen towers preserved, for sacred ground must be respected.

Looking back to a June day in 1944, the D-Day invasion onto the beaches of northern France sealed Normandy's fate in history. Like Normandy, the fate of the 16 acres that once was home to the World Trade Center has been cast. New office buildings will replace the towers; the footprints of the North and South towers will be respected, and a memorial and museum will tell the stories of unspeakable tragedy and the power of goodness to rise out of evil. But ground zero is, and will remain for generations of Americans to come, the epicenter of lost innocence and naked vulnerability.

With a rawness resurrected by bin Laden's demise and the looming 10-year anniversary of the attacks, that haunting, wounded look of New York's skyline — like a battle-hardened soldier absent a few teeth — has not diminished much for me, for the reason the twin towers are missing still lurks, not only in the shadows of New York City, but also from sea to shining sea.

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