

## **65 YEARS ON ..... NORMANDY BEACHES REVISITED – Roger Lyles writes:**

Around New Year 2009 Steph and I mentioned to our son David that we would like to go to Normandy for the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of D Day, whereupon David said he would like to go as well, and would like to drive us. David then kindly took over the organisation of the trip: he applied through The Royal British Legion to the Big Lottery Fund, who agreed to fund us, and we were booked through Le Maire St Marie du Mont to go to the D Day Celebrations on Utah Beach, where I took part in the landings on D Day, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1944.

We left Norfolk on 4<sup>th</sup> June and stayed in an hotel at this end of the Channel Tunnel, leaving England the next morning, having heard that the celebrations for Utah Beach were to be held on the evening of the 5<sup>th</sup> June, not on the 6<sup>th</sup>! David drove us hard and we managed to arrive at the museum for Utah at about 1600 hours. On the way we came across the preparations for the visit of President Obama, Prince Charles, our Prime Minister and other dignitaries: gendarmes everywhere on motorbikes and all sorts of transport, ensuring that everything ran smoothly.

On arrival the people in the museum were most helpful, telling us what was happening in the evening, and inviting us to join them in the marquee for drinks, to be followed by dinner at 1830 hrs. While we waited David asked me to look at the beach where I had landed 65 years ago with the American soldiers. Once they had gone on with their attack inland, I waited on the beach to be picked up by a great friend from my flotilla, who then returned us to the Empire Gauntlet. The US landing craft returned to its parent ship. At the time many of the Americans were in the Pacific, and they were short of trained officers to take their landing craft in, so the British helped them, gaining some of us early promotion, which meant that Dick and I were made Sub Lieutenants early (the Americans did not have midshipmen). We were very fortunate to lose only one LCA from Empire Gauntlet.

We also had time to look round the museum, which is well worth a visit if you are in the area. Afterwards we were entertained by the people of St Marie du Mont in the large marquee near the museum. We were put on a table for 6 with a very pleasant French family, father, mother and a teenage daughter, who all spoke some English; the daughter was very fluent. There was a band playing and a lot more people came into the marquee including some of the dignitaries. We had a lovely dinner with wine, followed by toasts and speeches. Steph was given a single rose. We were then escorted to seats in front of the memorial, where we watched the French and American bands march in, with the dignitaries and a guard of honour. We listened to many more speeches, each of which was interpreted by a Frenchman, which made the evening rather long winded! The final act was fireworks at 2300 hrs, by which time everyone was really cold, apart from Steph who was receiving a massage on her back from a young American, to warm her up!

For that night we were booked by the museum to stay with a French family, and were guided there by a French veteran of D Day. The owners had just purchased a lovely farmhouse, and were in the process of renovating it - the only loo was downstairs, and I was given a paint bucket in case I was taken short in the night as the stairs were not easy to negotiate! The family were children of resistance fighters and they had created a museum which was all about the Resistance, using tailors' dummies to demonstrate the various actions and events from the war.

After a very good breakfast we travelled back on the 6<sup>th</sup> June, which was a bit of a mistake, as once again there were gendarmes everywhere, even to the extent of having two gendarmes on every bridge crossing the motorways because of the prominent guests who had come to the D Day celebrations! We stayed in Honfleur on the way home, a lovely place full of restaurants around a beautiful harbour, which I would recommend to anyone who visits Normandy. Steph and I were extremely grateful for the opportunity to revisit Utah Beach with our son and be part of the occasion, and would like to thank the Lottery Fund and David for making this possible.