

NORMANDY 75; 5th – 9th June 2019

Wednesday 5th June; Southsea

Our RV for the start, “a pub near the train station” was none other than The Ship Anson, whose patron (Keith) was very supportive of our mission.

After a few bevies, we set off for the war memorial, and had we access to the news we might have been aware that the area was in lockdown. Security fencing surrounded the park and memorial, with marquees, stages, seating and catering outlets just like a music festival. Seeing a gap in the fence not too far away from the memorial, we approached the guard and asked if we could lay a wreath. She contacted her superior, who arranged for us to be escorted in and, passing the sound engineers, our escort told them what we were doing. Just after The Exhortation, they played “The Last Post” for us and then, 2 minutes later, “Reveille”.

Tea, across the road at Mozarella Joe’s was very welcome, and conveniently placed for a grandstand view of Boudicca setting off for Normandy, with her naval and airborne escort. To our immediate left, the words “THANK YOU”, 10 feet high, were seen facing the ship.

Soon after, we were on our way to board our own ferry, setting off at 10:00 pm, and saw that we were sharing the passage with a group of other, like-minded cyclists and a group of Fraser-Nash sports cars.



Thursday 6th June; Ouistreham – Thury-Harcourt

A bright, sunny day with little wind. RV at the town square car park and we began our ride along the canal to Pegasus Bridge; Simon and Gill in the support car had to take another route, and we knew by then that it was possible that, if they were allowed out of the D-Day exclusion zone (the town was just inside this) it was likely they would not be permitted back in; they needed a D-Day 75 sticker for their windscreen and we hadn’t got one. So at Pegasus, I took out the Standard, sling, gauntlets and beret to take with me to Melville Battery & Ranville, which wasn’t too bad as the route was quite flat and the weather kind. 2 others carried the wreaths. At Ranville, we came across a ceremony at the town memorial, so stayed at the back and joined in with God Save The Queen and La Marsellaise. Pressing on to the CWGC, we joined a parade of London Taxis, that were taking D-Day veterans to the Ranville CWGC for a service; we managed to squeeze our brief ceremony in just before theirs – so had uniformed Paras lining our route to the Cross of Sacrifice. Returning to Pegasus along a farm track avoided the traffic, and was much more direct; arriving just in time to see the pipe bands march across.



Once through that, we returned to Ouistreham along the canal, passing the Run To Pegasus group, that had run (or walked) from Tarrant Rushton, Dorset – from where

many of the gliders took off from, 75 years ago - to the same ferry we were on, and were then only a few hundred yards from their destination.

Taking the coast road for a few km, and a few diversions due to road closures (there were ceremonies all over the place) we eventually turned left to the Canadian CWGC at Bény-sur-Mer, where we had lunch and laid a wreath. A fly past of a dozen or so Dakotas, followed shortly after by a couple of C130-Js, was incredible.

Caen was also in lock down, and we were obliged to divert further around the city than we had planned (was the POTUS in town?) and found our way back on track a little while later. Soon after, our support crew swung by – but with a flattish front tyre. Finding a suitable layby, we set to fixing it, while one of us Googled the nearest tyre servicer. The spare was only good for 70 km, and would not hold pressure (it wasn’t even seated on its wheel) so, to be safe, we took both away to that tyre servicer – 400 yards back up the hill we had just came down. Except, stopping about 400 yards up the hill (and catching our breath) our Googler came running up to say it was in the other direction... definitely the low point of the ride for me.

The tyre mechanic replaced the punctured tyre, sorted the spare, gave a lift back to the car to those who hadn’t chased after on their bikes, fitted the wheel – and all for free. What a bloke.

Back on our way again and we found the “Green Route” – an old, tarmac’d railway line running from Arromanches past Caen and on and on into the French countryside - and almost past our hotel. Another puncture, this time on a bike and swiftly fixed saw us arriving at 6:35 pm.

Friday 7th June; Arromanches – Thury-Harcourt

Setting off at 8:00 am, 3 short, sharp hills soon after had us panting for breath; but from then on, we had rolling country and often saw – or heard – WW2 military planes over head and vehicles on the road. The weather this day was not kind, and I found proof in the saying “there’s no such thing as bad weather on a bike; but there is such a

thing as inappropriate clothing". I wore over boots, leg warmers – and wet weather trousers; a base layer tee shirt, cycle jersey, gilet and rainproof jacket, thick gloves – and was just warm; not toasty, but not cold, either.

At Arromanches, the roads were again closed, but a security guard allowed us to take off the Standard, sling, gauntlets and beret to take with us to the sea front memorial. Sadly, though, that beret became a souvenir for someone, as it didn't make it all the way. Frantic not to look proper, I retraced our route, but no joy finding it. Happily, a souvenir shop did have a black beret and a D-Day 75 lapel badge, so for the rest of the ride I made sure these were secure. Meanwhile, the rest of our cyclists were getting pally with a couple of veterans, who expressed their thanks for what we were doing; "The thanks are all ours to give" we said.



We laid the first of 2 home-made wreaths and pressed on to Longville for lunch; the weather turned ominous, so I carried the Standard protected in my windcheater jacket. Just as well, too – there were a few showers on the way.

On the way back to the hotel along the Green Route, we were surprised to find a fallen tree across our path, and so took the opportunity to call a Branch meeting.



Saturday 8th June; Thury-Harcourt - Bayeux

We held our first ceremony a short way up the road at the town war memorial then returned for breakfast; setting off around 9:00 am with the weather overcast and ominous. A short, sharp, heavy shower caught us out in the open at 1:05, but all over at 1:20.

Stopping at the Jewish CWGC, where the youngest victim of the D-Day assault is buried; the usual honours performed. A pristine spot, miles from anywhere, giving due respect to those that gave everything. Pressing on to La Cambe, where the German Cemetery stunned our senses; then on to the American Cemetery, where access proved exceptionally difficult – how Simon and Gill



managed to get as close to the entrance as they did, heaven only knows. I figured this needed the full effect, and just as well, too; arriving at the memorial, we found it was closed for the removal of staging, seating, red carpets etc. (who could have been visiting? POTUS?) and so walked on to the flag pole – which had a huge gathering for the flag lowering. We were granted permission to proceed once that was over, and were applauded afterwards for our homage.

More Dakotas, and a couple of C130-Js flying around helped keep our minds occupied while the rolling hills kept legs pumping all the way to Bayeux CWGC, where we held our ceremony at the Stone of Sacrifice.



Sunday 9th June; Bayeux - Cherbourg

Under time pressure to catch our ferry, we decided to forgo the detour to UTAH Beach; so our wreath was laid instead at Sainte Mère Eglise, at the memorial to 3 local war cemeteries, while an air show was in progress a little way to the west. 20 minutes out of the town, a line astern formation of military transport aircraft on our left caught my eye and, as I stopped to take a picture, saw they were dropping paratroopers. Very symbolic.

Thanks to Rob for organising the ride; to Simon and Gill (who did ride some of the way) for logistics support; to Marton and Nunthrope Knitters for the home made wreaths; our wreath sponsors, one and all; Suzanne for the cake; Darren for the tonal photos; and to both my legs for not giving up.