Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial
Established by Congress in 1923, the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) commemorates the service, achievements, and sacrifice of U.S. armed forces where they have served overseas since 1917. ABMC manages 26 overseas military cemeteries, and 29 memorials, monuments, and markers. Nearly all of these cemeteries and memorials specifically honor those who served in World War I or World War II.
HISTORY

Soon after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States’ entry into World War II, American military planners began to formally coordinate with their British counterparts. U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill quickly affirmed a “Europe First” strategy—prioritizing the defeat of Germany and its ally Italy, which were seen as the more immediate and dangerous threats. The war against Japan received second priority.

After occupying France in 1940, Hitler made plans to turn the continent into a “Fortress Europe.” Germany began the construction of an “Atlantic Wall,” designed to defend against an anticipated Allied invasion launched from Great Britain. This extensive system of mines, coastal fortifications, batteries, and gun emplacements extended from the Bay of Biscay through the shores of the English Channel to the coasts of Norway.

On August 19, 1942, Canadian and English troops, along with a small number of U.S. Army rangers, attacked the German-occupied port of Dieppe, France. This limited operation—approximately 10,000 troops took part—was intended to temporarily seize and hold a major German port, both to prove that it was possible and to gather intelligence. The Allies intended to destroy coastal defenses and strategic buildings as they withdrew. If successful, the operation would boost morale, demonstrate a commitment to open a western front in Europe, and alleviate pressure on the U.S.S.R. in the midst of its brutal struggle with Germany on the Eastern Front.

The Dieppe raid turned into a disaster. Suffering a lack of naval and aerial support, the invasion force was trapped on the beach under German artillery fire. Counterattacks by German units inflicted heavy losses. After less than ten hours the Allied forces withdrew back across the English Channel, leaving many casualties and prisoners behind. The Dieppe raid did provide lessons that proved useful in future amphibious operations. In particular, the raid proved that a successful invasion of the continent would require overwhelming strength at the point of entry, with heavy support from naval and aerial bombardment. Military planners realized that they could not immediately rely upon the seizure of a major port, as the harbor itself would likely be severely damaged during the battle.

Planning for an invasion through Normandy—codenamed Operation Overlord—began in earnest in early 1943. Operation Overlord would be the largest amphibious campaign in military history. The Allies soon agreed that since the United States would supply the bulk of the manpower for the operation, it would be appropriate to name an American as Supreme Allied Commander. In January 1944, President Roosevelt selected Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Eisenhower and his staff knew that the success of the amphibious landings depended on quickly establishing a secure beachhead. The first hours of the invasion would be crucial, a race between the Allies and the Germans to rapidly build up forces. Early on, the amphibious landing troops would be extremely vulnerable to counterattacks by German tanks and artillery. To mitigate these counterattacks, Operation Overlord included an airborne component; paratroopers would seize key objectives, such as bridges and road crossings, on the eastern and western flanks of the landing areas. They would also cover the movement of amphibious forces off the beaches, disrupt enemy defenses, and in some cases neutralize German coastal batteries. After securing the initial landing zones, the Allies intended to build up a well-supplied force capable of breaking out from the beachhead.
Deception was crucial to the success of Operation Overlord. The Allies convinced German intelligence that the landings would occur to the north at Calais, along the narrowest part of the English Channel. Extensive but bogus Allied radio traffic reinforced the priority given to the false landing site by German intelligence analysts. Eisenhower’s staff created a fictitious 1st U.S. Army Group under Gen. George Patton, featuring fake tanks and trucks and apparently headquartered in Dover—just across the channel from Calais.

The Normandy landings were planned for June 5, 1944. Poor weather conditions, including high winds and overcast skies that would have disrupted the amphibious landings and airborne operations, led Eisenhower to postpone the invasion for 24 hours. By the next day conditions had marginally improved, enough to meet the minimal requirements for getting troops and equipment swiftly ashore. Eisenhower gave the order for the invasion to commence. June 6 would be D-Day.

The airborne landings began shortly after midnight, with an assault by 22,000 American, British, and Canadian paratroopers. The U.S. Army’s 82nd and 101st airborne divisions dropped west of Utah Beach, while the British 6th Airborne Division dropped on the eastern edge of Sword Beach. To confuse the Germans, airborne dummies dressed in paratrooper uniforms and equipped with recordings of gunfire were dropped in locations far from the actual landings.

Despite heavy casualties—in part due to many paratroopers being inadvertently dropped far from their assigned locations—scattered groups formed ad hoc units and continued their missions. By 4:30 a.m., soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division occupied the town of Sainte-Mère-Église, giving it the distinction of being the first town liberated in the invasion.

At first light, five Allied infantry divisions began storming the beaches. The amphibious landings took place along a 50-mile stretch of the Normandy coast, in five sectors. From west to east these were: Utah (U.S.), Omaha (U.S.), Gold (U.K.), Juno (Canada), and Sword (U.K.).

Of the five landing zones, Omaha Beach was the most heavily defended. German resistance was well-organized and resolute. The high bluffs were defended by the German 352nd Infantry Division, their positions bristling with machine guns, mortars, and artillery. The German Army had placed formidable anti-invasion obstacles on the beaches, including heavy obstructions made of angled iron. The aerial and naval bombardment of German positions prior to the landings proved only partially effective. The landings were further complicated by choppy seas, and by strong cross-currents that caused many of the landing craft to drift eastwards, away from their assigned sectors.

The 1st and 29th infantry divisions landed on Omaha Beach beginning at 6:30 a.m. The first assault waves of engineers, tanks, and infantry took heavy casualties. Of 16 tanks that initially landed on the beach, only two survived. The first wave succeeded in blowing only a few gaps in the beach obstacles, resulting in grave delays for successive landings. Heavily defended vehicular routes off the beach were initially impassable, leading to a snarled traffic backup. Two hours after the first assault the beach was closed for all but infantry landings. Allied commanders considered abandoning the beachhead, but small contingents of infantry pushed their way forward, often in ad hoc groups supported by surviving tanks and other equipment they could muster. Eventually these groups infiltrated through the coastal defenses and scaled the bluffs between strongpoints. Subsequent waves of infantry exploited these initial penetrations. By the end of D-Day, American troops had fought their way across 300 yards of open beach, scaled the heights overlooking the channel, and occupied the plateau where Normandy American Cemetery is now located. The Americans suffered more than 3,000 casualties on Omaha Beach, the highest for any Allied landing zone.

On Utah Beach, the westernmost landing zone, the 4th Infantry Division found itself landing in the wrong place because of a current that pushed their landing craft off course. However, relatively sparse German opposition enabled the division to move quickly off the beach. By early afternoon, the 4th Infantry Division succeeded in linking up with elements of the 101st Airborne Division. This ahead-of-schedule inland advance made the Utah Beach landings a near-complete success.

The D-Day landings surprised the Germans, in part due to the inclement weather. The German Army High Command believed that the Allies would only attempt an assault in perfect meteorological conditions. The comprehensive deception plans implemented in the months before had their effects as well. Even after receiving the initial reports of the landings, many German military leaders mistakenly believed that the Normandy operations were a diversionary attack, and that the main Allied force would land at Calais.

During the evening of June 6, gliders brought in additional supplies and reinforcements for the 82nd and 101st airborne divisions. Even 24 hours after the initial parachute drops, only about a third of the paratroopers were in contact with their divisions. The wide dispersal of airborne troops had the unintended effect of further confusing the Germans and fragmenting their response. Paratroopers roamed and fought behind enemy lines for days. Many consolidated into small groups from different companies, battalions, regiments, and even divisions.
By the end of D-Day, approximately 156,000 Allied soldiers had landed in Normandy, including 73,000 Americans. The Allies expanded the tenuous beachheads over the following days. Within a week, benefitting from continuous naval gunfire and air support, the five separate landing sectors were linked together. Temporary anchorages and artificial “mulberry” harbors were constructed off the coast, facilitating the unloading of troops and supplies.

Despite their increasing numbers, Allied troops remained wedged into a narrow strip of land along the coast, because of the difficult terrain, the logistical requirements of the buildup, and a resolute German defense. This would soon change. Most of the German armored reserves had been drawn into the battle for Caen, and the seizure of St. Lo brought the Americans to open ground. U.S. forces soon took advantage with a new offensive.

Operation Cobra began on July 25. Preceded by an intense air bombardment, U.S. forces pressed south, breaking through German defenses and liberating the town of Coutances. They pushed on through Avranches, repelled a German counterattack at Mortain, and sped west into Brittany and east into the German rear. In Brittany, the advancing U.S. troops quickly drove scattered German units into fortified coastal enclaves. Moving east, the Americans, British, and Canadians, reinforced by Free French and Polish forces, encircled and destroyed German forces in the Falaise Pocket. They advanced on to Paris and, supported by an Allied invasion advancing up from the Mediterranean Coast, liberated the rest of France. Germany would be next.

CEMETERY

Normandy American Cemetery is located at the north end of a half mile access road on a bluff overlooking Omaha Beach. The 172.5-acre cemetery contains the graves of 9,387 United States military dead, most of whom lost their lives in the D-Day landings and ensuing operations. Burials here also include the graves of Army Air Force crews shot down over France as early as 1942. Another 1,557 names are inscribed on the Walls of the Missing.

Normandy American Cemetery is one of 14 permanent American World War II military cemeteries maintained by the ABMC on foreign soil. The cemetery was dedicated on July 18, 1956.

Architects for the cemetery’s memorial features were Harbeson, Hough, Livingston and Larson of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The landscape architect was Markley Stevenson, also of Philadelphia. Donald de Lue of New York City was the sculptor for the memorial statue and other statues in the cemetery.
Normandy American Cemetery was formed through the consolidation of ten temporary cemeteries in the region established during Operation Overlord and the campaign inland. The cross-shaped cemetery includes ten grave sections, five on each side of the main (east-west) mall. Within these sections there are 307 unknown burials, three Medal of Honor recipients, and four women. Forty-five sets of brothers are commemorated or buried in the cemetery, including 33 who are buried side-by-side. A father and son are also buried alongside each other. Every grave is marked with a white marble headstone: a Star of David for those of the Jewish faith, and a Latin cross for all others. The backs of the headstones are inscribed with the service numbers of the decedents. As in all ABMC cemeteries, the burials are not separated by rank; officers and enlisted men are interred side-by-side.

At the far end of the cemetery, granite statues stand at either end of a small hemicycle, framing a view of the church steeple in Vierville-sur-Mer in the distance. At one side the statue of Columbia, representing the United States, is holding an eagle. At the other side the statue of Marianne, representing France, is holding a rooster. Both allegorical figures of the two nations are holding olive branches of peace.

The east, south, and west edges of the cemetery are lined with Austrian Pine, interspersed with other trees. Corsican Pine trees line the north edge, overlooking the English Channel. Throughout the cemetery, shrubs and roses highlight the grave plots.
NOTABLE BURIALS

- Lesley J. McNair (Plot F, Row 28, Grave 42). U.S. Army general, one of the two highest-ranking Americans to be killed in action in World War II.
- Jimmie W. Monteith (Plot I, Row 20, Grave 12). Medal of Honor recipient.
- Preston (Plot F, Row 15, Grave 12) and Robert Niland (Plot F, Row 15, Grave 11). Brothers who inspired the film Saving Private Ryan.
- Quentin Roosevelt (Plot D, Row 28, Grave 46). Son of President Theodore Roosevelt; World War I aviator killed in action in eastern France. After the construction of Normandy American Cemetery, Quentin was reburied next to his brother.
MEMORIAL AND THE GARDEN OF THE MISSING

The memorial area is organized around a 22-foot tall bronze statue, “The Spirit of American Youth Rising From the Waves,” facing west toward the headstones. The symbolic figure is a reminder of the youth of the D-Day troops and the heroism they displayed. The red granite base of the monument is encircled with bronze lettering with the inscription: MINE EYES HAVE SEEN THE GLORY OF THE COMING OF THE LORD. The stones set in the memorial area floor are from Omaha Beach.

The memorial is flanked by a semicircular limestone colonnade; carved on the lintel is the inscription THIS EMBATTLED SHORE, PORTAL OF FREEDOM, IS FOREVER HALLOWED BY THE IDEALS, THE VALOR AND THE SACRIFICES OF OUR FELLOW COUNTRYMEN. At each end of the colonnade is a loggia containing maps of operations and battle narratives in English and French. The map on the south loggia depicts the Normandy landings and subsequent movement inland; the north loggia map shows the Allied movements through Western Europe from D-Day until the German surrender in May 1945.

There are four large inscribed bronze urns in the memorial area. Two versions are set in each loggia, which mirror the urns in the opposite loggia. The first version depicts a dying warrior astride a charging horse, symbolic of war, as an Angel supports him and receives his spirit. On the opposite side, a woman kneels holding her child beside the decorated grave of a soldier as the star of eternal life shines above, symbolic of the wartime sacrifice by women and children. The laurel leaf garland around the top signifies victory and honor.

The second version of the urn is inscribed with a figurative representation of God in Genesis, Chapter 1: “The spirit of the lord moved on the face of the waters.” On the water below, a spray of laurel recalls to memory those who lost their lives at sea; a rainbow emanates from each hand of the figure symbolizing hope and peace. The opposite side of the urn shows an angel pushing away a stone, symbolic of the resurrection.
Facing west at the memorial, the reflecting pool is in the foreground; beyond are two flagpoles where the American flag flies daily, and the burial area with a circular chapel.

Behind the memorial area, the semicircular Walls of the Missing are inscribed with the names of 1,557 Americans who lost their lives in the invasion of Normandy and associated operations, but whose remains could not be located or identified. Bronze rosettes mark the names of those recovered and identified since the walls were inscribed. There are no dates of death on the wall because this is unknown for many of those lost. Beds of polyanthus roses trim the garden, while a variety of trees grace the lawn areas. On the western side of the garden, the rear of the colonnade is inscribed with a quote from Eisenhower, taken from an address at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London honoring Americans who fell in the war: TO THESE WE OWE THE HIGH RESOLVE THAT THE CAUSE FOR WHICH THEY DIED SHALL LIVE.

Among those memorialized on the Walls of the Missing are many soldiers from the 66th Infantry Division who were lost in the sinking of the Belgian troopship S.S. Leopoldville. On Christmas Eve, 1944, the Leopoldville was carrying American and British soldiers across the English Channel when it was torpedoed by a German submarine. As the ship sank, more than 750 Americans perished in the icy waters; many of their remains were lost to sea and could not be recovered.

North of the memorial, set on a platform overlooking Omaha Beach, an orientation table with a map of the invasion area depicts the Normandy landings. The trail from this area down to the beach was used by American soldiers going in the opposite direction during D-Day, to advance inland.

South of the memorial, the path leading to the administration building—the former visitor center—is the Allée Coty, named after René Coty, President of France from 1954-1959.

CHAPEL

The circular cemetery chapel is constructed of limestone and granite. Directly above the chapel door is an engraved replica of the Medal of Honor, the United States’ highest military honor. It is awarded for personal acts of valor at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty. Surmounting the chapel is a bronze finial with armillary sphere which serves as lightning protection.

On entering the chapel, the black marble altar is immediately visible with the engraved inscription: I GIVE UNTO THEM ETERNAL LIFE AND THEY SHALL NEVER PERISH. Above, a translucent amber window illuminates the altar with soft yellow light. On the edges of the window, 48 stars—representing the 48 states as of 1956, when the cemetery opened—are arranged above an alpha on one side, and an omega on the other. Immediately above the altar table is a Star of David with a dove in the center, representing peace. A thin teakwood Latin cross encased in gold leafed copper is affixed to the window. The altar sits on a two-tiered limestone platform and is flanked by flags of the United States, France, Great Britain and Canada.

The interior walls of the chapel are constructed of limestone. Inscribed on the south interior wall is the inscription: THROUGH THE GATE OF DEATH MAY THEY PASS TO THEIR JOYFUL RESURRECTION. Above the inscription are three small stars carved in relief, and a Latin cross set inside a circle. Directly opposite, the north interior wall bears the inscription: THINK NOT ONLY UPON THEIR PASSING REMEMBER THE GLORY OF THEIR SPIRIT. Over the inscription are three small stars carved in relief, along with the Tablets of Moses and the Star of David set inside a circle.
On the ceiling, a colorful mosaic depicts America blessing her sons as they depart by sea and air to fight for freedom, and a grateful France bestowing a laurel wreath upon American dead who gave their lives to liberate Europe’s oppressed peoples. The return of peace is recalled by the angel, dove and the homeward bound ship.

ADMINISTRATION BUILDING AND TIME CAPSULE

The administration building is located west of the parking area, at the head of the Allée Coty, the path that connects it with the memorial. This building contains the superintendent’s office, and is closed to the public.

Embedded in the lawn directly opposite the entrance to the administration building is a sealed time capsule containing news reports of the Normandy landings. The capsule is covered by a pink granite slab and is dedicated to Eisenhower. It will be opened on June 6, 2044, on the hundredth anniversary of the Normandy landings.

VISITOR CENTER

On June 6, 2007, 63 years to the day after Allied troops stormed the beaches of Normandy, ABMC officially dedicated a new visitor center to tell the story of the 10,944 Americans buried or memorialized here, and their brothers-in-arms. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was among the more than 3,000 people in attendance. The visitor center puts the D-Day landings and subsequent campaigns in Europe in perspective, and underscores Operation Overlord as one of the greatest military achievements of all time.

One-third of the building’s 30,000 square feet is dedicated exhibit space. Using personal stories of participants and a mix of narrative text, photos, films, interactive displays and artifacts, exhibits portray the competence, courage and sacrifice of the American armed forces, and their Allies. Tours of the cemetery are available daily beginning near the cemetery overlook. Cemetery guides are available inside the visitor center to answer questions regarding the site and tour times.

Directly outside of the visitor center, overlooking Omaha Beach, a reflecting pool includes an engraved map of the D-Day landing beaches.
POINTE DU HOC MONUMENT

The Pointe du Hoc Monument is located on a cliff of the same name eight miles west of Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial. On D-Day, troops of the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion, under the command of Lt. Col. James Rudder, scaled the 100-foot cliffs and seized the artillery positions located there, which could have been used to fire on American troops landing on both Omaha and Utah beaches. The guns mounted on the cliffs proved to be wooden dummies, but more than a mile inland the rangers found the gun batteries ready to be fired, and destroyed them. Despite heavy casualties, the rangers successfully defended Pointe du Hoc against determined German counterattacks. Of the initial assault force of 225 rangers, only 90 were still able to bear arms when relieved on June 8.

The Pointe du Hoc Monument consists of a granite obelisk flanked with tablets inscribed in English and French, positioned atop a concrete German observation bunker. Erected by France to honor the U.S. Army rangers who fought here, the monument was formally transferred to ABMC for perpetual care and maintenance in 1979. Today, this battle-scarred area on the left flank of Omaha Beach remains much as the rangers left it, with craters from Allied bombings and German bunkers, casemates, and gun emplacements. Many of the rangers who fell in the assault on Pointe du Hoc are buried in Normandy American Cemetery.

The visitor center at the Pointe du Hoc Monument is open daily from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. from April 15 to September 15, and from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. the rest of the year. There is no charge for admission.

UTAH BEACH MONUMENT

The Utah Beach Monument is located at the termination of highway N-13D, approximately 30 miles west of Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial. It is a mile and a half northeast of Sainte-Marie-du-Mont (in the Manche Department). This memorial commemorates the achievements of the U.S. Army VII Corps that landed on the beach on D-Day, and in the subsequent weeks liberated the Cotentin Peninsula.

The memorial consists of a red granite obelisk surrounded by a small developed park overlooking the historic sand dunes.
The American Battle Monuments Commission

The American Battle Monuments Commission—guardian of America’s overseas commemorative cemeteries and memorials—honors the service, achievements and sacrifice of the United States armed forces. Since 1923, ABMC has executed this mission by (1) the erection and maintenance of suitable memorial shrines, in the U.S. when authorized by Congress and where U.S. forces have served overseas since April 6, 1917; (2) designing, constructing, operating, and maintaining permanent American military burial grounds in foreign countries; and (3) supervising the design and construction on foreign soil of U.S. military memorials, monuments, and markers by other U.S. citizens and organizations, both public and private, and encouraging their maintenance.

In performance of its mission, ABMC administers, operates, and maintains 26 permanent American military cemeteries; 29 federal memorials, monuments, and markers, and eight nonfederal memorials. Three memorials are located in the U.S.; the remaining memorials and all of ABMC’s cemeteries are located in 16 foreign countries, the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the British dependency of Gibraltar.

In addition to grave sites, the World War I and II cemeteries and three memorials on U.S. soil commemorate, on Walls of the Missing, U.S. service members who went missing in action or were lost or buried at sea during World War I and II, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

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“Time will not dim the glory of their deeds.”

GENERAL OF THE ARMIES JOHN J. PERSHING