

Don't be late for dinner: Normandy family dinner

19th Airlift Wing Public Affairs

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Before Hitler, Hirohito and Mussolini combined to form the Axis Powers and sent the world to war, people regularly enjoyed commonalities such as family dinners and playing sports with friends.

With the attack on Pearl Harbor, America went to war, quickly transforming their idyllic world into one wrought with conflict.

June 6, 1944, D-Day.

Men stormed the beaches of Normandy, France, with one goal: to liberate the French people who had been held captive for five years.

More than 425,000 allied and German troops were killed, wounded or went missing during Operation Overlord. Many didn't return to their families, never to enjoy another meal with them.

74 years later, my boots sank into the sandy beaches of Normandy, walking along shores once awash with blood from men who laid down their lives. At the age of 22, I would have been considered seasoned as many of the men who served were as young as 16, whereas now I am just beginning my life.

I wish I had known these brave souls, I hunger to understand the purpose which allowed these service members to so selflessly give their lives for.

I owe my daily struggles of choosing an outfit or worrying about the weather to their undertaking of something much more important in comparison. When given the ability to dine with families of Normandy, I jumped at the chance to meet the people the brave men fought to liberate.

My yearning propelled me along unfamiliar roads, worrying I would be late for dinner – something my mother always frowned upon. I kept wondering if these men had also thought about their mothers on their way to save these families.

These winding roadsides led me to the town of Sainte-Mère-Église, where families waited to welcome service members into their homes for a hot meal. They embraced us as if we were the very ones to have captured the beaches, ensuring their freedom.

My companions were a United States Army private and a sergeant, and our family for the evening were Jean-Louis and Yolande Cauvin, a couple with matching wrinkles and smiles who spoke little English.

As we traveled to their home, they transformed the route into war-torn France, describing what it had been like when Yolande's father was a boy. Just 14 years old during the D-Day invasion, he witnessed German soldiers killed in his own garden, and was freed from captivity.

I casually strolled down past the very place he had watched in horror as he finally became a free Frenchman.

Bunkers lined the roads and scattered in cow pastures: these relics somehow beautiful scars standing as a reminder



after 74 years of freedom.

Later I would stand at the bottom of a crater left from the siege, my already short 5' 2" stature dwarfed by the enormity of the devastation. What were to me signs of destruction, were a symbol of hope to my host family.

While the house had been rebuilt, the land bore testimony to its past, once littered with ammunition and smoke.

I would never have envisioned the devastation that occurred here, the home is an idyllic French countryside to me, complete with a cheerful donkey, geese and a curious cat. The donkey licking my hand as I fed him a carrot elicited my high laugh, which has been compared to his loud neighing in the past.

All of this weighed heavily on me as I dined. I noted my hand shaking as I lifted a homegrown melon to my mouth; the past horrors and present joys intermingling as we got to know each other.

I had a hard time eating with this realization, my eyes brimming with tears as I realized the survivors who had dined here nearly three quarters of a century ago felt just as grateful and overwhelmed as I did – hoping my manners would do my family proud. Did they have this same thought?

I was having the meal that those who had perished during the invasion should have had, but never would. My companions felt similar, our silent glances leading our host family to try to make us laugh, reminding us of privileges we now had thanks to our predecessors.

While our laughter was plentiful, our hearts were just as heavy as our bellies were full as we remembered the sacrifice, gazing upon a living embodiment of hope that this household had become.