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# Remembrance Day in Normandy

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*Richard B Bieche*

## Normandy, France

Remembrance Day may be an easier exercise in a place like Normandy, France, than in Canada. In Canada, we gather around monuments every November and try to make sense of remote historical events such as our participation in World War II. War monuments are all over Normandy as well, but the difference for the people there is that World War II went right through them. It's less of a historical event than it is a part of their family stories.

## Shadows in the Sand— Arromanches

A rather spectacular monument went up in Normandy in September of 2013. On the beach of the coastal town of Arromanches, one of the main landing sites on D-Day in 1944, people from all over the world joined the locals to build it in just one day. They raked 9,000 silhouettes of bodies into the sand. Each one represented one soldier (Allied or German) or one civilian killed on that day. Then, within hours, symbolizing all lives lost in war, the shadows faded away with the tide. But the effects of that day on those 9,000 families did not simply wash away. They remain to this day both in Normandy and in Canada.

## Four Rose Bushes— Bernières-sur-Mer

A little farther up the coast from Arromanches is the town of Bernières-sur-Mer, which on D-Day was

part of the Canadian invasion point and carried the code name Juno Beach. You can find a quieter but more enduring monument here, but you have to know where to look.



Starting at the famous beach house where the Canadians landed, you have to follow the road inland and retrace the steps of thousands of young soldiers. On the other side of town, there's a house with a fence that is low enough to peer over into the backyard. This is where you'll see four rose bushes standing apart. The family here planted those roses in the spot where they buried four young Canadians on D-Day. They still grow today as a humble and subtle reminder of what these youngsters and their families gave up for this French family.



D-Day was not the end for the Canadian soldiers or for the people of Normandy. It was only the start of 100 days of fighting, suffering and dying. And

you'll find large and small monuments all over the area. But this being Normandy, there are people and family stories behind each of them. Here are three examples:

### *Private G E Millar*

#### *Jardin des Canadiens, Ardenne Abbey*

Not far from Bernières is the Ardenne Abbey, an old monastery in rural Normandy. Nowadays, a quiet garden within the Abbey is referred to as the Jardin des Canadiens. It features a small monument and portraits of a few Canadian soldiers. One of those young men pictured is Private G E Millar of Renfrew, Ontario.

As a teenager, young Millar said goodbye to his family and went to war as a volunteer with the North Nova Scotia Highlanders. That was the last they ever saw of him.

In Normandy, Private Millar and the rest of the Canadians faced a famously brutal enemy—the 12th SS Hitler Youth Division. These were 16- and 17-year-old kids whose education had largely been a process of indoctrination in Nazi racism before they were taken away from their own families to be drilled and taught to fight to the death. These kids had been turned into fanatical, brutal and effective killers. They were perhaps the most formidable enemy in the whole Normandy theatre, and the Canadians had to face them every day.

Private Millar survived D-Day but was soon captured behind enemy lines and found himself at the mercy of the 12th SS at the Ardenne Abbey, which had been commandeered as a command centre. After interrogation, he was bound and lined up against the Abbey wall with a group of fellow prisoners. One at a time, each prisoner was taken out of the line. When it was Private G E Millar's turn, he was led around the corner into the garden and executed. He was 19. His parents' image of him as he bade them goodbye and left for a foreign land to die must have stuck with them for the rest of their lives because that poetic excerpt was the message they had engraved on his tombstone.

### *Helene Carville*

#### *Place de 37 Canadiens, Authie*



Authie is a small town near the Ardenne Abbey. The plaza in the centre of town now bears the name Place

des 37 Canadiens. It was here that Canadian prisoners were executed on June 7, 1944, by those indoctrinated killer-kids



from the 12th SS—many gruesomely so—by running over them with tanks. Eleven civilians were murdered along with their liberators. A small monument at Place des 37 Canadiens remembers those lost citizens.

A youngster by the name of Helene Carville lived in Authie. Four hazardous and hungry years of occupation were about to get a lot worse for her before they ever got better. You see, she was there. She was forced to watch as her father was executed.

Carville's father Jules is named on the monument at Place des 37 Canadiens. As it was for the Millar family of Renfrew, the Carville family of Authie was forever scarred by those bloody days in Normandy.

### *Phillip Roch Hanrahan*

#### *Varrieres Ridge, Near Caen*



In the same region, this time just south of the city of Caen, there's a large official Canadian monument at a place called Varrieres Ridge. It sits atop a

huge crest, with a view of much of the surrounding villages. The Canadian regiments who fought here are honoured in front of the flags of France, Canada and all the Canadian provinces.

Roch Hanrahan fought at Varrieres Ridge. He had left his family and his fiancé in Fort Macleod, Alberta, and joined the Calgary Highlanders. He never saw his intended bride again, because she became terminally ill and the war wouldn't wait for him to take a break to be with her.



Hanrahan would have been under fire for nearly all of the 100-day battle of Normandy.

*Phillip Roch Hanrahan*

Among the worst would have been the infamous Battle of Varrieres Ridge. The strategic value of the place is obvious, and in July 1944, both sides knew it. The Canadians and the Germans—among them those fanatical kids from the infamous 12th SS—engaged in a vicious battle for this hill for days on end.

Hundreds of young Canadians, many of them Hanrahan's friends, died trying to get up the ridge and liberate the villages around it. On one day alone, the Black Watch tried to advance and put it to an end. Three hundred and twenty-five went up. Three hundred and fifteen of them were killed, wounded or captured. There hasn't been a bloodier day for Canadian Forces since. And Hanrahan was there.

Hanrahan did survive the war and return to his family, but they never really got him back in the same way that he had left them. Today he would probably have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. He eventually died while still relatively young. He's not listed as a casualty of war; all the same, the Hanrahans of Alberta lost him and joined in the sorrow of the Millars of Ontario and the Carvilles of France.

## Bretteville-sur-Laize Canadian War Cemetery, Cintheaux, August 4, 2013



Close to Varrieres Ridge is the small town of Cintheaux. About 2,872 Canadians have remained here since the Battle of Normandy. Every August 4, the people of the town dedicate the day to Canada at yet another monument: the Bretteville-sur-Laize Canadian War Cemetery.

I was a guest at this year's gathering as part of a group of Canadian teachers, there courtesy of the Juno Beach Centre. The Juno Beach Centre in Normandy is a place every Canadian should visit as much as Vimy Ridge. It was started by veterans in the hopes of keeping alive the memory of what young Canadians did—and continue to do—in wartime.

August 4, 1944, was the day of Cintheaux's liberation from four years of occupation, danger, imprisonment,



hunger, torture, forced labour and other horrors. Young and old, they gather among the Canadian graves. They play the national anthems of France and Canada. They talk about each of the provinces the soldiers buried here hailed from. They basically try to get their heads around how this bunch of kids volunteered to leave their families and come halfway around the world to share in their suffering, and to fight, suffer, bleed and die for their safety and freedom.

And it's obvious from the gravestones that they were just kids—barely out of their teens or barely into their 20s. They should have been safe at home starting out their lives, but instead they volunteered for this carnage. The people of Normandy are fully aware of that and remain both grateful and gracious.

A lone elderly woman stood out the most for me the on that afternoon. I noticed her before the ceremony, struggling in the midday heat with her two canes. The sheer effort of making it here was obviously very important to her. I felt compelled to give her an arm and share the moment with her.

This lady represented the attitude I found throughout Normandy. They don't dwell on how they suffered in the war or on those who inflicted hardship and cruelty on them. They focus on thanking our families for lifting their families out of all of that. That's what's behind all the monuments.

For the people of Normandy, Remembrance Day is not about history. It's more important than that. It's about home and family. So should it be for us. We're the descendants of these kids, and they did great things that we should be proud of. That pride and the grim lessons behind their deaths need to be taught and retaught to each generation, because war is not history. It continues. Families still lose their kids to it.

This summer afternoon of 2013 was certainly not about history either. It was an occasion for all three families—the Millars, the Carvilles and the Hanrahans—to actually come together after all these years.

Private Millar is buried in the Bretteville Cemetery. He was here with us, as was the message his family had left for us on his headstone:

*"I think I see him as he bade goodbye, and left us forever in a distant land to die."*



Helene Carville







You've met Helene Carville. She is that elderly woman who was so determined to be here with us.

And Phillip Roch Hanrahan? In my family, he was just Uncle Roch. I never met him because we lost him before I was born. But I think he was here with us, too.

And he would have been more at peace this time than on his first visit here—because of the peace he and other Canadian kids like him brought to this place.



## Shadows in the Sand

Normandy was just one theatre among many—in one conflict among many—that our young people and their families have been sacrificed. The symbolism of the shadows in the sand fading away with the tide

is a powerful image of what happens to young men and women and their families in war. A lot of kids have volunteered for the ultimate sacrifice through the years. Others are preparing to do it now.



*Richard Bieche*

## Roses

But we must not let the memory of what they did fade away with the tides of time like that. We are their descendants. Even if you're new to Canada, this is your heritage, too. We are, all of us, their legacy. We owe it to them and to ourselves to keep that legacy alive and growing, like those roses in Normandy.