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Airborne museum houses one-of-a-kind artifacts that honor historic jump during D-Day invasion

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SAINTE MERE EGLISE, France -- This town loves paratroopers -- in particular, American paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne and the 101st Airborne Divisions.



SGT FAY CONROY

Tourists at the Airborne Museum in Sainte Mere Eglise, France, take pictures of an exhibit depicting 101st Airborne Division paratroopers boarding a C-47 aircraft for a jump during the D-Day invasion.

It was those two divisions that liberated Sainte Mere Eglise June 7, 1944, making it the first town in France to be liberated during World War II.

To show their appreciation for the veterans, an Airborne Museum opened here in 1964. A non-profit organization, all proceeds go back into the museum to pay for upkeep, new exhibits or extensions. The money is also used to provide decorations and celebrations for the anniversary of D-Day, travel for veterans, and exhibitions outside France. A large donation was also made to The National World War II museum in New Orleans, La.

“I’m amazed that there is an Airborne Museum here,” said Pvt. Andrew Marshall, a military policeman with the 230th MP Company in Kaiserslautern, Germany. “Being as that this is where they (the paratroopers who jumped into Normandy during the D-Day invasion) dropped, it’s nice that they have a museum.”

Because of the amount of action that Sainte Mere Eglise saw and survived, the museum has an extensive collection of artifacts.

“This museum is exemplary because of the glider. It is the only one in Europe and also because of the original uniform worn for the jump at Saint Mere Eglise that we have. When

the paratroopers jumped into Sainte Mere Eglise their uniforms were specially made for that jump. Each jump had a uniform with different modifications to them according to what had and had not worked previously,” said Patrick Bunel, museum curator. “When the Soldiers left Sainte Mere Eglise, they gave their uniforms to the local populace because they had received new ones.” The uniforms for the jump here had reinforced knee and elbow patches as well as reinforced cargo pockets.

Bunel said there are only five of the original Sainte Mere Eglise uniforms are known to exist in the world, but another six could possibly be in private collections.

In September 2011 the museum plans to add an extension that will include a garden of remembrance as well as a new solar-powered building that will house an interactive exhibit. The new exhibit will mimic the conditions of the night of the drop into Sainte Mere Eglise. It will be completely dark in the exhibit with flashes of light to simulate fires started by allied bombing in advance of the jump. The museum actually sits on the site of one such fire.

“It will help them (visitors) to understand the difficulty of the mission. It was a really dangerous mission. If they did not take Sainte Mere Eglise the operation would have failed,” said Bunel.

The museum also contains uniforms from throughout the war, a restored World War II era C-47 airplane, and World War II-era tanks.

Admission to the museum is free for American Soldiers and veterans and their families.

To visit the museum's Web site, go to www.musee-airborne.com/eng/home.php.



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