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Veterans take center stage in events honoring 65th anniversary of Normandy invasion

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NORMANDY AMERICAN CEMETERY AND MEMORIAL, France -- For nearly a week Department of Defense civilians and servicemembers from the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines have been deployed to the small French town of Sainte Mere Eglise and this memorial beside Omaha Beach supporting events in honor of the 65th anniversary of D-Day.



TECH SGT MICHAEL VOSS

U.S. President Barack Obama salutes an honor guard composed of Soldiers from the 173rd Airborne Brigade as the president arrives for a ceremony marking the 65th anniversary of D-Day at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial, June 6.

Towns across Normandy have also been abuzz with history buffs, tourists, reenactors in period uniforms driving World War II tanks, trucks and jeeps, and more than two dozen surviving World War II veterans attending commemorative events in the region.

The big event of the week was U.S. President Barack Obama's involvement in the ceremony here June 6, the actual anniversary date. On that day the cemetery, home to the remains of 9,387 American servicemembers who gave their lives here, was the talk of the international media, as nearly 600 correspondents from media ranging from local French newspapers to CNN were on scene at the 172-acre burial grounds to capture Obama's comments during the ceremony. Yet many servicemembers said that while the president's visit was the icing on the cake, the focus of the event remained right where it should be – on the veterans.

"I have the utmost respect for the commander-in-chief," said Pfc. Lawrence Hall, 1st Infantry Division M1 Abrams tank driver at Fort Riley, Kansas, and one of the youngest servicemembers at the event. "I am glad he is here to celebrate this moment with us, but for

me it is all about the veterans.”

Hall’s sentiments were echoed by many other military men and women here.



BILL ROCHE

Surviving members of the famed Easy Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (wearing black caps) participate in the ceremony honoring the 65th anniversary of D-Day, at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial, June 6. The group was part of more than two dozen D-Day veterans honored in ceremonies across the Normandy region.

“I am looking forward to seeing some of the veterans from 1st Infantry Division. We don’t have but six or seven D-Day survivors left that can come out to these events any more,” said Pfc. Aaron Fisher, who is also assigned to the 1st Infantry Division.

“Even if I wasn’t tasked to support the presidential speech at the event, I would still come out to the event,” said Fisher. “I’ve gotten to meet a couple veterans. Each one’s story impresses me more than I ever knew they could.”

Obama’s remarks focused on the veterans as well.

“You, the veterans, are the reason we come back here every year,” he said. “I know this trip here doesn’t get any easier for you each year, but we must not forget. You changed the world. You could have hid, you could have run, but instead you stayed and fought, fought for freedom.”



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Sgt. Sergio Nava of Fort Bragg, N.C.’s Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, 1st Battalion, 321st Field Artillery Regiment (Airborne) stands at attention as first lady Michelle Obama passes while taking part in a ceremony honoring the 65th anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, France, June 6. Nava, part of an honor guard for the ceremony, was one of hundreds of U.S. servicemembers who participated in the event.

This year’s D-Day anniversary ceremonies may prove to be more important than those in previous years just by virtue of time. Veterans of World War II are at least in their 80s now, a point driven home by Obama’s remarks about the death of 101st Airborne Division veteran Jim Norene, who came to Normandy for the ceremony but died the night before.

“Jim was gravely ill when he left his home, and he knew that he might not return,” the president said. “But just as he did 65 years ago -- he came anyway. May he now rest in peace with the boys he once bled with, and may his family always find solace in the

heroism he showed here.”

In addition to the more than 9,000 remains buried on the bluffs overlooking Omaha Beach, the cemetery has the names of 1,557 Americans who lost their lives in the conflict but could not be located or identified, inscribed on the walls of a semicircular garden.

“There is no more important reason to come here other than to honor their legacy, no matter who comes,” said Hall. “If they’re here this weekend, I’ll be here.”



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