

D-Day

It's the 6th June 1984 and a flotilla of small boats has just completed their crossing of the English Channel. Unplanned, we find we've joined a group of yachts and other craft that are sailing to Calais to commemorate the D-Day landings of forty years before. We hadn't realised the relevance of the day when we'd sailed and the interest there was in marking the anniversary. To us it was just a matter of the right time, tide and weather. Only later will we learn that along the coast in Normandy, by the landing beaches, a larger convoy of boats has started to arrive. The Queen and President of the United States are also there. It will be 1999, another fifteen years, before I myself visit the landing beaches and see the Lutyens white stones that mark the graves of allied soldiers killed in 1944.

The yachtsmen sailing into Calais are much older than us and may have opted for a shorter and less demanding crossing than those that have crossed to Normandy for the commemorations. In order to sail to Caen or the Cotentin peninsular you have to enter complex waters, the ocean is not far away and the tides and seas are rougher. The people travelling to Calais aren't the most experienced of sailors. Neither are we, still in our early twenties we've brought along a skilled sailor to help us cross the Channel. We have the ship's radio on, it's tuned to the harbour master and coastguard.

'Dame Hatt-ye Dame Hatt-ye.'

The French coastguard is calling on the radio to one of the British yachts. The vessel is about to sail over an excluded area where there is cable laying. The closure has been announced for weeks, we've been well aware of it as we prepared our route and kept up to date with regulations. In my mind I see our great treasure of a comedy actress in full sail crossing into waters where she should not be.

'Dame Hatt-ye Dame Hatt-ye.'

The harbour master has joined the alert. The yacht is about to enter the channel set aside for the Channel Ferry. Unless Dame Hatty moves out of the channel the master may not be able to permit the ferry to leave Calais. We are in the days before the Channel Tunnel or cheap flights, the ferry rules, she must sail. We are already holding our yacht well

away from the route, waiting for the ferry to leave so that we can enter the port. Small yachts who haven't made these precautions scatter, like ants before a giant elephant's foot.

The ferry leaves, on board it must feel quite slow, but from where we are the vessel travels at an alarming rate. We bounce and bob in the wake it leaves. Then we go into the harbour.

We motor into the 'Port de Plaisance'. Commercial vessels are outside but we are more secure on the inner bay with other smaller craft. There are only swinging moorings left available; a buoy that we can tie up to in the centre of the pool. As the water moves around in the port our little yacht swings round with it. We are safe now. We've crossed from Ramsgate today; yesterday we crossed the choppy Thames estuary, having left Felixstowe before six in the morning. For our crossing we motored across the Channel, there was no wind for our sails. The sea was so flat that we left ripples behind our boat. It was weather they could only have dreamt of in 1944 when the rough seas caused delay for the landings and dreadful sea-sickness for the men on their way to fight.

As it grows dark a large catamaran arrives and scoops up another swinging mooring. It's a bulky craft, large enough to cross the Atlantic let alone the Channel and we worry that it might crash against our yacht. Our worries are unnecessary as once it's hooked up it too floats around the mooring effortlessly, keeping in sequence with our little boat. We spin like two balletic butterflies. With the mooring sorted out and the vessel securely attached one of the sailors turns to the other.

'Well done Gerald', he says. 'You've gone continental now.'

As indeed had we. It was our first sailing across the Channel in a private boat (in fact the last for me). We sit in the cabin, me, my husband and our friend the experienced sailor. He had taken a holiday to help us and stayed with us until Cambrai. We are planning to travel through the canals to the Med.

There's a splash outside and when we check we find that a large fender, purchased to protect the sides of our boat, has fallen into the water. A fisherman, crossing the port in a small dinghy quickly picks it up, but doesn't return it to us. He just keeps travelling over to the quayside, his out-board engine pop-pop-popping as he goes. Then he lifts the fender up

and carries it off with him. He's simply accepted it as booty. Incensed I drag out my best French to remonstrate.

'Hey Monsieur,' I call out. 'Pouvez vous, s'il vous plait, retourner mon choque-feur?'

He ignores me.

'Mon choque-feur!' I shout, then go into the cabin to cry.

It wasn't the fender I cried for, it was the home that was sold, the dog given away. I wonder now if I would have cried so much if I'd known that I'd have a house again, that my dog would be returned to me, that I'd go back to England to safely continue with my life once I'd tired of travels across France and the waiting sea.

Unlike the young men who sailed out on 6 June 1944. Did they have tears? I'm sure they thought about home and the loved ones they'd left behind. They didn't know what fate waited for them on the beaches, life or death. Or what would follow as they progressed across the continent. The lives that were lost that day, and in the months that followed, was the price that was paid for freedom. Today on 6th June 2014, how many of the surviving troops will return to the Normandy coast to commemorate the 70th anniversary, to lay wreaths at the graves of their comrades in arms? Not as many as in previous years. They'll be in their '90s now, and a dwindling band.

The sea, La Manche, will be as bright today as it ever has been when I've visited, the beaches will be as golden. Many years have passed and the bloodshed of the day has long since washed away. But I know that over the beaches; Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword, on any day at any time, the memory hangs heavy. I've taken holidays in the area, sunbathed on the beaches and played in the sea but it's hard to forget the history of the area. Difficult to look across the wide space towards the incoming tide without thinking of how far it would be to run across with enemy fire tearing down.

In August 1999 there was a total solar eclipse that could be viewed across parts of Britain and Normandy. We stayed in France to see the spectacle. The site we chose to view the eclipse from was the Pointe du Hoc, close to Omaha beach. This was where the US 2nd

and 5th Ranger Battalions had scaled the fortress, an essential part of the D-Day plan. Suffering heavy casualties they completed their objectives.

On the day of the eclipse the cliff-top was busy with visitors. We had all gathered here to view the natural phenomenon. We could see the darkness approaching across the sea as the moon crossed the face of the sun. The lights on the small boats out on the water popped on as the edge of darkness crossed. The sea itself fell silent as the waves were drawn back by the pull of the moon. Sea birds shrieked in agitation. Then there was a brief moment of complete darkness, we were unable to see people around us, there was no sound. We were held by the magic of the celestial manoeuvres. Before we knew it the light had returned and we were back to normality. But for an instant I felt as if we'd stepped back in time; that the ghosts of the Rangers and the German Grenadier Regiment, who fought to hold the fortifications, had mingled amongst us.

Along the beaches D-Day has never gone away.

It's a long time since that evening when I arrived in Calais and cried for home, and much has changed, but for all that while I've been able to enjoy many things. I've travelled, partied, holidayed and had time with people I love. It's much further back to that history changing day, 6 June 1944. For many the promise of a full precious life ended there. For thousands of German and Allied soldiers killed on that day there was no returning home to their loved ones. It's a sad event to commemorate but after 70 years those of us with the good fortune to inherit the 'broader lands and better days' should remember this debt and be grateful.

Author's note: Broader lands and better days. *'The British ... and the United States will have to be somewhat mixed up together in some of their affairs.... Let it roll on full floodto broader lands and better days.'* (Winston Churchill August 20 1940)

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