More than 60 years have passed since Canadians stormed three Normandy beaches on D-Day as part of the Allied force that would liberate France and Europe. The eminent historian Desmond Morton recently toured the beaches of Normandy in the company of university students from Ontario and Quebec. He sends this letter from Normandy, which is evocative of his own father’s landing there on the morning of June 6, 1944. Students saw a different place in 2006, yet it also evoked the sacrifices and courage of Canadians.

D-Day has the kind of reverberations for present-day Canadians that Vimy Ridge once had for earlier generations. On June 6, 1944, a Canadian infantry division and an armoured brigade swept ashore on one of the five beaches designated for the Allied landing. For most of the next three months, Canadians shared fully and brutally in a series of battles that culminated, like Vimy, in a military victory. Two Nazi armies were demolished in the Falaise Pocket. Canadians had fought as gallantly and sacrificially to close the Pocket as our soldiers had on the beaches in front of Courseulles, Bernières and St-Aubin. Like Vimy in 1917, Canadian victories had changed history. This time, we told ourselves, victory would be ours to keep.

As with many other Canadians, D-Day has a family meaning for me. My father and his regiment, the Fort Garry Horse, came ashore at St-Aubin on June 6, a fact that was quite meaningless for me as a child until I discovered the letter he had written to the son he had last seen in 1941. On the eve of what he expected to be his death, he had filled a blue aerogramme with all the advice he could offer to a boy he remembered as a toddler and who might soon be an orphan. In the event, we were both spared. Though he was blown out of a couple of tanks and earned the Distinguished Service Order, he came home as intact as any veteran, with only his hearing impaired. He seldom spoke of his experiences except to recall one hot afternoon, He was guiding his tank down a narrow farm lane when an unwary German popped out of a hedgerow. He recalled grabbing his .30 calibre machine gun, but he couldn’t shoot. As the terrified men pelted down the road, his helmet had fallen off and his red hair was flopping about. Who could shoot a man with red hair? Who could shoot a fellow human being?

My dad remembered his regimental comrades and he adored history, but he preferred centuries before his own. We visited France once as a family, but he had no desire to re-visit Normandy and we drove rapidly south to the Loire valley where he had friends. I went to Normandy only in 1991, a full generation after he died. At the time, it was a somewhat dispiriting experience for a Canadian. Caen’s new Mémorial, a museum of peace, had just opened, but the only Canadian artifact was an anachronistic piece of uniform. A few weather-beaten signs near the beaches suggested a route for a Canadian to tour, but too many of the signs had vanished. I recall a single monument from the Régiment de la Chaudière. Perhaps there were others, and there was a pair of cemeteries, superbly maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Otherwise, you might conclude, like Hollywood does, that D-Day had fea-
tured only the Americans, the British and, of course, the French.

I was not alone in my dismay: things began to change. Marcel Masse, Brian Mulroney’s minister of heritage, launched a task force on military museums headed by Hamilton Southam and Dénis Vaugeois. Despite inevitable cynicism, this task force worked. Our splendid new Canadian War Museum in Ottawa is one of its outcomes; so was a boost to Canadian military heritage at home and abroad. Just as decisive was the influence of Second World War veterans, suddenly retired from successful postwar careers, with energy, resources and connections to celebrate the most important years of their lives. A succession of postwar generals helped create what is now the Canadian Battlefields Foundation, which was devoted to sending young Canadians to France, Belgium and Italy to see where their ancestors had served. Garth Webb, a wartime artillery officer, became the combative creator of the celebrated Juno Beach Centre at Courseulles.

Meanwhile, the 50th and 60th anniversaries of D-Day in 1994 and 2004 summoned world leaders, masses of tourists and endless rhetoric. Each celebration inspired scores of books, magazines and guidebooks, some of them excellent but almost all of them reflecting the combative chauvinism and retroactive reputation-busting that so often characterizes military history.

No single Canadian historian has done more for our current memory of Normandy than Professor Terry Copp. Copp’s remarkable teaching style and his ability to transform his students from merely studying to writing and publishing history. While many shared in the project of helping young Canadians to visit overseas battlefields, it was Copp who shaped and developed the program and made it happen. Annually, a couple of dozen university students visit Canadian battlefields and cemeteries of France and, more recently, of Italy. They learn for themselves how far battles are shaped by ground and weapons and, above all, by uncertainty. They come home, many of them, bound for graduate or professional schools with a special understanding of their country’s history.

This May, I finally had the opportunity to participate in a Copp tour. Thanks to Michel Fortmann, a political scientist at the Université de Montréal, a carefully-selected class of nine students sat down for the Université de Montréal’s first-ever course in military history. His colleagues in that university’s excellent history department were not interested: “On n’aime pas la guerre,” they told him. That allowed me an opportunity to lecture on the Somme and Vimy Ridge and, more nervously, on the rank structures, organizations and weapons of the two world wars. Alexandre Carette, a veteran of an earlier Copp Normandy tour, was graduate assistant for the course and, with his wit, good sense and experience, acted as a highly humane sergeant-major to the group. Last May 18, our nine students — five men and four women — met a comparable group from Wilfrid Laurier University at Charles de Gaulle Airport outside Paris. Despite flight delays that cost us a visit to the splendid French museum at Peronne, we set off in rented vans for Beaumont Hamel, Courcelette and other battlefields of the Somme campaign of 1915. Next morning, slightly recovered from jet-lag, we headed to Vimy Ridge, where Canada’s iconic monument is undergoing a badly needed renovation for its 90th anniversary in 2007.

By the afternoon, we hurried on our way to Dieppe and the once-murderous beach at Puys. Next morning, in a roaring Channel gale, we walked the main beach and reflected on Copp’s reminder of how difficult it was for the men responsible for the raid to change their minds, even as conditions vital for its success systematically vanished. Some of us collected a few of the over-sized pebbles that staled all but one of the Canadian tanks on August 17, 1942. Finally, we paused at the Canadian cemetery behind Dieppe, where the students were reminded that the elder Paul Martin had conceived of the then-radical notion of Canadian citizenship. Looking at the gravestones reminded us, as it did him, that “Canadian” had to be a better label than “British subject” for his heroic, ethnically diverse and deceased Windsor constituents.

Visits to war cemeteries play a major part in Copp’s battlefields tours. Students confront a central issue in his teaching: how nations construct history when they commemorate their dead. Consider the contrasting sym-
bolism in the huge anonymous ossuary in the French cemetery at Notre-Dame de Lorette, and the carefully individualized monuments in the British (and Canadian) graveyards, most with a few words requested by surviving families. How does that compare with the rigidly egalitarian crosses or the soaring idealism of the sculpture in the big American cemetery above Omaha Beach in Normandy? Nearby, the crowded German cemetery, with its clumps of brown crosses, insisted explicitly on the futility of war.

O ne of the assignments for our students was to select someone buried somewhere along our itinerary and to find out all they could about the man’s background and death. Many chose someone known to their own parents or grandparents. In other cases, they had picked someone as well known as Andy Mynarski, the Victoria Cross winning RCAF air gunner who is buried in Normandy, or someone apparently forgotten by all but the Veterans Affairs Web site. The presentations humanized the war. The fact that most of the dead were even younger than our students was always a poignant reminder of futures foregone and dreams dissolved. Sometimes powerful emotions came to the surface.

Most of our students paid their own fare across the Atlantic, but their support in Europe is largely dependent on benevolent supporters. John Cleghorn, former chairman and CEO of the Royal Bank, has been a generous benefactor of Wilfrid Laurier battlefield tours; the Université de Montréal is still too much a newcomer to have mobilized such support. One result was a budgetary imperative that hurried us on to Normandy. There, Copp and his colleagues have cultivated an arrangement with a generous-spirited British couple who own the Moulin Morin in the Bayeux suburb of Vaucelles. A beautiful water mill, complete with resident ducks and a soccer field, provided double rooms for the students and a little more privacy for the older guides. The seven women students occupied a house of their own, while the men spread into two other houses, each with its own cooking and washing facilities. Trips to nearby supermarkets in Bayeux allowed everyone to stretch a 10 euro per diem to cover three meals a day.
While the costs of fuelling the vans and French highway tolls have soared, food in France is as cheap and excellent as ever. Although cost was a governing factor, it is hard to imagine a more congenial base for our 12 days in Normandy.

Inevitably and appropriately, French- and English-speaking students were paired. Without exception, the francophones spoke good English but only one anglophone tried out his perfectly adequate French. Living together worked better than I had expected. Even some committed sovereignists among the Université de Montréal students confided that the English had not lived up to their image and really were des bons gars.

Unlike the Ontarians, the Montrealers could talk easily to the local people. One reported in horror that his encounter with a local lady in a restaurant had been transformed when she insisted that France had been liberated by Charles de Gaulle. Moreover, she assured him, the Americans had succeeded at Point du Hoc and Omaha Beach only because their lead troops had been recruited from convicts and gangsters. How, he demanded, could anyone believe such nonsense! All of us, I assured him, absorb much nonsense before we die.

The Normandy phase of the tour began, conventionally enough, with a day at Juno Beach, another at Omaha Beach and the Point du Hoc, and another at Pegasus Bridge, where the Canadian Parachute Battalion had landed and where a restored Horsa glider recalled an amazing British feat of airmanship before dawn on June 6.

Routine visits to battle sites and the crumbling Atlantic Wall were interspersed with another Copp innovation borrowed from his COTC memories: “tactical exercises without troops,” or TEWTS. Students were provided with photocopies of original operation orders, 1944 maps, air photos and orders of battle, plus an ample supply of the kind of hints and warnings that any officer-veteran can probably remember. Small groups or syndicates worked out their plans and then drove off to the actual ground to see how they might have revised their troop deployments for the Royal Winnipeg Rifles at Putot en Bessin or the North Novas at Authie. Doing TEWTS was surprisingly popular, even when most syndicates routinely repeated deployments that contributed to near-disaster in 1944. The purpose, Copp insists, is not to make students into colonels but to make them understand how much easier it is to be an historian after the fact than a commander on the day. Perhaps surprisingly to some, there was no very obvious gender gap in the general enthusiasm for the game. Students, after all, are often avid video-gamers.

There were more obvious gaps. Thanks to course work and Ontario’s school curriculum, the Wilfrid Laurier students knew more about Canada’s military past than did most of the Montrealers. A majority of them found their dead soldier close to their own family and community. The Montrealers were more likely to have to look beyond their direct experience. One even represented Lieutenant General Lesley McNair, the architect of US Army mobilization, who died in Normandy and lies in the American cemetery. The breadth of their presentations made the tour more interesting. It also underlined how little French Canada’s heroic contribution to the Canadian war effort is known or recognized in Quebec’s history curriculum.

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Reconciling historical differences is not a problem that an outsider can resolve, nor can it be done quickly or thoughtlessly. What can happen is more of the sharing of experiences I observed last May. In the short run, sustaining the Université de Montréal venture in military history could benefit from benefactors able to help university students from Montreal (and from Université du Québec à Montréal, Université de Sherbrooke and Université Laval as well) to re-live the experience our nine pioneers shared. Even better, it should be possible to see even more. At Ypres, for example, French Canadians of the 14th Royal Montreal Regiment shared the First Contingent’s bloody baptism of fire. At the Walcheren Causeway in the Netherlands, the Régiment de Maisonneuve got across through bitter German resistance, when no one else could.

These are memories to make any community proud, and they were shared with Canadians from all parts of our country. No doubt, there are other, more bitter memories to share, and last May convinced me that our history is best learned when both French and English are listening and trying to understand together. After all, as soldiers have discovered in two world wars, we generally like each other better when we are overseas.

Desmond Morton, author of 40 books, is a professor emeritus of history at McGill University and founding director of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada.
D-Day involved the simultaneous landing of tens of thousands of troops on five separate beaches in Normandy. 10 things you might not know about the day. More than a year in the planning, D-Day was originally set to start on 5 June, judged to be the most likely date to combine calm seas, a full moon and low water at first light. However, storms meant it was delayed by 24 hours to 6 June. D-Day is a military term for the first day of an operation. What happened on the day? Airborne troops were dropped behind enemy lines in the early hours, while thousands of ships gathered off the Normandy coast. There was common military parlance, just give something a letter. Whether stood for day, disembarkation or another word, the Allied invasion of Normandy was not the only D-Day in World War II. In fact, every amphibious assault had its D-Day. There were D-Days all through WWII where we performed that operation, where we landed on the beaches in Morocco and in North Africa in 1942, where we landed on the beaches in Sicily in 1943 says the National. It's been 76 years since the D-Day landings, which took place on 6 June 1944 during World War Two. The landings marked the start of the campaign to free north-west Europe from the Nazis. Find out more. What happened on D-Day? The attack began when Allied planes and warships bombarded German positions along the coastline. D-Day: Allied Invasion at Normandy. Subscribe for fascinating stories connecting the past to the present. SIGN UP. As the Supreme Commander of Allied forces in Europe and leader of the D-Day invasion, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower became legendary for his ability to get officers and armies from different nations to work together to defeat Nazi Germany. But if needed, he was also willing to take Intelligence | D-Day Revisited. D-Day Revisited fund and organise pilgrimages which give veterans of the Normandy campaign an opportunity to revisit the beaches and surrounding areas where they fought, and to pay tribute to those they left behind in 1944. Southampton D Day 1944 D Day Normandy Normandy France Saint Aubin Canadian Soldiers American Soldiers Juno Beach Military Police. Stubborn Defense or Poor Allied Leadership? How Outnumbered Germans Held Up the British Army at Caen. For British forces landing in Normandy on D-Day, the city of Caen was one of their most important targets. The Germans, recognizing the city's strategic. US Army - The Big Red One.