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A Lesson From My Summer Vacation

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A Lesson From My Summer Vacation

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Monday August 14, 2023

By Eric F. Spina

After every spring commencement I tend to get a little pushy with my colleagues about whether they are taking a vacation because I believe time away is essential for our mental health and personal relationships.

And I actually listen to my own advice, as illustrated this summer by an unforgettable family trip to Normandy, Brittany, and Sicily. I could go on and on about Brittany (you must read Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* and then visit Saint Malo!) and Sicily (staying at a villa nestled in an olive orchard a mile above the Ionian Sea? 'nuff said), but Normandy captured my heart. I have wanted to visit this hallowed site since I was 10 years old, when I learned my father had fought in the European Theater of Operations in WWII, and that the books I was reading and movies I was watching were a very real part of his life.

While my Dad, now 98 and as sharp and as vibrant as ever, did not land in France on D-Day, he came ashore at Normandy six weeks later. He then fought through France, Luxemburg, Belgium, Holland, and Germany with the 7th Armored Division (38th Armored Infantry Battalion, "C" Company) including in the complex and ambitious Allied military operation code-named Market Garden and the freezing misery that was the Battle of the Bulge, where a P-38 Lightning plane came out of the blue to save his life.

That's why it's so hard for me to put into words what it meant to finally visit Normandy. Pointe du Hoc. Omaha Beach. The American Cemetery. St. Marie Eglise. Longues-sur-Mer. These places that I had read about were real, and I felt the magnitude and poignancy of history and experienced a rush of emotions.

Standing on Omaha Beach, where the distance from the water's edge to the seawall is wider than photos or words can do it justice, I was captivated by the sheer beauty of the place. Waves gently breaking on fine, golden sand. Beautiful blue sky stretching to the horizon. And yet this was a place of unspeakable horror on June 6, 1944, with 90% casualties in the first wave of the invasion. As I stood alone, I considered the humanity of the soldiers who faced withering machine gun fire and incessant artillery shelling. Unfathomable. Simply unfathomable what those young, young men endured and how they responded with courage and resolve. Yes, certainly, says my father, the former "GI," but also an innate will to survive that was anchored in a real measure of fear and the desire to not let your brother down. While we can never truly know what they felt, standing there on Omaha Beach I understood it just a little better, and it was unsettling.

The American Cemetery, striking and haunting, with row upon row upon row of gleaming white marble crosses and Stars of David, made even more real for me the fate of so many young soldiers. Most of them just 19 years old, many had yet to travel even to another part of their state, yet here they were, thousands of miles away from home, fighting someone else's war and paying the ultimate sacrifice. And "sacrifice" is indeed the proper word. I was reminded of the words President Lincoln wrote to Mrs. Bixby about her sons lost in the Civil War. These soldiers, too, "laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom." How can we, two generations later, ever express our gratitude or repay that debt?

And so, while I visited these and other sites throughout Normandy, I contemplated the horrible loss of human potential on D-Day and throughout WWII, but also gave thanks that my own father was able to come home safe and live his life, a life full of goodness and sacrifice, a life spent caring for others and contributing to the common good.

I already knew that, of course, but being in that hallowed place brought home for me that God has blessed me and my family in ways beyond measure.