



D-Day and Normandy: 75 Years Later

Some pictures
Some history
Some trivia
Some fun....





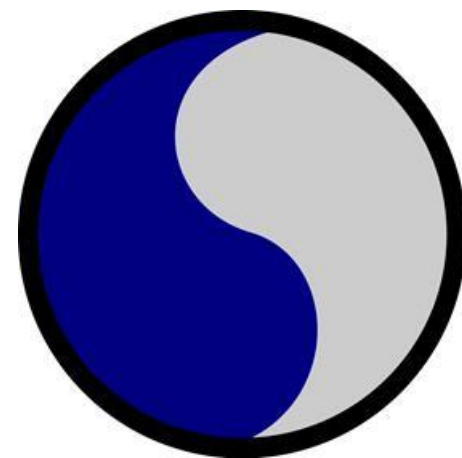
Anniversary Tour

- My wife and I went on a tour of Normandy and the D-Day battle about five years ago, for the 70th anniversary
- Tour group was different...hosted by the 116th Infantry Historical Foundation of the Virginia National Guard
 - Was one of the first units to hit Omaha Beach on D-Day...first company that landed had 95% casualties
- Obviously, tour was 116th-centric!
 - Tour guide was a former commander of the 116th (post-war) and head of the 116th Historical Foundation
 - Two subsequent 116th commanders were also on the tour
 - All are generals, was a smattering of full colonels as well
 - Former Sergeant-Major (whose father landed at Omaha) with his two sons
- Still visited sites of other major activities



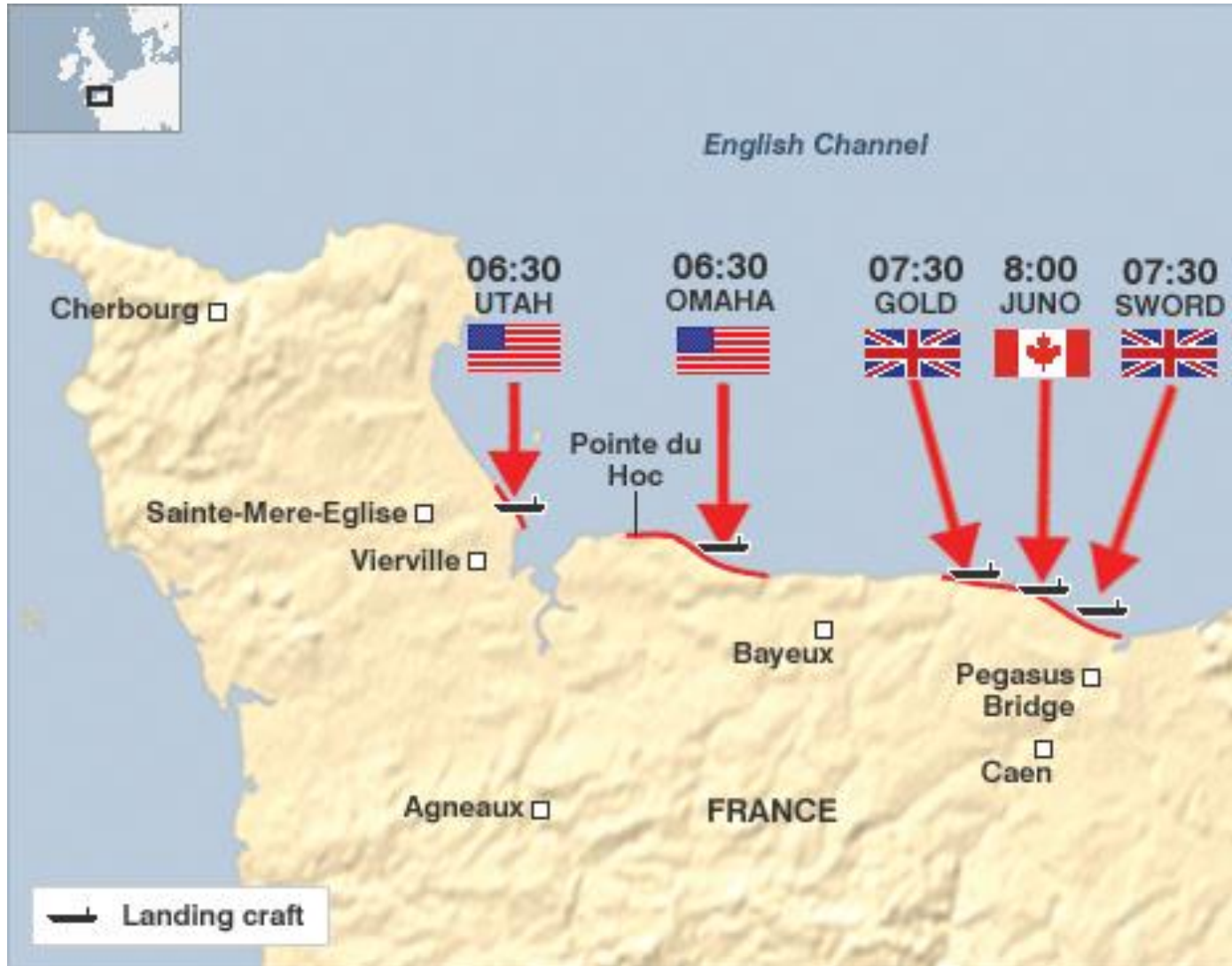
More on the 116th

- The 116th is the “Stonewall Brigade”... the unit Thomas Jackson commanded at Bull Run, where he got his nickname
- Unit was part of the 29th Infantry Division...a collection of National Guard units from both sides of the Civil War!
 - Division patch is a yin/yang of Blue and Gray to commemorate their previous “association”
 - Deputy Commander of the 29th was played by Robert Mitchum in “The Longest Day”



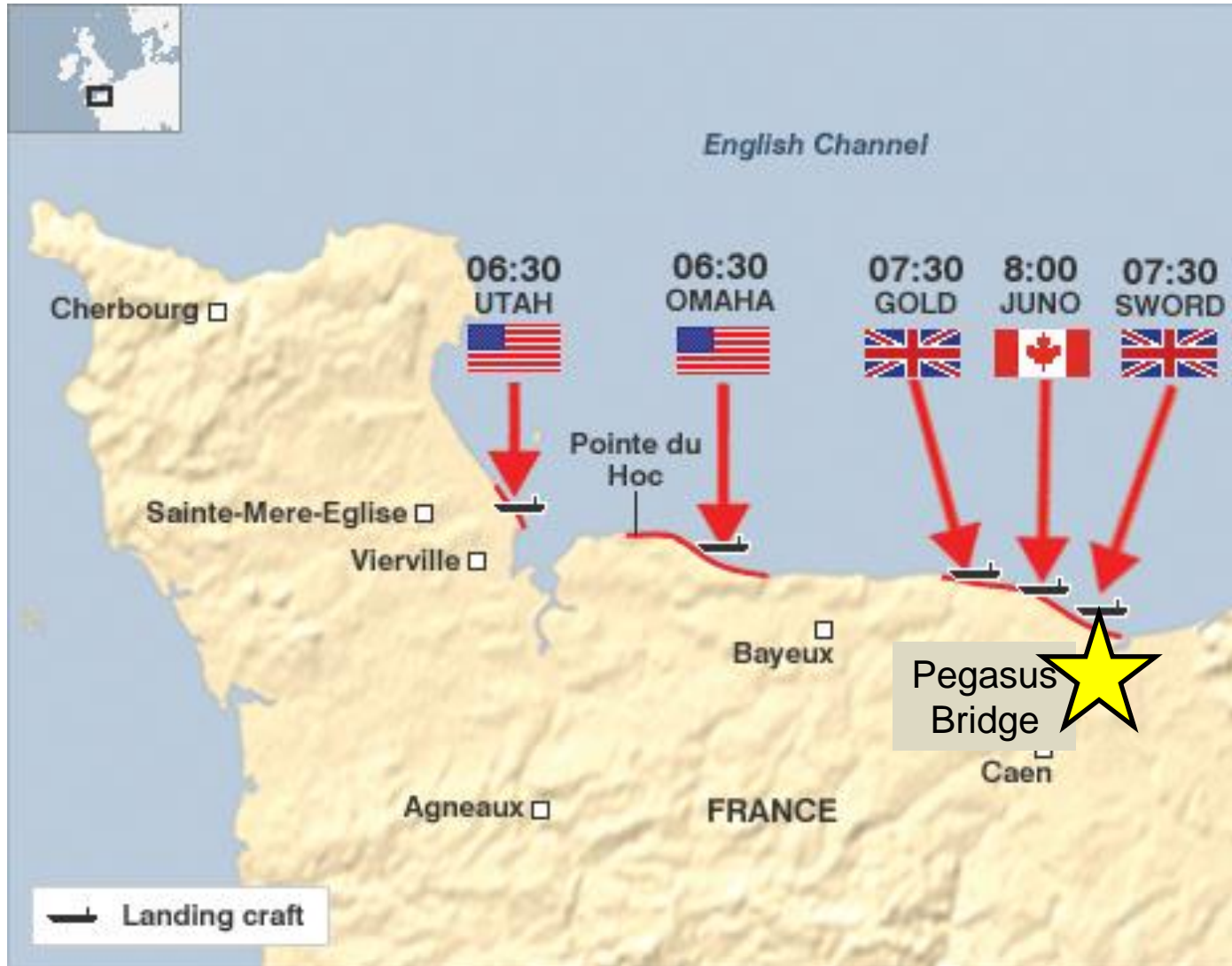


The Invasion





Our First Stop





Pegasus Bridge

- Two bridges over the Caen canal were vital to get the British troops off their beaches
- Glider troops were dropped near the bridges, and the men captured them before the Germans could destroy them
- This isn't the actual bridge! It was built after the war, and is very similar to the original
 - Original was moved several hundred feet to a museum (on dry land)





A Close Drop



- Monuments mark where the first two gliders finished crash-landing!
 - First is just 25 yards from the defenders



Taken from the Opposite Bank





1944 Picture





Café Still Open



- Owned by a daughter of one of the British glider troops
- Refuses to serve Germans!



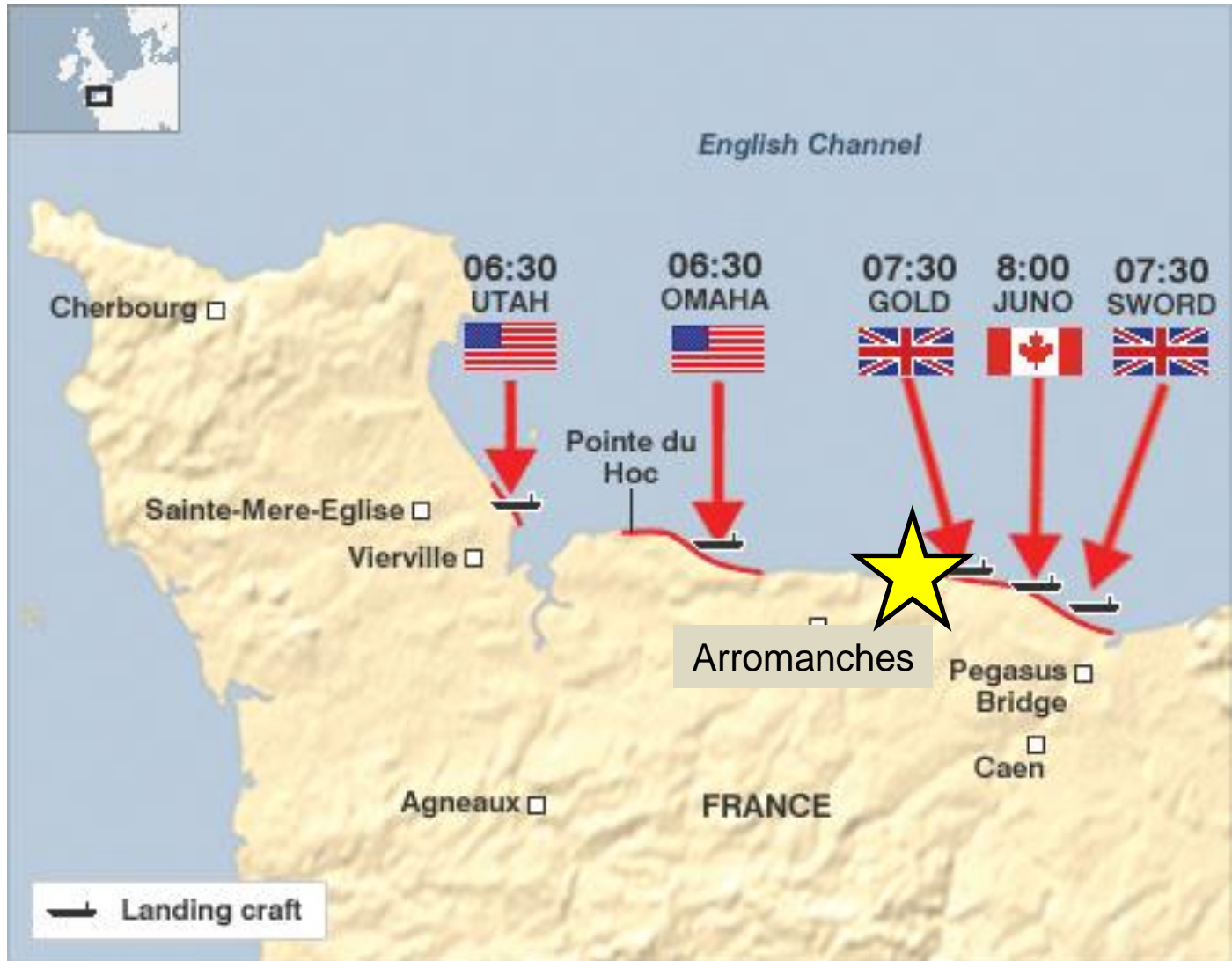
Richard Todd in “The Longest Day”

- Richard Todd (the actor) played Major Howard, the assault commander
- Todd (a Lieutenant at the time) was a paratrooper who dropped into Normandy for D-Day....





Second Stop: Arromanches





British Beaches/Arromanches

- Not much to see of the British invasion beaches...mostly urban areas, now
- A museum is located in Arromanches, the western limit of the British beaches





Mulberry Harbor

- Once the beaches were captured, the Allies would need a harbor so ships could dock and heavy equipment could be unloaded
- Developed the Mulberry system...floating docks and causeways
- Many of the sections are still in place at Arromanches





The Mulberry Concept

- The two Mulberries had floating concrete breakwaters combined with piers supported by pontoons



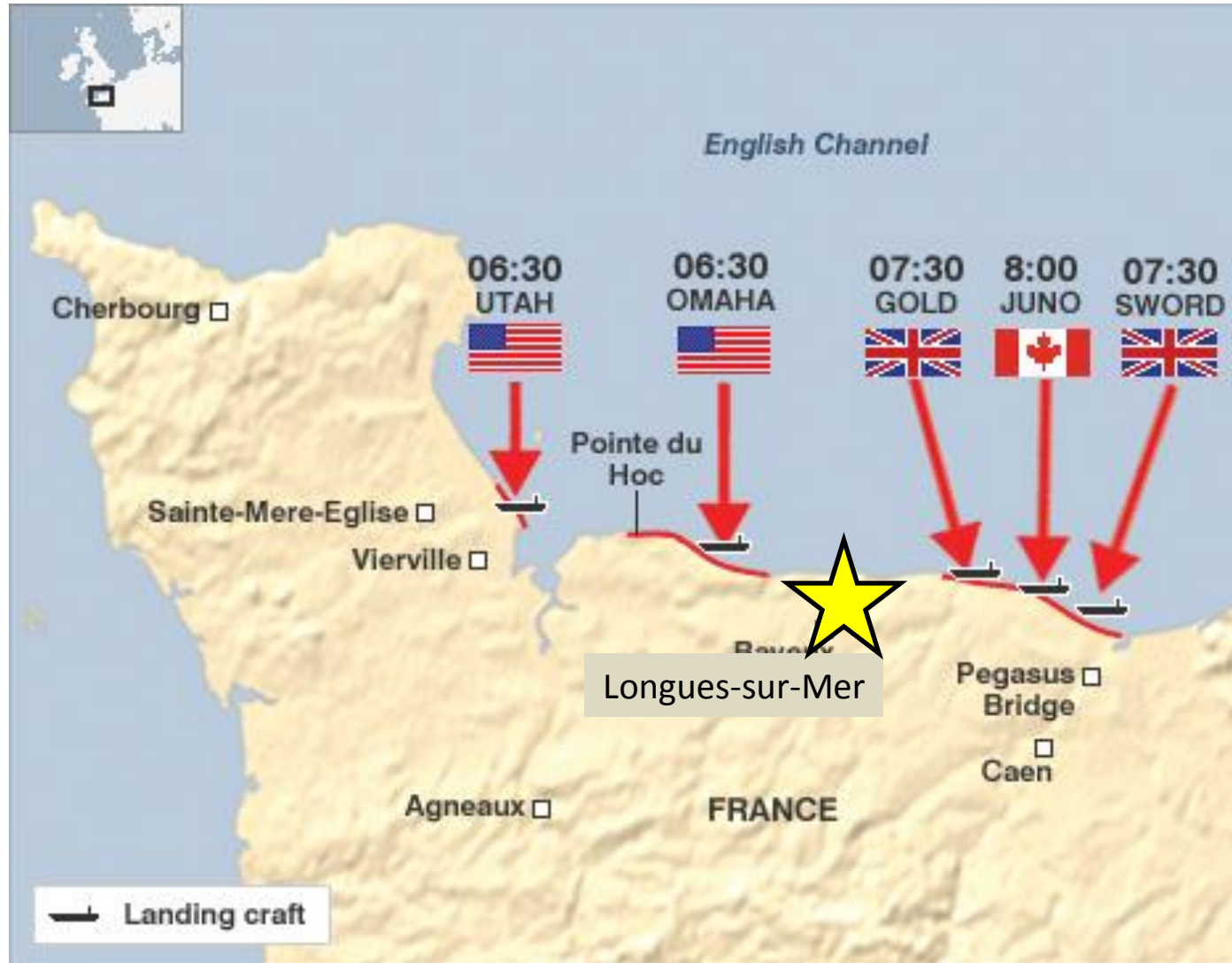


Critical to Invasion

- It was vital to have a harbor for simple unloading of cargo for supporting the invasion
- One of the critical factors in surprising the Germans at Normandy is that the area did NOT have a large enough harbor to support the invasion
- The Mulberries at Arromanches and Omaha Beach would fill that gap until port cities could be captured
 - A large storm hit ~1 week after the Mulberries were in place and destroyed the one at Omaha
 - Troops basically had to hold in place for a month until sufficient port facilities were developed



Longues-sur-Mer Battery





Indirect Fire

- Two types of fire: Direct and Indirect
 - Direct: Gunners see their target, correct their own fire as necessary
 - Indirect: Guns can't see the target, are directed by a forward observer
- The battery at Longues-Sur-Mer was about a mile back from the coast
 - Telephone line connected gunners to an observer on the coast cliffs
 - Battery was covered with sod/painted to blend in





One of the Battery

- Germans had a lot of experience building bomb-proof structures
- Hard to spot from the air

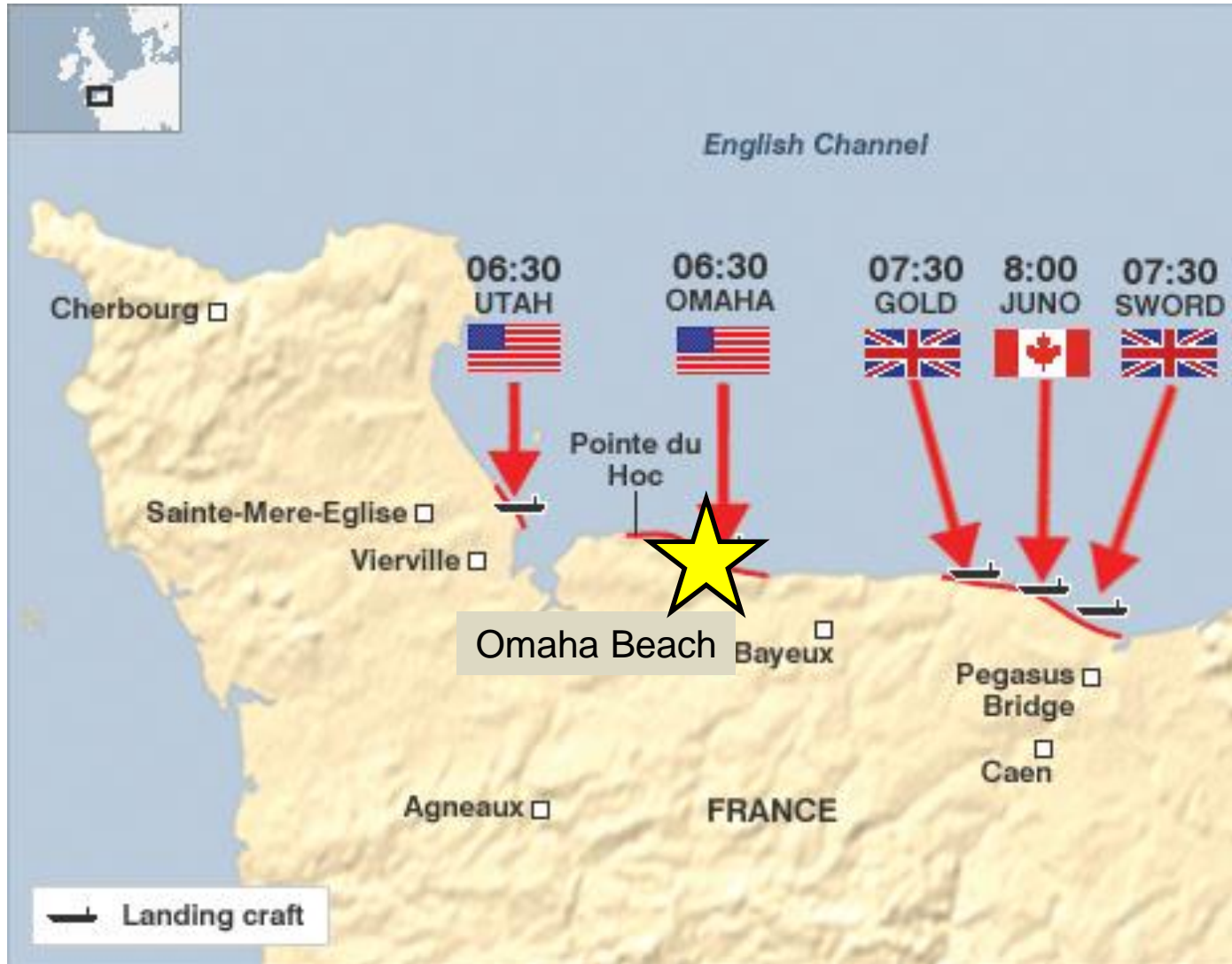


Farmer held onto the guns after the war...sued when the government tried to take them!





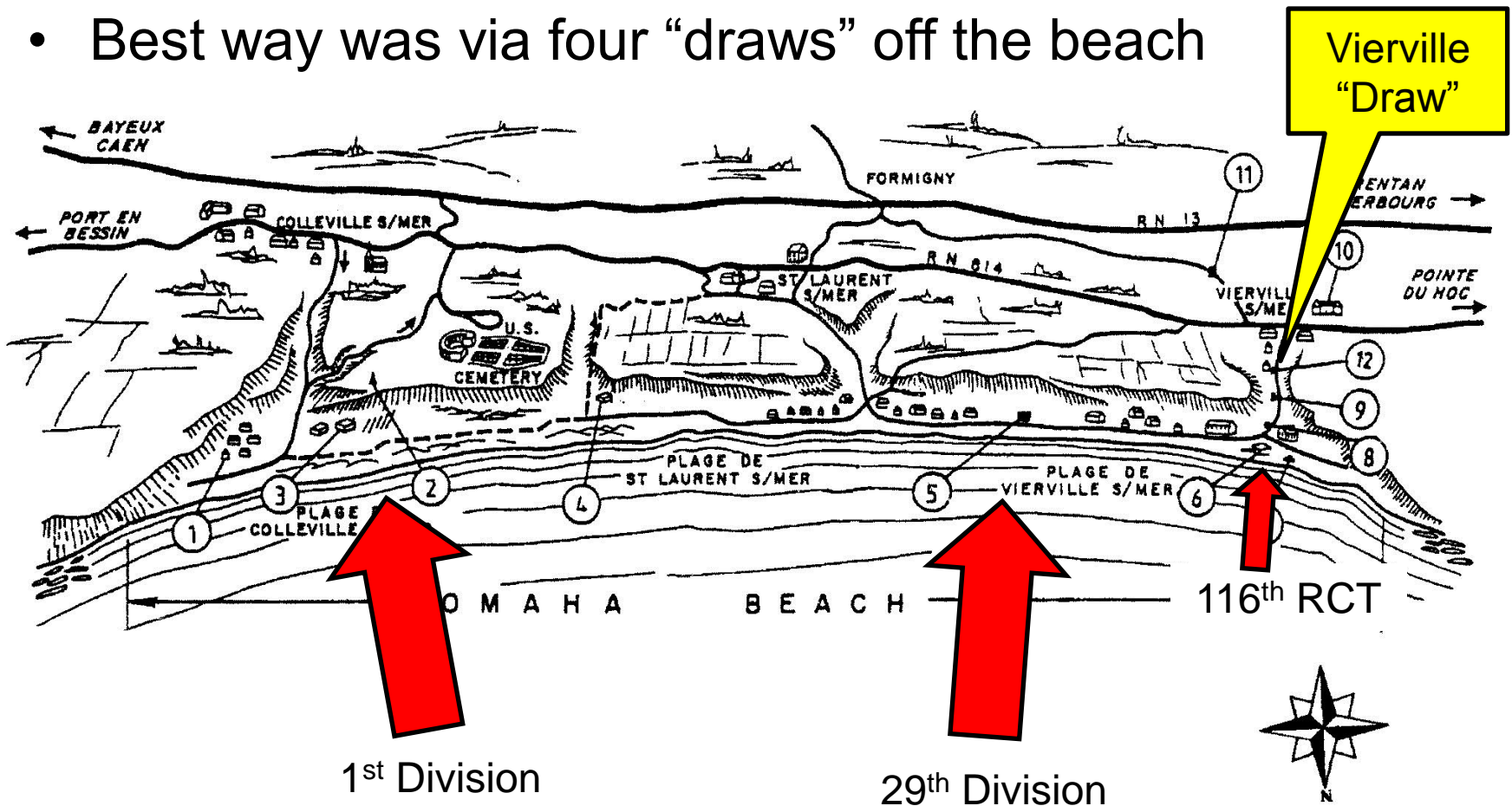
Omaha Beach





Omaha Beach Map

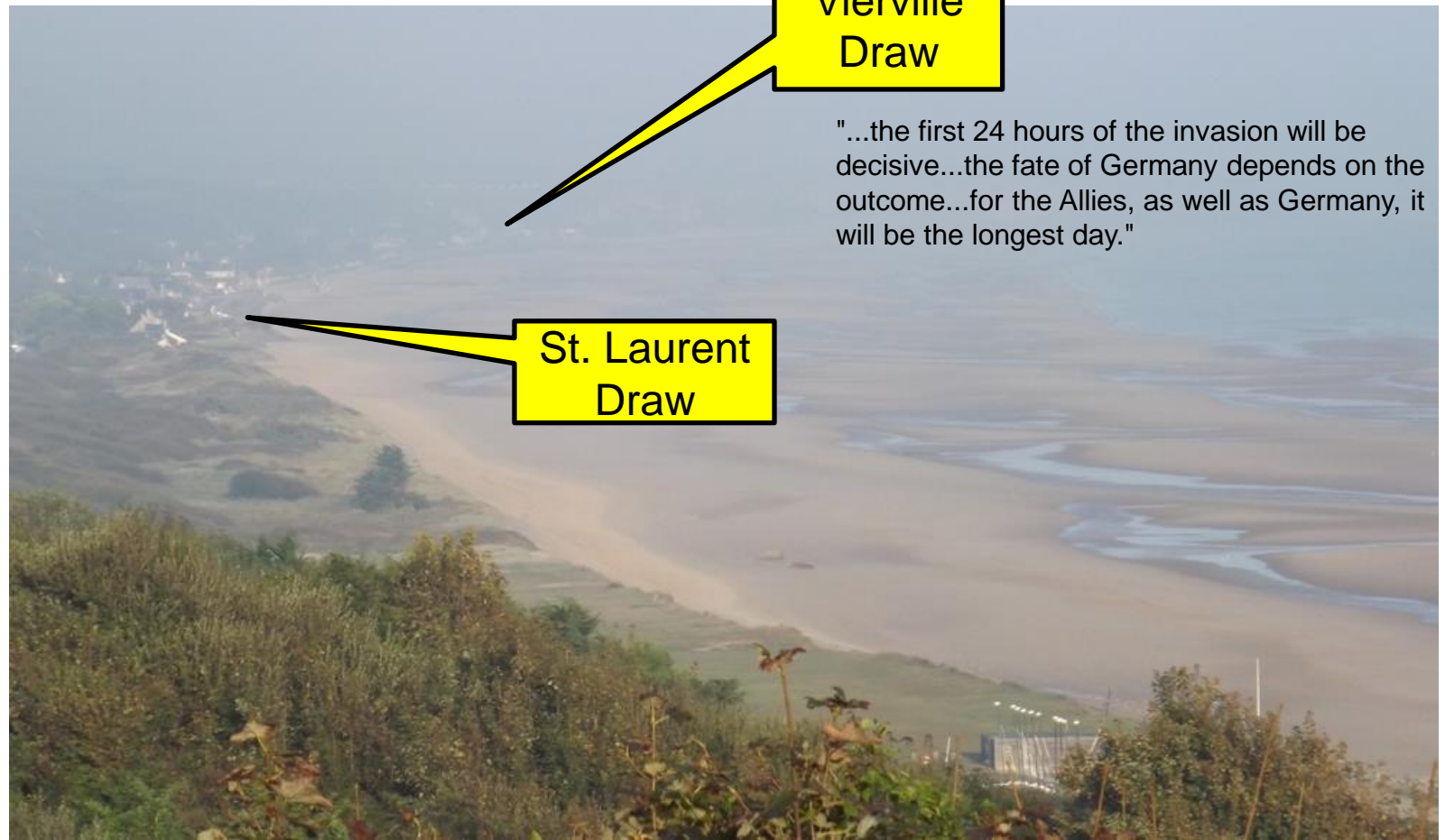
- High hills behind beach...hard to assault, easily defended
- Best way was via four “draws” off the beach





Panoramic View

- Previous American landings were on long, open, curved beaches, at low tide, and during the full moon
- Rommel stood at this exact spot and said, “This is where they’d come...”



Vierville
Draw

"...the first 24 hours of the invasion will be decisive...the fate of Germany depends on the outcome...for the Allies, as well as Germany, it will be the longest day."

St. Laurent
Draw



Tactical Considerations

- Photo was taken from strongpoint WN-60
 - This is where Major Pluskat was headquartered (in the movie, he was the commander who first saw the allied invasion fleet)
- Note the amount of beach & tidal ponds the Americans had to cross...while perfectly in view
 - Standard German infantry machine gun fired 25 rounds a second...





Vierville Draw: Where the 116th Landed

- Low tide...but not as low as the morning of the landing





116th GI's View

Vierville
Draw

National
Guard
Memorial

Our hotel!
(Replaced pre-
war building)

Trenches
Machine
Guns, etc.

German
Bunker

Bunker was built in
basement of pre-war resort





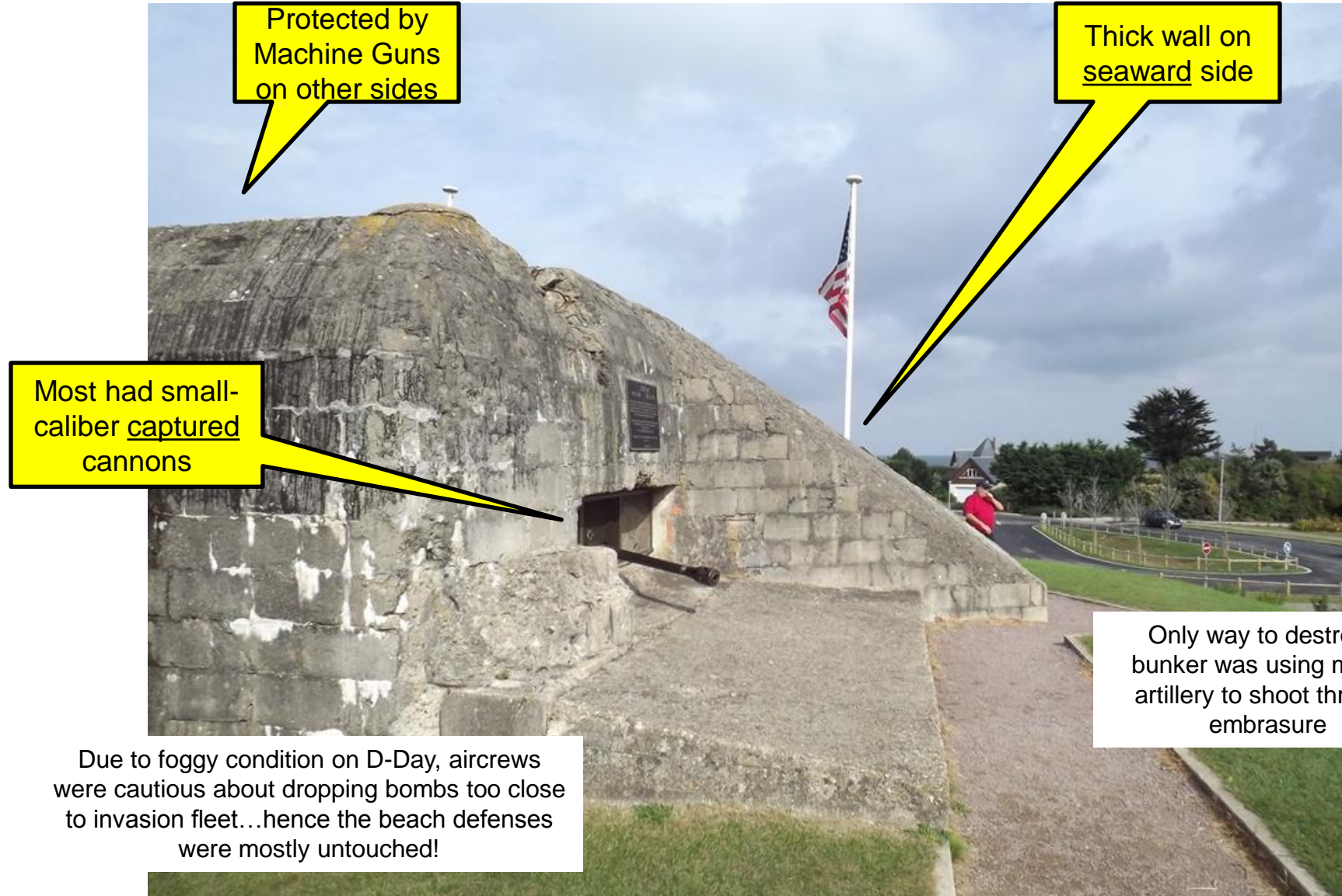
Vierville Draw in The Longest Day

- Vierville Draw were where most of the scenes with Robert Mitchum took place
 - Played Gen. Cota, deputy commander of the 29th
- The movie got most of it wrong!





Anatomy of a Bunker



Protected by
Machine Guns
on other sides

Thick wall on
seaward side

Most had small-
caliber captured
cannons

Only way to destroy a
bunker was using mobile
artillery to shoot through
embrasure

Due to foggy condition on D-Day, aircrews
were cautious about dropping bombs too close
to invasion fleet...hence the beach defenses
were mostly untouched!



The Duplex Drive Sherman Tank

- The DD Sherman had a collapsible canvas “hull” and propeller drive
- Designed to launch ~2 miles from shore, swim at 4 knots
- However designed for 1-foot waves... Omaha Beach had 6-foot waves
 - Most that were launched per plan foundered and sank...2 out of 30 made it ashore
 - One commander brought the LCTs in closer, most of those tanks made it onto the beach...finally had something that could eliminate the direct-fire bunkers





Higgins Boat

aka Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel (LVCP)

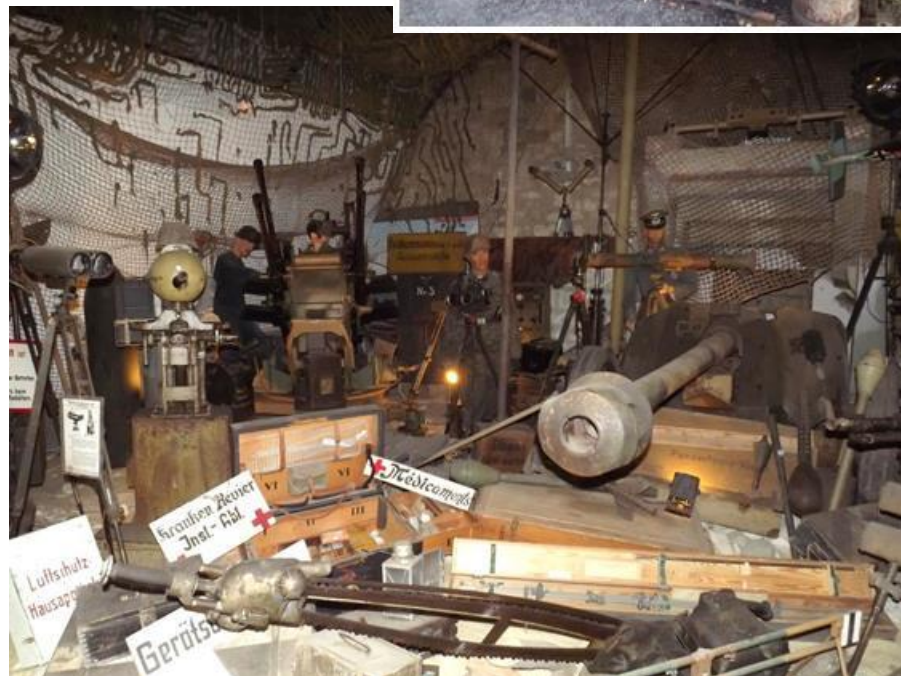
- Eisenhower identified three things that won the war: The C-47, the Jeep, and the Higgins Boat
- Low-cost, simple landing craft made out of plywood
 - Based on Louisiana swamp boats
- Carry a platoon or troops (~35 men) or a jeep and small gun





The Museums of Omaha Beach

- There are a half-dozen or so museums within a mile or two of Omaha beach
- Some are traditional displays, others are just collections of material
 - After the war, French farmers would haul away equipment and store in barns
 - Many barns still full of gear!
 - Homes/Cafes/Bars have tank traps and sometimes small cannons
- Material is still being found





Omaha Beach Museum that didn't START as an Omaha Beach Museum

- About 45 days after the landings, the Allies had a large German force nearly trapped about 25 miles south of the beaches (the "Falaise Pocket")
- Germans tried to escape, with massive casualties, especially loss of equipment
- Local Frenchman gathered up the equipment for an excellent museum for the Falaise battle
- When he died, his sons figured there'd be more interest in a museum near Omaha...and the collection was moved
 - VERY professional display
- A lot of rare tanks, and unusual logistics equipment (such as portable repair gantries)
- Museum closed several years ago...





Environmental Impact of the Invasion

- Beautiful sandy beach, eh? Wasn't like that on D-Day!
- Was all gravel ("Shingle")
- The gravel was used to pave the roads to Paris!





Just a Small Hovel



- Champagne reception our first day at a 1000-year old French Chateau
 - Part of the house was electrified only last year
- Owner was a young boy when the Germans invaded
- House became headquarters for the local Wehrmacht unit
 - Had a partial tower on-site, hit by the Americans during the invasion
- Became American headquarters when the Germans moved out!
 - Hosted both Patton and Eisenhower



Champagne in the Chateau



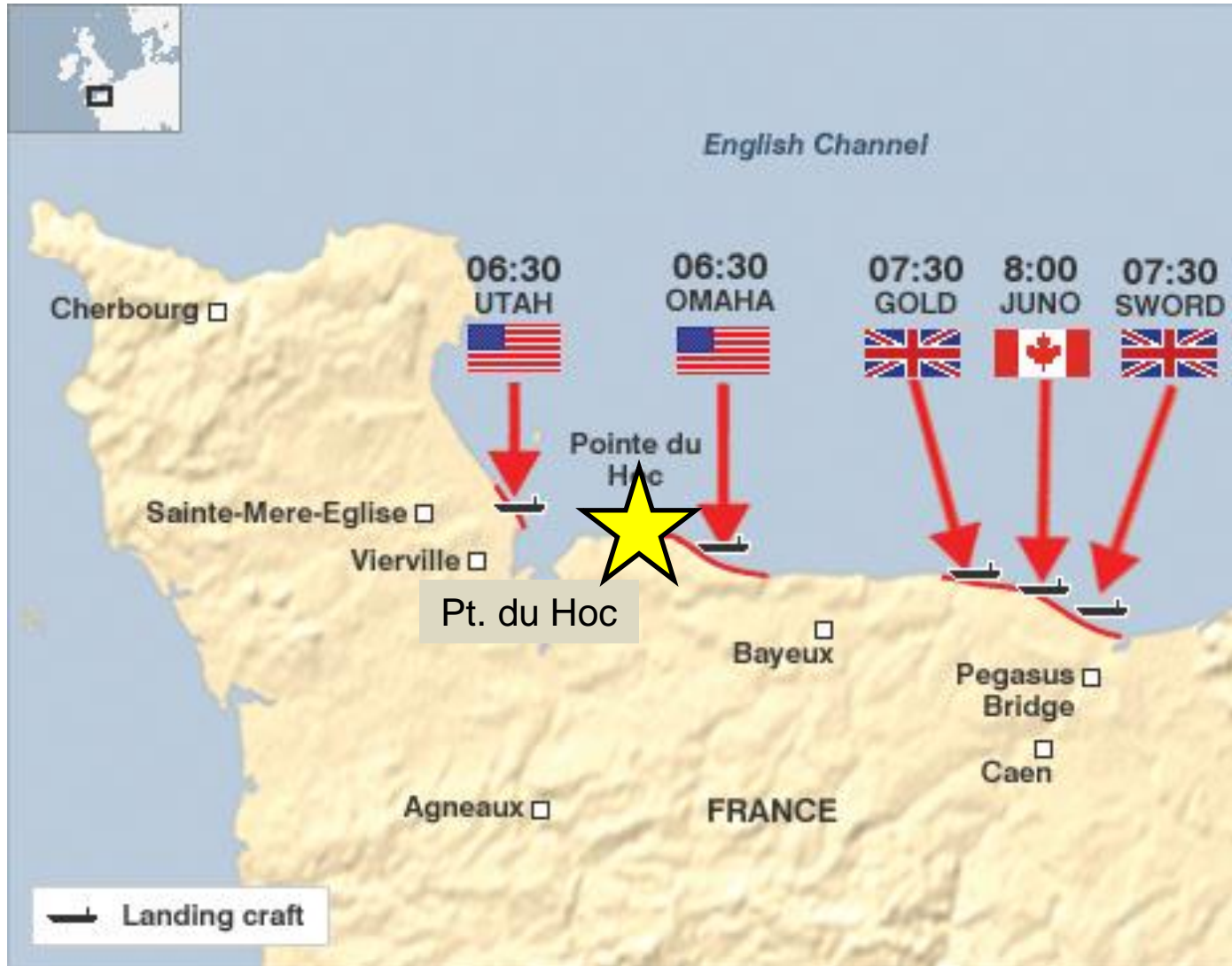
Alex Ortner Playing
150-year-old Piano



Alex Ortner, his father
Blake, and me



Pointe du Hoc





Sacred Ground for Rangers

- Point du Hoc was a small peninsula with a gun position that could reach both Omaha and Utah beaches
- Army Rangers climbed the cliffs, now one of the shrines for the Rangers



Blake Ortnier was a Ranger assigned to the 2nd Ranger Battalion in the late 1980s. He commanded the 116th Infantry Brigade Combat Team on a deployment to Afghanistan in 2004, and, eventually the entire 29th Infantry Division



Height of the Cliffs





That's not Rolling Terrain...it's Bomb/Artillery Craters!





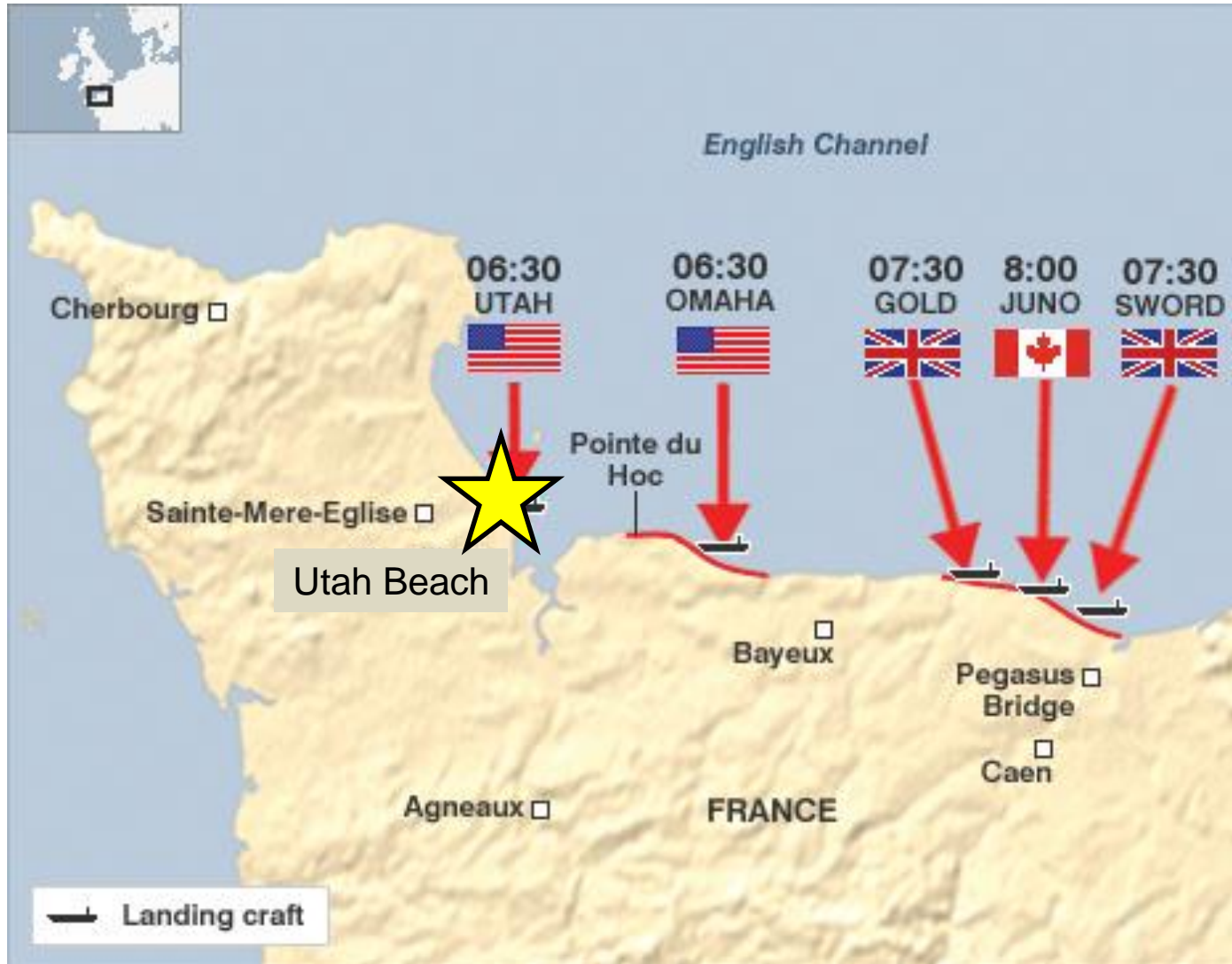
Controversy at Pointe Du Hoc

- When the Rangers reached the top...the guns weren't there!
 - Parked several miles away
 - Found/destroyed by Ranger patrol
- Controversy regarding when this was known
 - Some sources say the Resistance was unable to notify SHAEF in time
 - Other sources say the Ranger commanders knew it
- Ranger unit was besieged several days until relieved from Omaha





Utah Beach





Utah Beach





Utah Beach

- Utah Beach didn't have the cliffs above them, like Omaha
- Defenses were not significant
 - Actually landed in the wrong spot...but since it worked, they kept going
 - Only 197 casualties out of 21,000 men
 - ~3000 killed at Omaha
- Teddy Roosevelt, Jr. was the on-site commander, came ashore on the first wave (Henry Fonda played him in the movie)
 - Died of a heart attack a month later.
- Slow to progress out of the beach area, due to flooded terrain



Utah Beach Museum

- Didn't seem to be a lot of "independent" museums around Utah
- One very nice, professional museum and several memorials



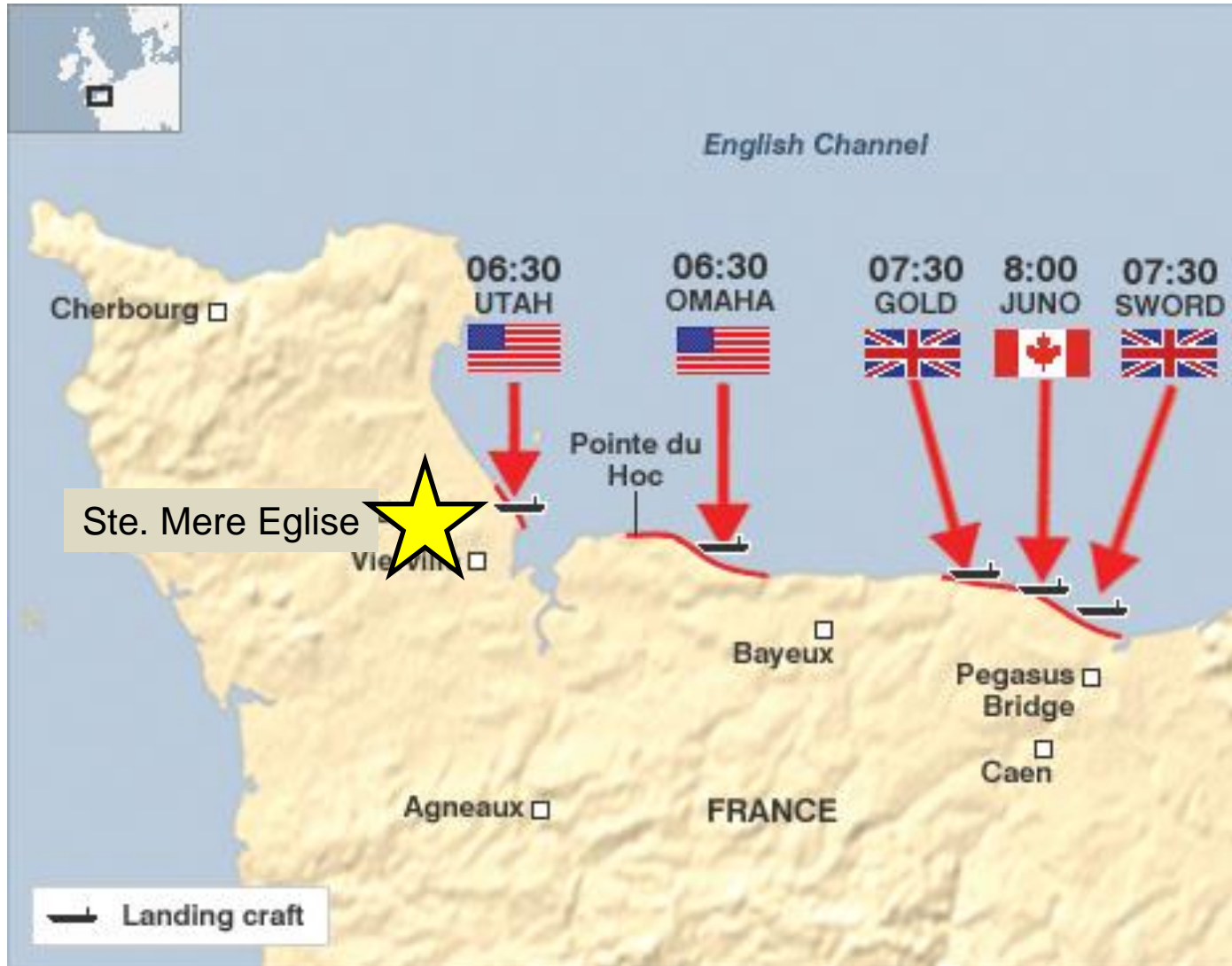


B-26 in Utah Beach Museum





Sainte Mere Eglise



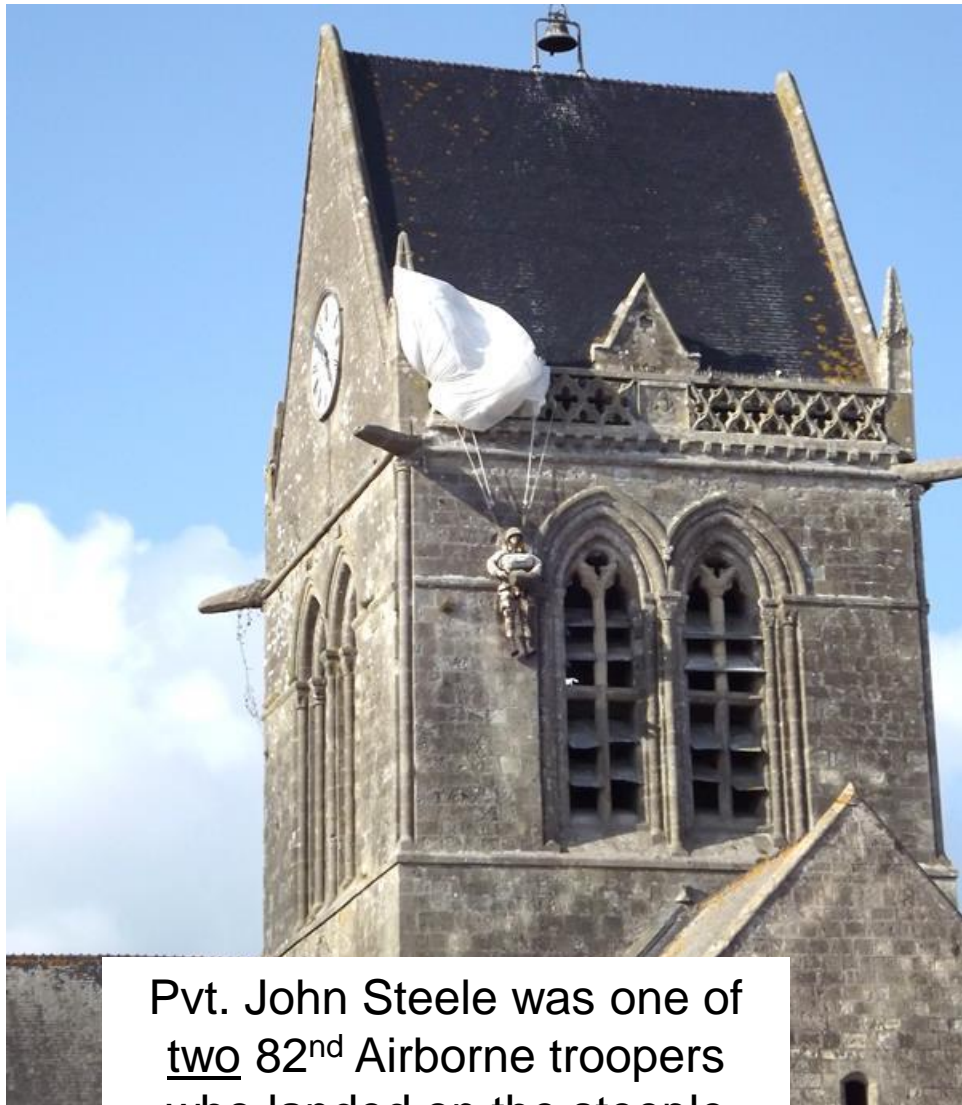


Ste Mere Eglise

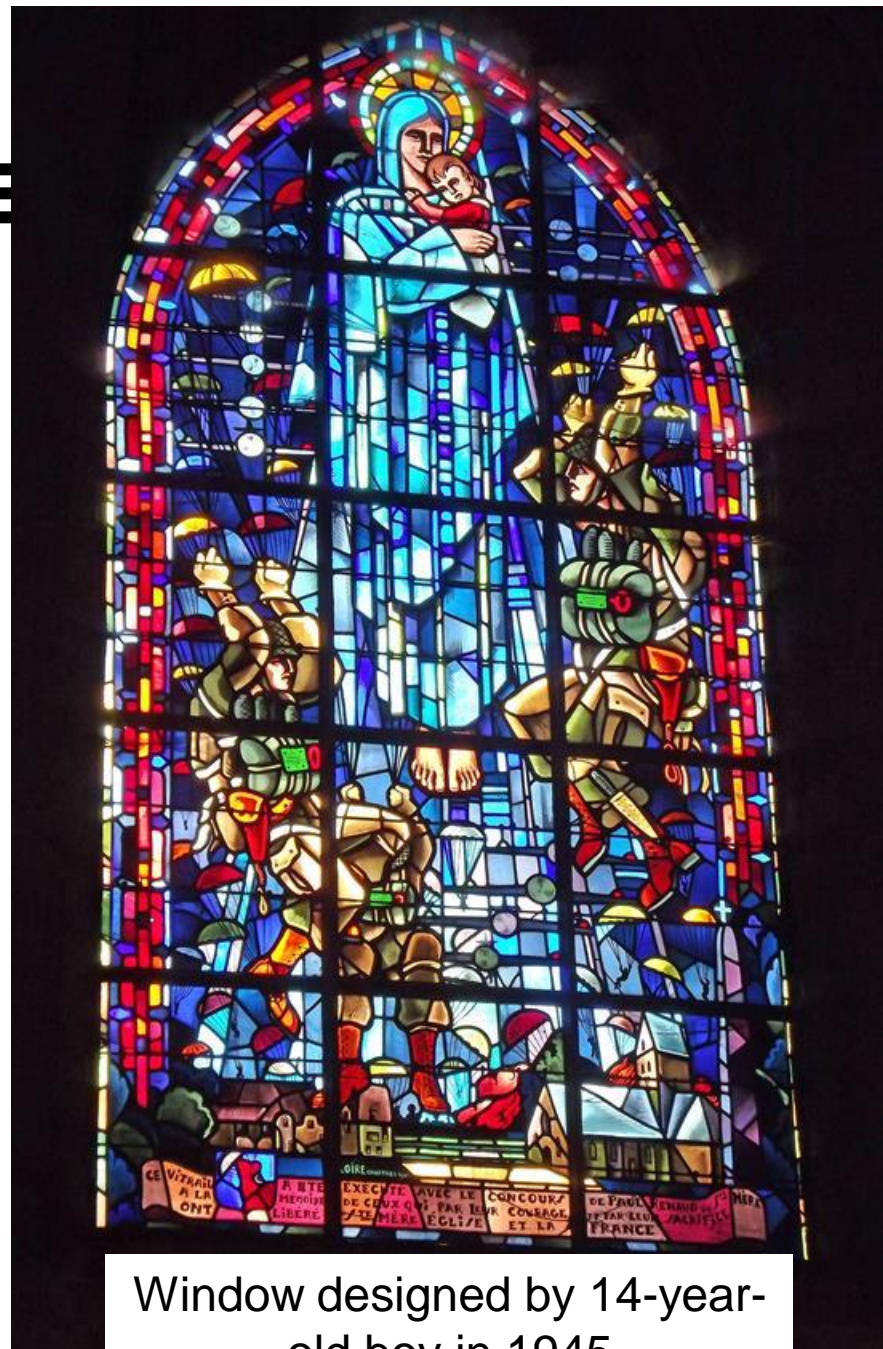
- Sainte Mere Eglise is the symbol of the American Paratrooper assault on D-Day
- Due to weather conditions the troops were widely scattered over the area
 - Flooding (deliberate) made it difficult to join up and drowned many men
 - About 14,000 paratroopers dropped, about 2,500 casualties
- A fire in Ste Mere Eglise was mistaken for a landing beacon, and a stick (~18 troopers) was dropped directly on the town
 - The German garrison had already been alerted due to the fire



The Church at Ste. Mere Eglise



Pvt. John Steele was one of two 82nd Airborne troopers who landed on the steeple



Window designed by 14-year-old boy in 1945



Musee Airborne

- The Musee Airborne was built on the site of the burning building
- A C-47 and a Waco glider housed in buildings with parachute-shaped roofs





Waco CG-4 Glider





John Wayne as Lt. Col. Benjamin Vandervoort

- In “The Longest Day,” John Wayne played the commander of the unit that included the men dropped into Ste. Mere Eglise
- Wayne was 54 years old
- The man he played was 27 years younger at the time of the drop.....





Posing with the Captured Flag

- The day after D-Day, two paratroopers pose with a captured flag in Marmion's farm in Ravenoville
 - Former German headquarters
- 70 years later, members of our tour group posed in the same spot with the actual flag that had flown over the headquarters!



- “But the flag is different!”????
- The flag in the original photo was a vehicle flag, not the headquarters flag
- The Germans would have it on a vehicle hood to identify the vehicle to aircraft overhead



Lest We Forget



American Cemetery Chapel





The German Cemetery





The Other Casualties

- It is estimated that 20,000 French civilians died during the battle for Normandy



WWI Memorial damaged by artillery from the USS Texas



Do They Hold It Against Us?

- Both these memorials are located on private property, in non-public locations





Touring the Battlefield

- As these pictures show, much of the Normandy battlefields are still visible
- If you've got any interest in military history, I highly recommend visiting this area!