**Remembering Memorial Day and victory in Europe**

By Lucas McMillan

Index-Journal

May 27, 2015

page 10A

Americans remember Memorial Day each May and know June 6 as D-Day in 1944, but we skip over May 8, the day that World War II in Europe ended in 1945. Although we must think of the ultimate sacrifice of our citizens on Memorial Day, we should also remind ourselves of dates such as the Allied victory on May 8.

Victory in Europe or V-E Day is celebrated in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom. My wife and I recently took Lander students abroad and were in London for the 70th anniversary of V-E Day. We enjoyed watching the military parades, listening to the bands, and seeing planes fly over Buckingham Palace. And we were thrilled to see the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh drive past us in their car. Prince Phillip is a WWII veteran and Queen Elizabeth’s parents are still remembered for their dedication to the war effort and the British people even as they (like those in London’s East End) had their home bombed during the Blitz.

Unfortunately, V-E Day was not marked with celebration and thanksgiving in the United States.

Of course, May 8, 1945 could not have happened without Operation Overlord, the largest amphibious military operation in history. Students needed to see Winston Churchill’s Cabinet War Rooms where these secret plans were discussed, and they needed to learn about the glory and tragedy of conflict at the Imperial War Museum. But understanding 1945 also meant that we had to visit Normandy.

Like Lander students, I have seen “Saving Private Ryan.” I have probably read a bit more than they have about WW II, but had not traveled to the beaches of Normandy before May 14. And so our visit touched me, even if my wife and I do not have relatives buried at Normandy, but in another cemetery in France.

Our visit means this Memorial Day I was thinking about the courage and sacrifice exhibited by troops on June 6, 1944. The Normandy American Cemetery is where 9,387 are now buried. This includes the nearly 2,000 that lost their lives at Omaha Beach just below this hallowed ground. Photos show how the grounds and surrounding landscapes have become more beautiful with age. The peacefulness of a visit now means that it is hard to imagine the armed struggle that took place then.

The battles in 1944 were difficult. We saw the Germans’ gun battery at Longues-sur-Mer as a way of understanding the Atlantic wall that had been constructed to stop a sea invasion.

We also visited Pointe du Hoc, the 90-foot-tall cliffs U.S. Rangers heroically scaled.

We saw the memorial to Easy Company, the regiment of the 101st Airborne Division profiled in “Band of Brothers,” that draws attention to the importance of taking the causeways to move Allied troops inland and liberate towns after landing at Utah Beach.

Nothing can make you feel prouder of the United States than a visit to Sainte Marie du Mont, the first village to be liberated after the invasion. Here buildings fly both French and American flags and residents have never forgotten the actions on that Tuesday in 1944.

It was at the Utah Beach Musée du Débarquement that I found the best description of the sacrifice of U.S. soldiers. The words come from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, a French writer best known for “The Little Prince.” Although he did not participate in D-Day operations, he had spent time in the United States and traveled with a U.S. Navy convoy to North Africa in 1943. Shortly before his own death, his 1944 “Letter to an American” (Complete Works, Vol. II, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade) has the words that we should remember this Memorial Day:

“It is not in the pursuit of material interests that mothers in the United States gave up their sons. It is not in the pursuit of material interest that these boys accepted the risk of death…

“And what were they told that could motivate them to sacrifice their lives? They were told of hostages hanged in Poland. They were told of prisoners shot in France. They were told that a new form of slavery threatened to extinguish a part of Humanity. They were told not about themselves, but of others. That gave them a sense of solidarity with all mankind.”

“The fifty thousand soldiers in my convoy went to war not to save American citizens, but rather for Man himself, respect for Mankind, liberty of all men, the greatness of Man…”

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

*Dr. Lucas McMillan is Associate Professor of Political Science at Lander University.*