

MAURICE RENAUD SPEECH AT THE DEDICATION OF THE AIRBORNE MONUMENT

SAINTE MERE EGLISE JUNE 8th 2014

Here, 70 years and 2 days ago, Paratrooper Alfred Von Holsbeck landed and exploded in the flames of the house near here, on the other side of THIS square. The Paratrooper John Steele, was trapped on the steeple of THIS church. In the village, and in the surrounding villages of Chef du Pont, La Fiere, Carantan, St. Come du Mont, Sainte Marie du Mont; ferocious combats were engaging paratroopers of the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions.

At the same time, in the east, in the Merville and Franceville sectors, the British 6th Airborne division and the 1st Canadian para battalion were jumping and were taking Pegasus Bridge with Lord Lovatt leading the way.

The commandos of the SAS Brigade were attacking their targets. The Paratroopers of the French free forces landed in Brittany.

Operation Overlord was on its way.

In the first hours of the morning we discovered the bodies of 6 American Paratroopers hanging from their parachutes from the limbs of the great, old trees in the center of this square.

Many others were lying dead on THIS VERY SQUARE.

The casualties of all the Airborne units were very high during the Normandy campaign;

3,152 Killed in Action

8,006 Wounded in Action

We chose to engrave the numbers of their casualties on this monument because it illustrates the amount of courage and sacrifice of these elite soldiers.

This monument is more than a slab of granite etched with military insignias and the numbers of killed and wounded soldiers. It is the reaffirmation of a promise.

That promise is simple. NEVER FORGET.

Never is a big word. It is infinite. In so being, it is also eternal, like the Airborne spirit.

These Paratroopers, many of whom were less than 20 years old, were all volunteers. Without family ties of their own, they came to liberate a country they did not know. They did not know the language nor the customs but gave of themselves to defend fellow human beings who were oppressed; defending the ideals of freedom and democracy.

Seventy years have passed since the historic night that delivered our freedom from the skies. To those of us on the ground, it was nothing less than a miracle from heaven.

In reality, the Airborne assault on German-occupied Normandy was something even greater; It was an act of human sacrifice for the salvation of others, a suicide mission for Paratroopers and Glider Crews who were shot out of the sky, drowned in swamps or killed while fighting on the ground.

A day will soon come when no one who fought in the battle of Normandy will be among us. At some point after that, no one who has even a personal connection to the Liberation will be here to speak as a firsthand witness.

Today, we immortalize the bravest of the brave; The Paratroopers, who paid for our freedom, our future, with their lives; seventy years ago. As the monuments says:

“They gave all of their tomorrows so that we could have our today”

The idea for this monument to the Allied Troops of Operation Overlord came from Colonel Keith Nightingale. He envisioned an everlasting symbol located on this square of our village; which has become an icon for the returning Airborne troops who come back each year just as my father, Alexandre Renaud predicted in his book, which he wrote in 1945.

Our Association, the AVA, which stands for “Friends of the American Veterans”; decided to erect this monument and we are deeply grateful to the many donors from Normandy, from all over France and from the United States of America.

We are very grateful to our Veterans, their families and friends, for attending this ceremony. This monument is dedicated to them and to their comrades killed in action in June and July, 1944.

To the Paratroopers we extend our undying admiration and respect.

GOD BLESS THE PARATROOPERS

AIRBORNE ALL THE WAY!