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SAINTE-MÈRE-ÉGLISE, France (Army News Service, June 11, 2014) - Barely past midnight, in the first moments of June 6, 1944, hundreds of aircraft carrying some 24,000 British and American paratroopers filled the sky over France's northern coast.

The elite Soldiers were the first boots on the ground for the invasion forces, and the "tip of the spear" in the liberation of France.

Exposed to fire from the ground during descent, and often dropped miles away from the intended target, the airborne units also incurred scarring casualties in their operation, just within the first hours.

Carrying two parachutes in its city coat of arms, Sainte-Mère-Église still remembers the sacrifices of those who came to its rescue. Recently, municipality officials added a new monument to its town center, memorializing the men who lost their lives in the fight for their freedom.

Covered in an olive-drab parachute, the memorial stood veiled during the 70th D-Day anniversary celebrations until Maj. Gen. James C. McConville, commander of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) and Maj. Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr., commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, unveiled the memorial stone, June 8.

Displaying the unit crests of the U.S., British and French Airborne units, followed by casualty statistics, the monument was designed to serve as a lasting reminder of the human cost of the battle, officials said.

"We chose to engrave the casualties on this monument because (the numbers) illustrate the amount of courage of these Allied Soldiers," said Maurice Renaud, son of the wartime mayor and president of the Friends of American Veterans in Sainte-Mère-Église. "It is more than a slab of granite etched with military insignias and numbers of killed and wounded Soldiers. It is a reaffirmation of a promise, and that promise is simple: We will never forget."

The idea for the monument, Renaud said, came from an airborne veteran, Retired Col. Keith Nightingale, who served two tours in Vietnam with Airborne and Ranger units.

"Sainte-Mère-Église is the Gettysburg battlefield for the American Airborne troops," Nightingale said. "There is no other place they have been that has the same significance. If they hadn't succeeded (here), the outcome of the Normandy campaign, particularly in this part, may have been markedly different."

A long-time visitor to Normandy, Nightingale said he suggested that one thing that was missing in the town of Sainte-Mère Église.

"Each number on this statue has a name -- a name of a young Soldier that came here 70 years ago," he said. "Each had a family and a future he did not see. By their deaths, they gave all of us what we have and enjoy today. They are truly the one single family of Normandy."

In attendance during the ceremony were some of the men who survived the war, to include George Schenkle, a former corporal who landed near Hill 30, four kilometers outside of town, with E-Company of the 508th Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division.

"It was a cloudy sky and moonlight was coming through the clouds," Schenkle recalled. "We walked until we assembled to a larger group, since we were all pretty scattered and didn't know what to do. When we had enough people together, we received orders that aimed at sealing the peninsula, so we could take Cherbourg."

Overcoming the adversity and confusion of the nighttime landing, Schenkle's unit was instrumental in securing the town and connecting the landing beaches for a cohesive advance inland. Later in the war, Schenkle was wounded in the battle of the bulge and received a Purple Heart.

"Somebody had shot me across the shoulder," he recalled. "It knocked me down for a moment. I walked back to the aid station, was taken to the hospital in Birmingham, England, and it took me three months to get back to my unit."

Shenkle, who also traveled to Normandy to attend the 50th and 69th anniversaries, said the welcome by local families is overwhelmingly positive.

"It brings back memories," he said. "The people here make you feel very welcome and you don't get that everywhere. They are genuinely glad to see us and make us welcome."

While Shenkle said he sometimes resents all the praise heaped upon him as a survivor of the war, he said the monument is a good way to remember those who were lost during the fight.

"We lost a lot of good men, and it's good that people remember what they did and left here," he said.

"The day will come when none who fought in the battle will be around," Renaud said. "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, with this monument, we immortalize the bravest of the brave, the paratroopers who paid for our freedom, our future, with their lives 70 years ago. The monument is dedicated to them. God bless the paratroopers."

