

# Remembering the sacrifice for freedom

*Visit to Juno Beach helps students understand importance of never forgetting*

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Staff Writer

**T**hey visited the Louvre, travelled to the top of the Eiffel Tower, toured a cheese factory and stopped by the French village where Joan of Arc met her fate in 1431.

But for the 32 students from Newmarket's Dr. John M. Denison Secondary School and 12 students from Langstaff Secondary School in Richmond Hill, the most moving part of their school trip to France was definitely the afternoon they spent on Juno Beach.

"It was kind of weird to think about what happened and to just be standing there," said Laura Cerilli, a Grade 11 student at John M. Denison.

*"... we have our Remembrance Day ceremonies, but it's so far back it's getting hard for them to get it. After our generation, when all the veterans are dead, who do we have to tell the stories?"*

"It was also neat to experience something you've already learned in history class.

June 6, 1944, more than 21,000 Canadian soldiers landed on Juno Beach, an eight-kilometre stretch of beach on France's northern shore, as part of the Allied campaign to wrest the European continent from Nazi control.



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

The York Regional Police Pipe and Drum Band led members of the Sutton Legion and their comrades from Pennsylvania during the annual D-Day parade to Briar Hill Cemetery in Sutton last Sunday. A ceremony was held at the memorial to commemorate the invasion of Europe on June 6, 1944. On that day, Canadian forces stormed Juno Beach,

Three hundred and forty soldiers died that day; another 574 were wounded and 473 taken prisoner.

It has been 59 years since our soldiers landed on that rocky shoreline and students were a little surprised to find the beach itself, just a few kilometres away from the beach made famous in the film *Saving Private Ryan*, showed little evidence of what happened that day.

"Just knowing people were shot down there and died right on the spot where you're standing ... it's just kind of hard to picture," Amanda McGowan, a Grade 10 student at John M. Denison, said.

"At some parts, it looks like nothing bad had ever happened there and there's no evidence of war or killing.

But there are remnants of old bunkers and chunks of concrete

still litter the landscape. The cemetery containing the remains of the soldiers who died in battle that day is just a short distance from the beach.

Unlike the American cemetery, where all the headstones are in the shape of a cross and contain little more than the soldiers' names, the Canadian cemetery features headstones carved with a single maple leaf and verses chosen by families back home.

"When you're going through just reading those inscriptions ... I think there weren't very many people that didn't shed at least one tear," said Summer Harris, one of the teacher chaperones on the trip.

On the April day the students visited the cemetery, few other visitors were there, allowing students time to read inscriptions and realize many of the soldiers who died

establishing a bridgehead for the reinforcements that followed. The evening prior to the parade and service, lighted candles were placed on the graves of veterans buried at Briar Hill. That project, which was initiated locally by Second World War veteran Sam Daggart of Georgina, is spreading throughout York Region.

were't much older than they are.

"You hear numbers in history class, but when you actually see them, you're just like, whoa," Ms McGowan said.

"You never imagined it was this many, it actually looks like so many people when you see the crosses row on row."

Premier Ernie Eves will be among dignitaries in Courselles-sur-Mer, France, who will take part in the official opening of the Juno Beach Centre tomorrow, a \$10-million museum commemorating the D-Day landing and the contributions of Canadians on the home front.

## Juno centre 'long overdue'

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The 15,000-square-foot Juno Beach Centre was built with donations from Royal Canadian Legions across Canada, as well as provincial and federal funding. It also houses a museum.

The Stouffville Legion and Markham Veterans Associations, as well as the Town of Whitchurch-

Stouffville, purchased commemorative bricks for the centre.

The veterans association and its members raised funds in partnership with Wal-Mart, which sold bricks for the centre.

The centre "is long overdue," said Mr. Dawe. "It is very essential that we should keep to the front the very fact that our boys served in that terrible war."

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