CANADA'S OWN D-DAY: A CASE STUDY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY

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The 70th anniversary of D-Day, 6 June 2014, drew large crowds to the Normandy landing beaches and included Queen Elizabeth, U.S. President Barack Obama and other world leaders. The main ceremony at Sword Beach in the British sector attracted most of the attention, but late in the afternoon Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Minister of Veterans Affairs Julian Fantino joined the crowd gathering at the Juno Beach Centre for the Canadian ceremony.

There were solemn moments and the usual dull, overlong speeches from the politicians, but the general mood was festive, a celebration of the achievements of the young Canadians, who in the words of the War Diary of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles "had to storm the enemy positions 'cold' and did so without hesitation." These D-Day ceremonies, which have become major tourist events in Normandy and elsewhere, are an especially interesting example of how memory is constructed and used to promote various agendas.

The process began in 1984 during the 40th anniversary ceremonies. The French government had invited western leaders to Normandy and U.S. president Ronald Reagan, then in the midst of his re-election campaign, delivered a beautifully crafted talk timed to coincide with morning television programs. His brief, seemingly informal comments "to the boys at Pointe du Hoc" were heard by millions, including Canadians, who were thrilled by Reagan's reference "to the unsurpassed courage of the Canadians who had already seen the horrors of war on this coast. They knew what awaited them here but they could not be deterred; once they hit Juno Beach they never looked back."

The audience at Pointe du Hoc included European leaders and Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

It would have been entirely out of character for Trudeau, who was on the verge of retirement and engaged in a world tour promoting peace and disarmament, to offer such sentiments and he did not try. Other Canadians did become involved. A chance meeting between veterans of the Queen's Own Rifles and the owner of the house the regiment had liberated in the first hours of the landings sparked interest in Toronto and the QORs arranged to have "Maison Queen's Own Rifles" become a centre of activity each June.

The first large-scale attempt by Canadians to create a public memory in and of Normandy began in 1992 when representatives of a new museum in Caen, *Le Memorial*, visited Ottawa to seek partners to develop a Canadian memorial garden for the 50th anniversary in 1994. The American Battle of Normandy Foundation was building an elaborate garden to include a "wall of Liberty" with the names of all Americans who lost their lives in Normandy. Neither the Canadian government nor the Canadian War Museum was willing to become involved, but Hamilton Southam, a Second World War veteran and prominent member of the family that owned the Southam newspapers, began to organize the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation to respond to the invitation from Caen.

A student design competition was organized with teams drawn from the Université de Montreal and Carleton University. The students in their graduating year were the age of many of the soldiers in 1944. Before leaving for a site visit in France, they met with veterans who had joined the board of the new foundation and were encouraged to develop their own approach to the project. Professor Nan Griffiths, who with her colleague Professor Bernard Lafargue supervised the students, described the process of creating the garden in a 1999 article:

> *"On arrival in Normandy in became apparent that there was no agreement on what the project should be, where it should be located, or what funding might be available to build it. A model of the American garden, designed by professional architects with a budget of millions, offered little guidance and the students began their work as individuals developing ideas before forming three teams for competition. A site was then selected, partly for its remoteness from the American garden and partly because it lent itself to the symbolic, metaphorical approach the students preferred."*

Garth Webb, a D-Day veteran, like many other visitors to the Canadian Memorial Garden, found the space too abstract and impersonal. They also resented the almost total failure of the curators at *Le Memorial* to include references to Canadians in their exhibits. Webb began to plan a new modern building on the beach where the Royal Winnipeg Rifles landed. The Canadian government wanted nothing to do with this private initiative until Webb persuaded U.S.-based retail giant Walmart to take up the cause and encourage Canadians to donate to a Juno Beach Centre. Enlisting the support of Walmart was a stroke of genius. Many Canadians opposed the entry of the company into Canada when it purchased the Woolco chain of stores in 1994. Walmart sought to counter criticism of its low-wage and aggressive anti-union policies with community involvement, and eagerly responded to the opportunity to identify the company with Canada by persuading customers to donate one dollar to help build the Juno Beach Centre. Ultimately, Walmart itself donated $1.8 million in addition to the

several hundred thousand dollars received from customers.

Webb employed an abrasive, take-no-prisoners approach to fundraising, which offended many people. Neither he nor any of his core group of supporters had any experience in building or running a museum and they were unwilling to seek advice. Officials at Veterans Affairs Canada, the Canadian War Museum, and other organizations with an interest in war commemoration were ignored as the fundraising campaign proceeded. Walmart's well-publicized role embarrassed both the federal and provincial governments. When construction began in 2001, government contributions accounted for 40 per cent of the $10-million budget with a further $2.2 million from the regional governments in France.[1] Despite this, the Juno Beach Centre remained fully under Webb's control.

It is difficult to estimate how much impact the Juno Beach project had on popular opinion, but what we do know is that when *Saving Private Ryan* reached Canadian theatres in 1998, curiosity about D-Day and Canada's role in this iconic event reached a new high. Many Canadians complained that the film, like *The Longest Day*, ignored their countrymen. But as one reviewer put it:

> *The unschooled may emerge from* "Private Ryan" *asking what Canadians were doing on 6 June while the American soldiers were pushing ashore through a barrage of Nazi shells, mines and bullets. Those who know that nine battalions of Canadian troops were busy assaulting German-held beaches in Normandy might ask instead what Canadian film and TV producers were doing while Spielberg made this movie... The answer is, worse than nothing. A quick survey of Canadian film and TV treatments of the Second World War suggests that if we'd made "*Saving Private Ryan*," the Allies never would have gotten off the beach. Private Ryan himself would have been flattened by a German Tiger tank, with the rescue squad dead to the last man in a circle around him.*[2]

The short-term impact of *Saving Private Ryan* was enormous and may account for the extraordinary selection of D-Day as the number one "Canadian" story of the Century in a top ten list compiled by print and broadcast journalists in November 1999.[3] Steven Spielberg had created a memory that is still going strong well into the new century.

Construction of the Juno Beach Centre began the next year, and when it opened in 2003 television and press coverage was extensive. Visitors entered the display via a simulated landing craft with audio and visual cues to the D-Day experience, but once inside the exhibits provided little insight into the events of 6 June 1944 or the Battle of Normandy. One historian who toured the facility complained that "what little military history there is contains numerous errors."[4] The public response was very different. The Centre is a striking building located

1 See www.junobeachcentre.org/centre/pdf/jbc_press_document_2011.pdf.

2 Steve Weatherbe, "Saving Private Canada," *Globe and Mail*, August 24, 1998.

3 *Globe and Mail*, November 7, 1999.

4 Jack Granatstein as quoted in *National Post*, June 18, 2004.

on the edge of a stretch of coast that contained several intact bunkers lending the area a unique air of authenticity. As preparations for the 2004 anniversary began, the Canadian officials selected the centre as the site for an elaborate 60th anniversary ceremony that was to include the presence of the Queen. Over 6,000 people attended the ceremonies at the Juno Beach Centre, which included a flypast of a Lancaster bomber escorted by two Spitfires. The day ended with a lone piper playing a lament at the edge of the beach.

A site of memory, with broad public appeal, had been created, constructing a specifically Canadian version of D-Day. Ten years later, the story had become part of our collective memory.

NOTE

The essay is based on Terry Copp and Matt Symes, *"Canada's D-Day: Politics, Media and the Fluidity of Memory,"* in Michael Dolski (et al) *D-Day in History and Memory (Denton*, University of North Texas Press 2014)