

## **Normandy: Sacrifice for Freedom**

By: Courtney Sonn

Last year, a unique program was designed through the joint efforts of National History Day and sponsor Mr. Albert Small. A trip was designed that would bring fifteen student-teacher pairs to Washington D.C, Paris, and Normandy, France, to learn about the history and untold stories of World War II soldiers, and the D-Day invasion. In February, Montville Township High School history teacher Mr. Peter Porter, and student Thomas Il Grande applied for the program, and were selected out of over a hundred candidates nationwide to participate in the experience.

Porter and Il Grande left for Washington D.C on June 15, arriving several days earlier than the other participants, in order to partake in the National History Day Competition that was occurring in D.C. On June 16 they attended the National History Day Award Ceremony, which several Montville Township High School students qualified to attend. After finishing National History Day events, Porter and Il Grande joined the fourteen other student teacher pairs that came from all over the country to take part in the Normandy Institute program. The group spent time from June 18 to the 22nd in D.C., visiting monuments and historical sites. They additionally went to the University of Maryland to hear lectures from George Washington University and West Point professors. One of Il Grande's favorite moments in the capitol was having dinner at Fort McNair. "Hearing stories from D-day veterans at Fort McNair was an experience that I'll never forget. These soldiers were able to recall first hand accounts of one of the greatest invasions in history", said Il Grande of his time there. After sightseeing and lectures in the city, program participants flew to their next stop, Paris, France.

The participants landed at the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris, France on June 23. Joining the teachers and students were Cathy Gorn, National History Day Director, Ann Claunch, National History Day Education Coordinator and Dr. Tom DeLong, chief scholar and professor from George Washington University. Leaving the airport they boarded a tour bus and began to see the sights. The Paris tour let Porter and Il Grande experience the Eiffel Tower, Arc d' Triumphe, the Louvre, Notre Dame, and Napoleon's Tomb. The group spent one night in Paris, and then began the bus ride to Normandy on June 24. On the way to Normandy, a stop was made at Benouville, where the participants were able to see Pegasus Bridge, where they discussed the British airborne attacks. The group then went to the museum of the Atlantic Wall, and finally arrived in Bayeux where they were able to see a German bunker and the famous Bayeux Tapestry.

June 25 brought participants to St. Mère Eglise, and different battle sights of World War II. They next were brought to the German Cemetery at La Cambe, and finished the day with a visit to Point du Hoc, the scene of the Rangers attack on the German strong hold. June 26 was by far the most moving day of the entire trip for both Porter and Il Grande.

It began with a walk across Utah Beach, and then Omaha Beach, the sights of the American D-Day invasion. "I was deeply affected as a veteran, with the experience" recalls Porter. "I could barely contain the emotion" he said, of walking across the beaches. From Omaha Beach, the group was led up the path to the American Cemetery, where over 9,500 victims are buried.

At the cemetery, each student read a eulogy to a soldier they chose to research, who came from their state. Il Grande wrote a eulogy for Gilbert Woodhull Tennent Combs Jr., a member of the 2nd Armored Division, 41st Infantry. Combs was a volunteer who was killed while trying to save a fellow soldier. "Everyone at some point had tears in their eyes" says Porter of the eulogy readings. Porter was also very moved by the cemeteries' superintendent, Mr. Hans Hooker. Without prior notice, Mr. Hooker was so moved by the first eulogy he heard, that he decided to present each student with the French and American flags they had planted to next to their soldier's gravestone. After each read their eulogy, Mr. Hooker quietly presented the flags to each student. He charged each of them to return to their schools and present their flags to their school so their fellow students would remember the sacrifice of those who fell at Normandy. Mr. Hooker ended the day encouraging them to find more stories of other Normandy soldiers who were buried in the cemetery. With Mr. Hooker's encouragement, Mr. Porter has put into his history curriculum an opportunity for his students to study and discover the untold stories of many D-Day soldiers. National History Day also has plans to continue the search for more stories to provide the superintendent of the American Cemetery at Normandy. Of the eulogy reading, Thomas said, "Researching my soldier and presenting my eulogy was the least I could do. Soldiers buried at the Normandy American Cemetery deserve our respect and it's unfortunate how few of us are able to visit them".

After walking the historical beaches of Normandy, and giving the eulogies at the soldiers' graves, the group was bused back to Paris, where they spent their final day in France. "Knowing I only had one day left in France was hard" says Il Grande," but spending it at the top of the Eiffel Tower, viewing Paris, was a great way to end the trip". For their final dinner in France, the group ate at La Cercle de L'Union Interalliée, a palace next door to the home of the president of France.

The Normandy Institute participants flew home on June 28, and from there went their separate ways. Of the trip Mr. Porter said, "This experience will account among the most powerful and significant in my life. It touched me as a teacher, as a Vet, as a citizen, but most importantly it touched me as a human being". Both Mr. Porter and Thomas were greatly moved by the trip, and highly grateful for the opportunity they were given to learn about and experience the events of World War II. "The experience taught and showed me the sacrifices of our soldiers in a way that no textbook or movie ever could", says Il Grande. "Overall it was an experience that I will never forget".

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**Announcement**

Last year NHD piloted a summer institute for student/teacher teams that focused on a study of the D-Day invasion. Thanks to the continuous sponsorship of Albert H. Small we will be taking 15 teacher/student teams to Normandy again this summer. The institute will begin in January with professional readings, weekly responses and a research project, which culminates in June at the American Cemetery in Normandy, France. The applications are due on December 1, 2011 and interested teachers can apply on-line at <http://www.nhd.org>. This is an incredible experience. If you have questions or need further information, please contact Ann Claunch at [ann@nhd.org](mailto:ann@nhd.org).