

# Former Foes, Now Allies, Meet on Their French Battlefield: 40 Years ...

By Michael Dobbs Washington Post Foreign Service

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## *Former Foes, Now Allies, Meet on Their French Battlefield*

By Michael Dobbs

Washington Post Foreign Service

LA CAMBE, France, June 4—Alexander Uhlig, former commander of a crack German parachute company, clapped his old American prisoner on the back today for the first time in 40 years—just a few miles down the road from their old battlefield.

“Captain Spayde, I’m glad to see you again.”

Paul Spayde, a retired Ohio school superintendent who had been wondering on the flight over from the United States how he

would break the ice with a man responsible for killing and injuring many of his friends, smiled back.

“It’s a pleasure, Mr. Uhlig.”

As tens of thousands of veterans from the armies that fought World War II flood back into France for the 40th anniversary of the D-Day landings, there have been plenty of nostalgic encounters. Americans who took part in the battle for Normandy have been meeting once again with French families they helped liberate or Canadian and British soldiers alongside whom they once fought.

But of all these reunions, possibly the most unusual as well as one of the most moving took place this afternoon at the German war cemetery here when former members of the 90th U.S. Infantry Division came to pay their respects to the 20,000 enemy war dead. Waiting to greet them were veterans of the Sixth German Parachute Regiment against whom they battled for the same ditches and hedgerows.

Wives and children by their sides, the two groups of veterans listened to Maj. Bill Falvey, a former intelligence officer for the 90th,

announce solemnly: “After 40 years, it is time to put away the bad feelings and be friends.” Then, in another symbolic gesture of reconciliation that would have seemed inconceivable just a few years ago, many of the Americans saluted as Falvey’s grandson James played the German national anthem, “Deutschland Ueber Alles” (Germany Above All), on a trumpet.

The reunion between Uhlig and Spayde, and some 200 comrades from both sides, was made possible largely by the persistence of a

**See D-DAY, A10, Col. 4**

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Veterans of U.S. 90th Division carry a wreath in a ceremony in the German cemetery at La Cambe, France.

## 40 Years After Their Battles, Americans and Germans Meet

### D-DAY, From A1

French engineer with a passionate wish to know how his hometown of Periers was liberated a few weeks after D-day. Aged just 13 at the time of the invasion, Henri Levaufre has spent much of the last 20 years piecing together the story of one of the bloodiest battles in the Normandy campaign.

In order to build up as detailed a picture as possible, Levaufre traveled to Washington several times where he was given access to previously confidential papers in the Pentagon. By befriending both American and German veterans who came back to Normandy, he uncovered details about a long-forgotten incident that was to serve as a pretext for bringing the two sides together: a three-hour truce granted by the German parachutists at the request of two U.S. army chaplains to allow both sides to pick up their wounded.

In 1979, on the 35th anniversary of D-Day, Levaufre helped arrange a banquet for some 200 veterans from the 90th U.S. Division and the Sixth German Parachute Regiment in the West German town of Heidelberg. The occasion was so successful that it will be repeated later this month—complete with a 25-piece Luftwaffe band laid on by Uhlig.

Since the first banquet, the German and American veterans have exchanged visits with each other, in some cases becoming friends. Today, as they met each other again on the lawn of the German cemetery, they swapped addresses, autographs, and stories about life on their respective front lines.

After Hans Schneider told an anecdote about his good fortune in coming across a box of U.S. rations parachuted in for the American troops that included Lucky Strike cigarettes, Falvey joked: "Maybe if we had just dropped Lucky Strikes all over the place, we could have captured you all without a fight."

But there were also painful memories for both sides. In his opening address, Falvey recalled that 718 members of the 90th division—"many of them the buddies of those who are here today"—were buried in the nearby American cemetery above Omaha Beach.

Earlier in the day, as he picked his way across the battlefield a few miles north of Periers where the two sides agreed to the truce, Karl Bader, a former German medical officer, said: "I lost some of my best friends here. When you come back and look at a place like this, you understand that it could have been your graveyard. Your main feeling is to think how lucky you are to be alive."

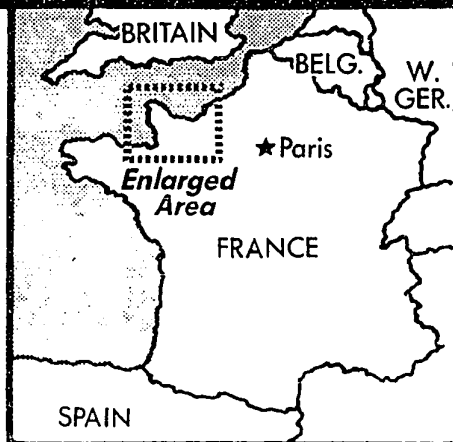
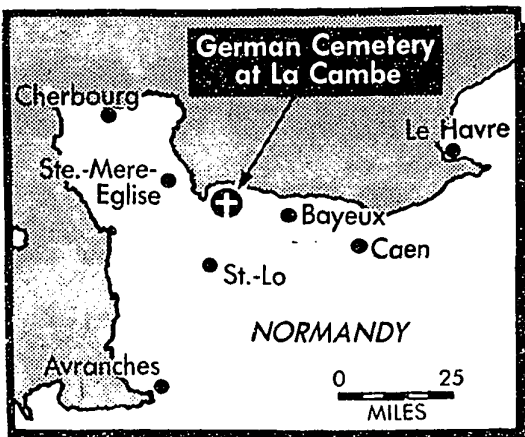
Walking along a hedgerow in the peaceful Normandy countryside, he suddenly recalled that 40 years ago Americans had been shooting at him from the other side.

"It was us or them," he said.

Bader, just 20 at the time, helped pick up dozens of American dead from the battlefield and carry them on stretchers back to the lines held by the 90th Division. The American casualties came when a company of German parachutists commanded by Uhlig opened fire from cleverly concealed positions behind a hedgerow as the U.S. infantrymen crossed a stream.

It was in this same battle that Spayde and scores of other Americans were captured. In recognition of the part he played in what turned out to be the last victory for the German Army in Normandy, Uhlig was awarded the Knight's Cross, one of the highest Nazi awards for gallantry, which he wore proudly on his jacket.

"The Americans were much better supplied than we were, but we had more experience,"



By Dave Cook—The Washington Post

said Uhlig who flew 117 missions with the German Air Force as a navigator and was eventually captured when the Americans under Gen. George Patton encircled the Germans in the Battle of the Falaise Pocket.

The fighting ability of the German parachute regiments, even after D-Day when ultimate defeat seemed certain, was praised by many of the 90th Division veterans today.

"They were damn good professionals. I would have hated to fight them for man, ship for ship, and plane for plane," said Col. Edward Hamilton, conceding that the western allies enjoyed logistical superiority, particularly after the initial beachheads were established.

For the German veterans, like the Americans, returning to Normandy provides an opportunity to relive old memories and visit the graves of the fallen comrades. They try to ignore the fact that everybody else is busy celebrating their defeat.

The first act of the former parachutists on arriving at their hotel in the village of Les Veys, just down the road from the German cemetery, was to replace the American and British flags with a German flag. The entrance to the hotel is festooned with the emblem of the Sixth Parachute Regiment, an oval shape with a plane in it.

Unlike Uhlig, who has returned four times to Normandy, Spayde says he has spent most of the last 40 years "forgetting rather than remembering." Asked what he felt about meeting up with his former enemies, he replied: "I look at it philosophically. They had their job to do and we had ours."

While the Germans stay in their hotel, the Americans are spending the anniversary of D-Day in the homes of French families in Periers which was liberated July 27, some six weeks after the Normandy landings.

While keeping in touch with both sides, and attempting to maintain the impartiality of a historian, Levaufre makes clear that he regards the Americans differently from the Germans.

"The Germans I consider my friends; the Americans are part of my family," he said.

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French soldiers watch re-creation of the D-Day plight of an American paratrooper caught on a church spire.

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