

D-Day graves ready for ceremony

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In its magnificent setting on a bluff overlooking Omaha Beach and the Channel beyond, fevered preparations are under way at the American cemetery and memorial in Colleville-sur-Mer for the 60th anniversary commemorations of D-Day. Hugh Schofield reports.

One of the high points of June 6 - and the moment to be most closely monitored for its diplomatic significance - will be the encounter between presidents Jacques Chirac and George W Bush at the joint Franco-American ceremony before the gravestones of some 9,400 fallen US troops.

Today contractors are installing metal viewing-stands, rows of folding seats and towers for the television cameras, while gardeners bring the already immaculate acres of greensward and woodland into an even higher state of perfection.

Vast tents have been installed out of view for accommodating the 1,700 American soldiers who will provide both the ceremonial guard and an extra tier of security. Terrorism is a real concern, and the whole 80-kilometre (50-mile) stretch of the Normandy coast is already patrolled by French paramilitary gendarmes.

"It is a great honour to be hosting the ceremony. It's always an honour to see the president. That's the tops!" says Gene Dellinger, a retired US airforceman who was appointed as superintendent in 1999 by the American Battle Monuments Commission.

Officially opened in July 1956, the 170-acre site consists of a semi-circular colonnaded memorial overlooking a rectangular pool, with symmetrical ranks of white crosses spreading out westwards. To the right, a path winds down through scrub land to the pebbled beach.

One of two US cemeteries housing those fallen in the World War II Normandy campaign - the other is near Avranches to the south - it contains the remains of servicemen originally buried in temporary graveyards across the theatre of battle. More than half of those killed were repatriated across the Atlantic.

On a hot Tuesday in May the place was swarming with visitors - coachloads of French school-children, pensioner tour groups, retired couples from Britain and Belgium and, somewhat outnumbered, small parties of Americans - and struggled to keep its air of serene contemplation.

With some 1,400,000 visitors a year - up to 10,000 in a single day - the cemetery has become a major tourist attraction, and the narrow lanes leading to Colleville-sur-Mer are clogged with traffic. Some call it the "Saving Private Ryan" effect after the 1998 film in which it featured prominently.

Among the thousands there is still the occasional Normandy veteran - now in his 80s - to whom Dellinger is anxious to offer a special welcome.

"Today the veterans are fewer, but they come with more people. In the old days he used to come alone - or perhaps with a buddy or a wife. But now he comes with his children and grandchildren," he says. "And he's talking."

According to Dellinger, who was deputy superintendent in the 1970s, visiting ex-soldiers used to clam up when asked about their experiences. Today - perhaps because they sense they are nearing the end of their days - they want to pass their stories on to new generations.

"They kept it to themselves, and that's admirable. They have great self-pride. But we really enjoy it when they talk. I had two brothers who fought in World War II, and I'll never know what they did because now they are dead," says Dillinger.

Twelve kilometres away extensive work is also under way at the Pointe du Hoc, the site of a memorial to the feat carried out by the US Rangers who scaled 30-metre (100-foot) cliffs to capture a German gun battery and hold it for two days against fierce counter-attacks.

A new access road, car-park and visitors centre have just been completed to put the place more clearly on the D-day tourism map. At 1:00 pm on June 6, President Bush will preside over an American national commemoration ceremony there.

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