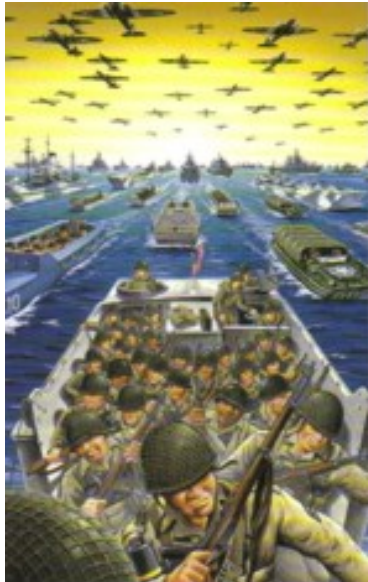


## Postcard from Normandy

By Gina Cariño



No, not everything has to boil down to sex and sexism, but thanks to a sexist education, I was never taken to Normandy. I had to wait to come here on my own.

My father wanted to be a soldier, but he was colour-blind. So he just became a World War II buff. Eisenhower, Bradley, Patton, Montgomery, also Rommel and Runstedt, were all like his best friends. His favourite read was Cornelius Ryan's *THE LONGEST DAY*. He made several trips to the scenes of D-Day. These were WWII pilgrimages combined with gastronomy. He thought it amusing to say that camembert was good because the region's cows grazed on grass fertilized by "all that bloodshed and all those corpses." Twice he took along my brother. But he never took us daughters. Battlefields were for boys. Perhaps in vengeance, I myself became a bit of a WWII buff, and I just had to one day come to Normandy.

How exciting to see it all "in person": the town where the first paratroops landed and John Steele got stuck to the church roof;

the beachheads of Omaha, Utah, Sword, Gold, and Juno; the same waters that blurred the lens of Magnum photographer Robert Capa; the placid farm landscape of hedges and ditches that made Normandy a defender's paradise and an invader's inferno; the Pointe du Hoc cliff that the Rangers scaled to disengage some big Nazi artillery, many dropping to the sea in the process, only to find when they got to the top that the big guns had been removed; those forbidding, igloo-shaped structures of Hitler's Atlantic Wall, seen so clearly in the animated film *VALIANT*; the huge American cemetery, so Cartesian in formation, seen at the start and end of *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*; the German cemetery, evocative, so different in color, texture, and choreography, balancing... War graves scream: "Never again!" They are supposed to be reminders.

Travelling, for me, has to be a homecoming of sorts. Otherwise, stay home. By coming home I mean touching base with something that is part of you, whether real or read. Here in Normandy, I feel my father's presence and ultimate approval. And I meet Oskar Matzerath and Robbie Turner. Yes, especially Robbie, one of my greatest loves ever. The novels they belong to, Günter Grass's *THE TIN DRUM* and Ian McEwan's *ATONEMENT*, contain terrific descriptions of June 6<sup>th</sup> and the before and after, one from a German soldier's and the other from a British soldier's point of view.

There's more to Normandy. My dad completely ignored that other Normandy story, that other Anglo-Norman epic that also crossed the English Channel but in the opposite direction and in Viking boats. It's wonderfully depicted in a 75-meter embroidery called the Bayeux Tapestry. The really most exciting thing about this Norman Tour that coincides with the French Tour is that we keep flitting from 1066 to 1944 and back again. And again it's a homecoming, because William the Conqueror of England was great-grandfather to the Henry II who married another favourite of mine, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and therefore great-great-grandfather to the same Richard Lion-Heart and John Lackland who are in the background of *ROBIN HOOD* and *IVANHOE*!