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On the Fields of Glory: A Student's Reflections on Gettysburg, the Western Front, and Normandy

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Abstract

I'm very fortunate to have had no shortage of opportunities to get out into the field and put my classroom learning into practice. I am especially lucky to have twice had the opportunity to travel to Europe. Two years ago, I went with my first-year seminar to explore the Western Front of World War I in France and Belgium. This year, I travelled with The Eisenhower Institute to tour the towns and beaches of Normandy where the Allies launched their invasion of Hitler's Europe during World War II. Having experienced these notable sites of military history, and having taken a number of strolls through the battlefield in my backyard here in Gettysburg, I thought that it might be nice to reflect on each of these special places in a blog post. [*excerpt*]

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

On the Fields of Glory: A Student's Reflections on Gettysburg, the Western Front, and Normandy

April 27, 2015

by Kevin Lavery '16

I'm very fortunate to have had no shortage of opportunities to get out into the field and put my classroom learning into practice. I am especially lucky to have twice had the opportunity to travel to Europe. Two years ago, I went with my first-year seminar to explore the Western Front of World War I in France and Belgium. This year, I travelled with [The Eisenhower Institute](#) to tour the towns and beaches of Normandy where the Allies launched their invasion of Hitler's Europe during World War II. Having experienced these notable sites of military history, and having taken a number of strolls through the battlefield in my backyard here in Gettysburg, I thought that it might be nice to reflect on each of these special places in a blog post.

Since many of you are likely most familiar with Gettysburg, let's use it as a point-of-reference for my descriptions of the battlefields in Europe. In many ways, Gettysburg is unique even among Civil War battlefields—in its scale, the ubiquity of its monuments, and the quality of its preservation. Nevertheless, Gettysburg is a site intimately linked with what battlefield tourism looks like to Americans.

The Somme and Flanders Fields

Normandy and the Western Front differ considerably from Gettysburg—most notably in terms of scale. The Western Front ran continuously from Flanders to the Alps, and the breadth of the Allied landings at Normandy was ten times the length of the Confederate line at Gettysburg. It would have been nigh impossible to maintain so much land in the way that the U.S. National Park Service has done at Gettysburg.

In the absence of a coordinated preservation scheme, much of the Western Front has been transformed back into farmland and villages like it was before the war a century ago. That isn't to say that there haven't been any efforts made to preserve the trenches, but they are scattered around the region and on a much smaller scale than preservation at Gettysburg. Many nations have established parks and cemeteries on the sections of the front where their soldiers fought. Our first stop on the Western Front trip was at Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial Park, where the Canadian government has done a wonderful job caring for and interpreting the trenches running through the area. The trenches don't really resemble their original state – they look more like drainage

ditches running through a field – but there are still areas of the park blocked off to prevent visitors from setting off unexploded ordnance. Verdun is even worse, I'm told.

Lots of the monuments and cemeteries of World War I dwarf their Civil War counterparts. While they aren't concentrated like those at Gettysburg, there are still a lot of them and they are still very alive in the public consciousness. The Theipval Memorial, the Ireland Peace Tower, and Tyne Cot Cemetery are sites of mourning on a massive scale. Every night—every single night—there is a ceremony of remembrance at the Menin Gate in Ypres, Belgium for the soldiers who fell in Flanders Fields. Imagine having a mini-Gettysburg Dedication Day ceremony every night for which everyone drops what they are doing and goes to pay their respects. It's amazing to witness.

The town square of Ypres has been restored—not to its wartime state, which would be completely uninhabitable, but as close to the pre-war medieval architecture as possible. Down the length of the Western Front, the people of France strove to rebuild their pre-war lives on top of the trenches, alongside the cemeteries and shell holes of a more brutal age.



The Beaches of Normandy

Normandy is in many ways the same. Although you can still see the remains of German bunkers and the Allies' artificial harbors at Omaha Beach and Arromanches, the residents of Normandy have rebuilt their lives upon the fields of battle. But unlike the conservative feel of Flanders and the Somme, Normandy has developed since the war in a big way—especially in response to the tourist trade, which forms a critical component of the local economy. Sprawling towns are filled with stores and restaurants for tourists and locals alike. Frankly, as a part-time Gettysburg resident, I felt totally at home in *Ste.-Mère-Église*, with its little gift stores and scattered museums. On the beachfront road in Arromanches, I felt like I was exploring the shops of Steinwehr Avenue. As far as battlefield tourism goes, it seemed like the biggest difference between Normandy and Gettysburg is that that the high water mark of the latter is only metaphorical, rather than an effect of the tide.

While visiting the Normandy American Cemetery, we saw a number of people swimming along Omaha Beach—the same site where thousands of men died on June 6, 1944. Our tour guide told us that the beaches remain a popular spot for vacationers and made the observation that the men who died on D-Day fought for freedom—not to have their sacrifice proscribe others from enjoying the same land that they fought to liberate. How different from at Gettysburg National Military Park, where throwing a football is

considered a sign of disrespect. That isn't to say that there isn't a deep and abiding reverence for those who died in Normandy; the American Cemetery is one of the most frighteningly beautiful cemeteries I have ever seen, and its powerful visitors' center moved me almost to tears.



There are many reasons why each of these sites developed so differently from each other—reasons wrapped up in the temporal, cultural, and geographic context of the sites. Frankly, it would have been unfeasible to have preserved the World War battlefields according to the same standards as American Civil War battlefields. Civil War Era buildings in Gettysburg might have been hit a few times by bullets; World War I Era buildings in Ypres were flattened by artillery. Preservation seems a bit sillier when you'd essentially have to preserve ruined cities and pockmarked fields to maintain the wartime appearance of the battlefield.

What will these battlefields of World War I and World War II look like when they are celebrating their sesquicentennial anniversaries? It's anyone's guess—no one can predict future trends in preservation and interpretation. The best we can hope for is to anticipate them.

One final word: although each of these sites is incredibly different, each is beautiful and haunting in its own way.

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