



Daytime Drop. Every June, to honor the sacrifices of American paratroopers who jumped in the night behind enemy lines on D-Day, paratroopers from the United States and across Europe conduct a massive daytime re-enactment over the Merderet River. Simone Renaud worked closely with World War II veterans and the French government to begin conducting the low-altitude jumps from C-130s in the early 1960s. Over the years, the spectacle has grown and now draws crowds of 5,000 or more each year. Selected American military personnel use the event as a training exercise.

The Legacy of Simone Renaud

The mayor's words were prophetic indeed.

They did come back. Their memories brought them back. Some hedge-hopped over Ste. Mere-Eglise and jumped from transport planes into a broad, grassy meadow where the ground was no longer swamped, just soft, as the reconnaissance reports had determined. At some of the commemorations through the years, flowers were released from above and drifted through the coastal air onto the graves of the fallen, like multi-colored parachutes.

Many veterans and families of the war dead could never make such a trip. To them, Simone Renaud was their only connection to a son, brother, father or uncle, resting in Norman earth among their comrades. To them, Mme. Renaud was a mother's sweet comfort against the harsh reality of military sacrifice. To her, these families were a reflection of her own; she raised her three sons – Paul, Henri Jean and Maurice – to always appreciate that their lives of freedom were purchased with American blood.

Doug Stebleton was not looking for this particular story when he learned about it in 2004 while researching a different documentary film, about British D-Day veterans who make annual pilgrimages to Normandy to remember their fallen comrades. His work on that project led him to Ste. Mere-Eglise and the Renaud family. There, as the town prepared for its annual eruption of liberation gratitude, he came to know 82nd Airborne Division veterans Bob Murphy, Bill Tucker, Don Lassen and Bob Piper. "They were living legends of World War II," Stebleton explained. "They had so many stories to tell about the D-Day invasion, each one different, each one compelling, but the one common thread among all of them was their love of Mme. Renaud and everything she did to preserve the memories of the soldiers who were killed."



Dramatization of Devotion. Sound man Michael Bidese and cinema photographer Raul Marin direct a scene for the documentary film "Mother of Normandy" in which Florence Thoby plays the part of Simone Renaud decorating the grave of Brig. Gen. Teddy Roosevelt Jr. Taped at Manoir du Chene in Nonant, France, the set replicates a newly dug cemetery at Ste. Mere-Eglise in 1944.

Stebleton was soon swept up in the story of the first French town liberated by the Allies on D-Day. He was especially impressed by the people of Ste. Mere-Eglise and their unwavering support of America six decades removed from the invasion. Images of U.S. flags flying above French flags, of Europeans dressed as American soldiers and airborne division veterans in their 80s encircled by autograph seekers astounded him.

The phenomenon was especially meaningful given the strained relations between America and France at the time, in the aftermath of 9/11. In the town of Ste. Mere-Eglise, nothing more mattered than the events of June 6, 1944. D-Day had not been forgotten there. Simone Renaud was the primary reason for that. She had spent decades building a bridge of good relations between France and America, one letter at a time, one photograph at a time, one poem at a time, in honor of veterans and in remembrance of the fallen.

Soon, Stebleton was taping interviews with the principle figures of the Ste. Mere-Eglise story. The documentary film “Mother of Normandy” was in production. He and his film crew traveled back and forth to France, as well as various locations in the United States, over a three-year period to record more than 90 hours of discussion. They met with Tucker, Murphy, Lassen, Piper, the Garrabrant family, the Morrow family and, of course, all three of Simone Renaud’s sons. They spoke with military historians and shot footage of battle re-enactments. Along the way, Stebleton

collected more than 2,000 documents and photos related to the story. Without much outside funding, he paid for most of it out of his own pocket.

“Someone paid a price for every day I have,” Stebleton explained in an interview with *The American Legion Magazine*. “With this project, I have been able to rub elbows with people who made the choice to lay down their lives so I could be here today. I am very conscious of that.”

The documentary film “Mother of Normandy,” featuring French film star Leslie Caron as the voice of Simone Renaud, debuted May 15, 2010,

at the GI Film Festival in Washington, D.C. On the 66th Anniversary of D-Day, June 6, 2010, it was screened in Normandy.

The project involved many people who shared Stebleton’s passion to produce on film the little-known story of Simone Renaud. Foremost among them has been Maurice Renaud, youngest son of the wartime mayor, who has spent his entire life in the context of World War II and D-Day. Maurice, Henri Jean and Paul Renaud have committed themselves to keep their parents’ legacy alive in Normandy. They were told by their mother to never forget. And they did not. Cathy Soref and Kaye Weninger of Locust Valley, N.Y., have been unflappable supporters of the project and envision a resurrection of Operation Democracy that would pair U.S. cities and towns with communities in Iraq and Afghanistan to help them rebuild from war. Author and nutritionist Maureen Kennedy was an avid supporter of the project until her death in August of 2006. On her last visit to France, she gave a speech in Ste. Mere-Eglise in honor of D-Day sacrifices, at the request of her friend, Maurice Renaud.

I became involved in this project earlier that year when a big envelope appeared on my perpetually cluttered desk at *The American Legion Magazine* office in Indianapolis. It was one among hundreds we receive every month aimed at connecting some book, project or program with the nation’s largest veterans service organization. The majority of such queries are regrettably turned down, due to space limitations in the magazine. This one, however, was different.

On the cover of the folder was the face of an elderly woman in a French beret. Her dark, deep eyes peered soulfully across the title words: “Mother of Normandy.” Super-imposed beneath the title was another photo of a woman – I assumed it was she, much younger – placing a flower beneath a white cross I knew could only be the grave of an American soldier. So, I turned the page and began a journey that would take me to France four years in a row for D-Day anniversary commemorations, put me into personal contact with some of the most incredible people I have ever known – the Renauds, the folks from Locust Valley, Tommy McArdle, Col. Keith



Cemetery to Soccer Field. “Mother of Normandy” producer and director Doug Stebleton and cinema photographer Raul Marin shoot a scene of Maurice Renaud at the original site of Cemetery No. 1, Ste. Mere-Eglise. Today, the site is a soccer field.



Famous Pharmacy. Maurice Renaud, son of wartime Mayor Alexandre Renaud, is filmed outside the local pharmacy where his family witnessed history in the early-morning hours of June 6, 1944. For decades after the war, the pharmacy stood as a local embassy for French gratitude toward U.S. veterans who liberated the town. Veterans and American dignitaries invariably dropped by to visit the Renauds and sign the guestbook.

Nightingale, Jacques Fourcade, Yves Tariel, Gerard LeCoeur, Maureen Kennedy and many others who shaped my understanding of the story and its greater meaning.

After my article, “Where Heroes Fell,” appeared in the December 2006 issue of *The American Legion Magazine*, Stebleton asked me to write a treatment of the Mother of Normandy story for the documentary film. Boxes of video tapes soon arrived at my home in Indiana, and I began the process of viewing all 90 hours of them. By the time I finished the first treatment and screenplay, I felt as if I personally knew the family, the veterans and the town. In time, I did.

Perhaps the most meaningful decision I have ever made as a father was to take my son, Sam, to Normandy in 2007 and 2008 to meet some of the living legends of D-Day. He will never forget the opportunity he had, as a 12-year-old boy, to meet and talk with Bob Murphy, to walk along Omaha and Utah Beach and prowl the bomb craters of Pointe du Hoc. In subsequent years, I was able to introduce two American Legion national commanders – Marty Conatser and David Rehbein – to the Renaud family and the people of Ste. Mere-Eglise. Like me, and like Stebleton, they were astonished to discover a place in France where the clock rolls back to 1944 every June, and American flags fly higher than all others.

As the film was in production, all four of the Renaud family’s closest veteran friends – Piper, Murphy, Tucker and Lassen – passed away. Doug and I are both saddened they did not get to see the film or this book. It was with great reverence for the greatest generation that I attended the funeral service for Piper, alongside Maurice Renaud, at Arlington National Cemetery in February 2008. We both recognized that a day is soon coming when none of the D-Day veterans will be among us. The passage of these brave men, these heroes of a flashpoint in military history that forever changed the world, can never be forgotten.

That is exactly what Mme. Renaud wanted. It is exactly what she accomplished.

– Jeff Stoffer



Recollecting History. “Mother of Normandy” producer Doug Stebleton interviews Henri Jean Renaud on camera outside his home in Ste. Mere-Eglise. The middle son of Simone Renaud, Henri Jean carried on his father’s legacy as the local pharmacist, and his mother’s drive to correspond with American families who lost loved ones in the invasion.



Funeral for a Comrade. Don Lassen walks through the grave markers at Arlington National Cemetery during services for his longtime friend and fellow D-Day veteran of the 82nd Airborne Division, Bob Piper, in February 2008.

Acknowledgements

This book and the documentary film “Mother of Normandy” could not have been produced without the support of many. More than 90 hours of taped interviews went into the film. Personal letters, books, photographs and other secondary sources were vital to its completion. Following is only a partial list of individuals whose words, memorabilia and collections contributed greatly to this project.

Paul Renaud	Joanne Morrow Rojas	Keith Nightingale
Henri Jean and Yvette Renaud	<i>The American Legion Magazine</i>	Karen Tucker
Maurice Renaud	American Legion Post 283, Pacific Pallisades, Calif., and numerous other American Legion posts	Kaye Weninger
Bill Tucker		Cathy and Douglas Soref and family
Bob Murphy	The Locust Valley, N.Y., Chamber of Commerce	Rodney Berens
Donald Lassen		Maureen Kennedy
Robert Piper	The Locust Valley Library	Marion Wood
Nancy Piper		Ryan Murphy
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Bill Garrabrant	Tom and Kim Bengard	Doug Stebleton
	Tommy McArdle	Robbie Wyckoff
		Emile Lacroix



Ordering information

Order more copies of this book or a DVD of the documentary film “Mother of Normandy – The Story of Simone Renaud” online.

www.motherofnormandy.com

Call **310-497-8000** for other payment options.

Resources

This book and film relied on several firsthand accounts and secondary resources, including:

Sainte Mere-Eglise; 5-6 Juin 1944 by Alexandre Renaud

No Better Place to Die by Robert Murphy

Parachute Soldier: From the Diary of William H. Tucker

Poems of Simone Renaud

The Locust Valley Leader