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In France, Honoring Our Best

By David Ignatius

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In the months after Sept. 11, 2001, a French sculptress named Anilore Banon began thinking about creating a work that celebrated the ideal of courage. As she pondered the task, her thoughts turned to the young Americans who came ashore on Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944. "Those kids who landed on D-Day were just 18," she explained this week. "They had futures. To give us freedom, they gave up their own. That is the very best of humanity."

Banon was born in the 1960s, long after the liberation of France. But she had visited the site of the D-Day landings as a schoolgirl and the experience had "marked her," she says. She worried that modern French children wouldn't realize how great a sacrifice those young Americans had made. So she began imagining a piece of sculpture that would stand on the beach in Normandy where so many died.

Her finished work, "The Brave," will be dedicated as part of the 60th anniversary of D-Day. Its creation tells us something about France and America, and about what we are jointly celebrating this weekend.

The massive sculpture rises out of the waves at St. Laurent-sur-Mer, where corpses once colored the sea red. At the center is an array of seven stainless steel columns. The first five bend up from the sea, like soldiers struggling to stand. The last two columns are upright, the tallest rising to 30 feet. Stretching 25 feet to either side are arrays of delicate steel wings, whose surface reflects the sea, sand and light of Omaha Beach.

Banon wanted the columns to represent "energy coming out of the sand, standing up straight." She says of the American soldiers: "Their sacrifice and courage allowed us all to stand up. It was the force of their will that three generations later we still have with us."

Reading the histories of D-Day, you realize what an immense exercise of will it took to stand up that day. The military historian S.L.A. Marshall wrote one of the most moving accounts of the landing for the Atlantic Monthly in 1960. Almost nothing had gone as planned: The weather was hellish; Allied bombs and shells had mostly missed their targets; the entrenched Germans lay in wait to destroy the first assault waves.

And yet the young men came ashore. Marshall quotes Lt. Edward Tidrick as his landing craft neared Omaha Beach: "My God, we're coming in at the right spot, but look at it. No shingle, no wall, no shell holes, no cover. Nothing!"

At 6:36 in the morning, the ramp went down and Tidrick led his men off the boat. He took a bullet through the throat as he jumped into the water. His last words were "Advance with the wire cutters." To give the order, Marshall writes, "Tidrick has raised himself up on his hands and made himself a target," and in that instant, "machine gun bullets rip Tidrick from crown to pelvis." By the end of the first half-hour, about two-thirds of the members of his company were dead.

Banon designed her memorial at a time when France and America were bitterly divided over the Iraq war. She needed about \$840,000 to build it, but French corporate sponsors had become skittish. She feared she would have to abandon the project until an American journalist named Joseph Fitchett wrote a story about it in the International Herald Tribune.

A few days later, Banon was contacted by a young Frenchman named Jean-Paul Delorme, whose family had founded the company Air Liquide. "The project has to exist," he told her. "Don't worry about the financing. If that's the only problem you have, I'll take care of it." He paid the bills as 25 workers in Cherbourg fabricated the massive columns. Inevitably, it being France, there was a strike at the factory as construction was nearing completion. But Banon says the workers decided, "For the sculpture, we are not on strike."

Art doesn't change politics. Despite this weekend's show of D-Day camaraderie, France and America are still bickering over Iraq and some French people seem, in truth, almost to resent the American sacrifices of 60 years ago. But Banon's sculpture is anchored on that beach in steel and concrete, and as the Latin phrase has it, "art is long, life is brief."

"I want to remember that the soldiers died, of course," says Banon. "But I want to remember what they died for. And I want the ones who survived to see that after all these years, we are still free, and we are remembering."

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