Normandy
April 5-12, 2004

For the first time I acted like a seasoned traveler, though I wasn't as confident as I acted. In fact, I hesitated at the check-in machine (the way I do at ATMs). But I did it: pulled out the SAS Eurobonus card from my wallet and slipped it into the machine. After a few touches to the screen I was issued a boarding pass. It wasn't until I got off the plane and out the door that I realized nobody had asked to see my passport. No customs; no immigration; no security. The international flight was akin to taking a bus across town.

Getting into France was one thing - like walking into a French restaurant, which is quite easy; getting out of Charles de Gaulle was something else – like ordering from a French menu. My old friend John Bryer met me at the gate with his characteristic-backslapping hug. John and I had been talking about this trip for years, and I was almost giddy realizing it had finally come. Like any old buddies who hadn't seen each other for years we chattered about family, friends and flights as the moving sidewalk chugged us along. I thought that ribbon of rubber would never end. But the tunnel was merely an esophagus of Charles de Gaulle, of which there are many. We finally entered one of de Gaulle's stomachs (again, there are many) and from there worked our way through its intestinal tract – tube-like glass tunnels that house escalators and conveyor belt people-movers. The system actually digests visitors efficiently, though one gets easily lost in the entrails. It finally dumped us off in the bowels, which like any airport was a hangar-size toilet bowl constipated with thousands, all squinting at a million directional signs – few in English, fewer still helpful. After deciphering a diuretical sign, we bumped to a curb, spotted a bus marked "Paris" and hopped on. Right city, wrong bus.

We had planned to go directly to the hotel and then explore Paris. In fact, we did the opposite, but it wasn't any problem – we were just toting hand luggage. The bus stopped at the Arc de Triomphe, which we studied (but didn't climb), then strolled down the Champs Elysees. The avenue was lined with barricades, police, and British and French flags. Little did we know the Queen was in town and would soon pass by. Crossing the Seine to Les Invalides, we snaked our way to the hotel, which was tucked in an archipelago of embassies. I've never seen so many police… so smartly dressed. There was so much leather that the street corners squeaked every time they breathed. But not a smile on one of them. One quickly assesses that kepi-clad cops are not to be trifled with.

The hotel was so quiet you could hear the Gendarmes breathe. Our fourth floor room overlooked a courtyard, bedded with roses (still sleeping) and cobblestone. The room was spacious, the bathroom luxurious, but the elevator was so small you had to step out to turn around. John and I could hardly get in together. I don't know how anyone (much less an American) could get in with a suitcase.

Despite all the hoopla about French eating, they're a petite people. It's probably the portions they serve, which are typically petite. There's an inverse relationship between portions and price. Likewise, as the lights go down, the prices go up. We knew this before hand so we ate at a well-lit deli. Actually we'd planned to go to a restaurant, but none were open. We asked the hotel clerk if she could recommend a place and she looked shocked: "Oh, nothing is open now. It's only 6 o'clock! The restaurants won't open until 8 or 9."

We didn't do the usual tour de Paris. Neither of us wanted to shuffle through the Louvre. As John said: "I have more original art on my refrigerator than all of the museums in Paris put together, so what's the point?" Instead our first site to see was Père Lachaise Cemetery. I'd never heard of the bone-yard, much less thought of visiting it, but I'm glad we did. It looks more like a village than a cemetery because all the stiffs are entombed above ground. Cobblestone streets lined with shade and fruit trees meander over the hilly landscape. The size of the tombs range from phone booth to double-car garage. Most are 18th and 19th century, but a few look predeluvian. It's a necrologist's dream world. But even for those who aren't into eschatology, it's amusing. Celebrated residents include Chopin, Sarah Bernhardt, Edith Piaf, Balzac, Delacroix, Modigliani, Seurat, Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde…. Wilde's grave was really wild. The block of granite looked like an art nevoux bunker. As I approached it the dappled surface appeared like camouflage the German's favored in WWII. Closer up I realized it was lipstick – left by kisses from hundreds of admirers. The last stop was Jim Morrison's grave. A name that sounded vaguely familiar (and I emphasize the word *vaguely*). John said he'd visited the graves of Elvis and Jimi Hendrix; now he could check off the temporary resting spot of The Doors' lead singer. That's right, temporary. He's entombed for 30 years, then he's got pull up stakes. If a corpse is permanently at rest, the tomb is usually marked as such. Otherwise it's a contract, like renting an apartment. I didn't ask if they had time-sharing or lease with option to buy. Whatever; it was a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to die there.

On day two we took the Metro (underground) to Notre-Dame. The hotel clerk told us how to get there – and how to save money by buying a packet of tickets rather than one at a time: "You'll need four to get there, but you're better off buying a booklet of ten. You'll use the rest during your stay." Even with his impeccable English I managed to misunderstand him. We each got a 10-ticket booklet. In fact, we only need one ticket to get there, and one ticket back; hence, four tickets – not twenty.

Notre-Dame was like most cathedrals I've visited. I gawked at the gingerbread exterior for a few minutes, then entered, craned my neck and gawked at the vaulted ceiling. Padded quietly past dimly lit naves, gawking at the carved relief; then gawked at the stained-glass windows. After fifteen minutes I began looking for a restroom. Gawking always makes me want to pee.

Public conveniences are rarely convenient. I found one in a Metro station, which at first thought made me wince. Think bus station restroom. But what I discovered was both a shock and a relief. For fifty cents an attendant escorted me to a private, modern bathroom that was cleaner than my mother-in-laws (who happens to keep the cleanest bathrooms in Scandinavia). The place was so clean I hated to use it.

Paris was exceptionally clean. Not just squeaky clean restrooms and hotels, but the streets and sidewalks as well. Street-sweepers were everywhere, whisking water down gutters with brooms – not dull push brooms, but bright green designer brooms for fashion conscious public servants.

Everyone seemed fashion conscious: the street weepers, the Gendarme, even fatigue clad soldiers who patrolled the train stations – the platforms serving as catwalks for the spring ensemble. (By the way, patent leather is out; canvas webbing is in.) I thought the beret was the lid of choice for Frenchmen, but I was wrong. They're scarcer

than derbies in Maine. The only berets I saw were on soldiers, and all were three sizes too small worn in a rakish manner on shaved heads. Sounds odd, but then most fashions are.

Everyone dresses so nicely. I didn't spot a flannel shirt the entire trip. The children in particular are always dolled up, which probably explains why there are so many children's boutiques. John wanted to get some clothes for his girls when we were in Caen, and I counted five children's shops on one block alone. Only lingerie shops rival the kiddy boutiques in number. I never thought of underwear as a highly competitive industry, but I was wrong. I couldn't figure out how they stayed in business until I noticed they all carried different styles. I guess fashion is fashionable.

The lingerie shops also have their own sultry looking poster models. And not one of them was smiling. In fact, their expressions mirrored the women clicking down the sidewalks or leaning on the dime-size café tables. John had an acute observation: "French women are genetically predisposed to pout." At first I thought they looked bored or depressed, but, in fact, they were merely pouting. French women pout the way American women laugh – much of it beguiling simply to attract men's eye.

There's much to catch one's eyes in Paris. Monumental monuments are as common as lingerie shops. After a while they start looking like ribbon winners at a dog show. Interesting at first, but you inevitably end up yawning. We skipped the museums, except one, Les Invalides (The Army Museum). It covered an area the size of Rhode Island. I guess they need all that room because it originally housed disabled soldiers. And as we know, back in 17th and 18th century war drew large crowds. It didn't become a spectator sport until recently. I never thought I'd overdose on dashing uniforms – and I didn't – it's just that after two hours they started looking somewhat the same, like the lingerie.

Napoleon was big at the museum; I guess to compensate for being small in life. (Why is it small people often have big PR budgets?) A highlight was Napoleon's dog – stuffed, of course. As you might expect, the dog was bigger than the Emperor. Also on display was Napoleon's deathbed, which was actually a foldaway cot, the type you'd find at a cheap hotel. It was the only small thing Napoleon had, and he didn't have it long. His body was moved from the island of St Helena, which is small, to Paris, which is big. (I guess his PR department was still alive and well.) Twenty years later his tomb at Les Invalides was complete. And it too was (you guessed it) big! Top to bottom it surpasses a football field, including end zones, gilded with 35 pounds of gold. He rest in five coffins (one in tin, one in mahogany, two in lead and one in ebony), each successively bigger and encased in a majestic block of stone the size of a boxcar. The interior dome takes your breath away, as does the gilded alter and marble steps. As we ambled away I couldn't help but think his PR department coined the cliché, "Small is beautiful."

From there we limped towards the Eiffel Tower, and ended up in the park, simply looking at it for a few minutes. A passerby was nice enough to photograph us like a police lineup, but with fixed smiles; then John lit up a cigar and we sat on a bench, mostly in silence, admiring the pruned sycamore more than the erector set on steroids. Don't misunderstand me: it's an incredible structure, but also incredibly familiar. Nevertheless, if one visits Paris, one ought to see it. It's one of the "oughts" of life.

The next day we took the train to Caen and hired a car. After checking into the hotel we drove to Pegasus Bridge. It was there that D-Day began. A British commando raid was to secure the bridge before the invasion. If they didn't, German Panzers would

roll across and nail the Allies before they got off the beaches. It was a stunning success and a remarkable story. At midnight several gliders landed smack dab on target. The first plowed right through the barbed wire perimeter fence and skidded to a halt 50 meters from the bridge. The Germans were caught off guard, and the bridge secured in 4 minutes! I'd read the story numerous times, but to finally see it was… well, moving. It was just what I'd imagined. We walked the path from where the gliders had landed to the bridge. You have to be on site to sense – to appreciate – that it was one of the most remarkable flying exploits in the war. How they landed those gliders so close to target without ditching in the canal or pranging a tree, a building or the bridge on a dark cloudy night, is beyond comprehension. Skill, luck, divine intervention… who knows.

Afterward we walked over to the café that's just a stone's throw from the bridge. The café owners were key figures in the carefully planned operation. They're both dead but the café is still open, with five small tables surrounded by memorabilia. The place swarms with tourists in the summer, but that day it almost empty; so we ordered coffee. I sat by the window staring at the bridge, growing acutely aware that sixty years ago a German officer was probably doing the same thing. John elbowed up to the counter and began talking with the owner, who we discovered was the daughter of the café couple. Arlette Gondrée was four when the bridge was taken and remembers it well. For her entire life she's had throngs of people asking her questions – mostly the same I guess – about that eventful evening; and yet, she still takes the time to visit with all, making each feel like an old friend returning home. She autographed our post cards, stood in the doorway to pose for another photograph with yet another tourist and cheerfully welcomed us back. As we departed I asked for directions to Sword Beach. She concluded, "If you have the time, stop by that little church I mentioned. Twenty-two paratroopers are buried there."

We drove west along the coast, stopping at the broad expansive beaches of Sword (British), Juno (Canadian), and Gold (British). With the exception of Gold, the terrain is flat. The villages are charming, but clearly holiday oriented and peppered with summer homes. At Gold you can park on the bluff and look down on the beach. A broad grassy plain entices you to stroll and marvel at the scope. A wild mustard field was in full bloom, it's golden color a rather appropriate memorial. You can still see detritus from the invasion: an artificial harbor that carried in a half-million tons of material. We drove down to the beach and poked around a few of the massive concrete structures. Apparently, as best as we could figure out, the hollow chambered blocks were towed from England, then flooded.

We left the beach in time to dine in Caen, which meant around 8 o'clock. Oddly enough, as we walked into the restaurant the proprietor was taking down the menu: "We stop serving at 8." What's the story? In Paris… But luck was in our favor; the place we landed was beyond our dreams. I'd been led to believe that French food was good, but the portions small. Not here! First came the warm salad (I'd never heard of a warm salad before). Toasted goat cheese and chopped ham on croutons and lettuce, all smothered in a dressing that knocked my taste buds senseless. Then came the veal. That was also a surprise: first, because we thought we'd ordered scallops (I don't know a word of French and John knows even less); second, I think they slaughtered the entire calf. The potato was… I simply don't know how to describe it other than a culinary masterpiece of buttered herbs whipped and packed into the soft jacket. And of course, there was a

mountain of French fries on the side. I couldn't believe I was capable of eating it all, but I did. Admittedly, I felt my armpits bulging near the end. John went whole hog and ordered dessert. I passed, but then when he took a bite and said, "You have got to try this," I succumbed. Never, and I mean never, have I tasted an Epicurean delight like that.

The next day was it. The day we'd been waiting for all these years – to walk Omaha Beach. The roads toward the coast were narrower than expected. We simply couldn't imagine the place in a couple of months, when thousands arrive for the 60th anniversary, with busses, caravans, motor homes, and cars choking that ribbon of asphalt. At least visitors will have a feeling for what the beach-masters faced at D-Day +1. We almost passed Vierville draw: in fact, we did. Our eyes were focused on a battered landing craft hauled up to a roadside display. Realizing our mistake, John turned around and almost zipped past it again when I called out, "There it is!" pointing to the road. With the exception of memorial markers it looks like any other innocuous road. But drive slowly and you'll see lethal bunkers set in the embankment, strategically situated to crossfire anything that attempted to inch up the draw.

We arrived around 8:30 and we're thrilled to find nobody there. Not a footprint in the sand. The sky was gray with broken clouds – the low ones scudding quickly inland. In the distance a curtain of shower played tag with a few patches of sunlight. And it was eerily quiet save the stiff breeze. It was just like the invasion prelude, including the tide. It was out, exposing the expansive breadth of the beach – all five miles of it. We walked out to the water's edge, the shallow waves lapping like drowning men crawling to shore. For a fleeting moment I studied the horizon, trying to picture what it must have been like, the largest armada ever assembled: 5000 ships carrying 130,000 men. But it was impossible. Visually it's like any ocean horizon – empty. Then I turned around, and it hit me. Try to imagine coming off a landing craft after four or five hours of rolling in swells. (Most were loaded seven to ten miles off shore.) You probably didn't sleep the night before; you're seasick and wet and cold, and hauling 40 pounds of gear – more if you're toting a flame-thrower, bangalore mines, a .30 caliber machine gun…. The ramp yawns down and you've got three football fields to get across. The lucky ones find their boots sinking into wet sand; the rest plunge into water, often above their heads. They didn't run ashore, nor did they scuttle. They wallowed, stumbled, plodded….

Looking towards the bluffs I sited the exit draws and plotted where we stood: the border of Dog Green and Charlie. The terrain looked as I had imagined, but I wasn't prepared for the scale. It was all so vast. I thought I might get emotional, knowing that four thousand died that morning, the tide turning red as it rose; but, in fact, the hallowed site made me hollow. When you stand there and try to imagine what happened and see only a long lonely beach you feel isolated from the past. In an inexplicable way, isolated from yourself. It's a place for poetry, not prose.

A shower passed over – leaving just as quickly and mysteriously as it arrived. A patch of sunlight broke through, casting shadows along the corrugated sand. John turned and said, "I guess this is the time," and he reached in his coat pocket. We knelt, packed our canisters with sand, then shook hands: "We did it, buddy."

We meandered back to the shoreline and I hiked up the bluff to get a better view. John was plagued with gout and explored by car. I passed bunkers and shallow depressions that cradled a few of the German's 85 machineguns – all pre-sited. How in hell those guys ever made it up the exit draws is beyond comprehension. Every foot of

that beach was targeted by machine guns, mortar, or artillery; the draws laced with barbed wire and mines. It's a wonder anyone survived. From the bluff's edge you can see miles up and down the crescent beach. I felt fortunate to have it all to myself. By "it" I mean the experience. I don't know why; maybe one needs silence and solitude to search for the sacred.

Perhaps no ground is more sacred to Americans than the cemetery that rests on the eastern edge of Omaha. Arlington is hallowed ground, but speaking personally, it doesn't evoke the emotional pride of sacrifice like the American Cemetery. More than 9,300 are buried there. The crosses uniformly laid out row after row after row… No matter which way you look the geometry carries your eyes toward the beach. Thousands come every year to walk amongst the crosses – stopping more frequently than one might expect – to read a stranger's name. I did it, John did it; everyone does it. It's a peculiar phenomenon, as if the living hope to find something amongst the dead.

As we left I stopped by the visitor's center with a curious notion. I walked up to the lady at the desk and asked if it was possible to locate a deceased relative. She said with a French accent, "Could you please spell his last name?" *P-E-N-N-Y* "First name?" *Joseph.* "State?" *New York*. In a keystroke it flashed on the screen:

2nd Lt Joseph M. Penny
New York
Died Sept. 28, 1944
Lorraine Cemetery
Plot, Row, Grave E 43 27.

She made a print out and then said, "If you'd like a photo of the grave, you can fill out this form." She paused, then sympathetically added, "It's free." Hearing that in a soft French accent made it all the more moving.

I don't know why I got so choked. I never knew my cousin; I'd simply heard stories about him. He was Dad's age. Actually they more like brothers than uncle-nephew: Dad lived with Aunt Voneda after his parent's divorce. Maybe it was because Uncle True sent me a copy of Joe's last letter a few weeks earlier:

Dear folks,

Just a few lines again to let you know I'm okay. It takes a lot of caution and prayers until this war is over. Gosh but I don't see how the Germans can take all the punishment they do, because the prisoners seem to know the war is lost for them.

I wish that something inside would crack even though we can drive straight through.

I had my first hot shower in 2 months today and it was really a treat. I live on ground at night digging 6-foot holes and placing logs and dirt above most of the hole. Soldiers fear artillery and mortar fire more than small arms fire.

If you would like to send me a package, make it candy (not hard candy). I believe it would get here safely within five weeks. Fruit cake or cookies, or any sort of food is worth a million. Cigarettes are so easy to get and are given to soldiers and I just give mine away.

My letters will be few for I censor my enlisted men's mail in my spare time. An officer in my work has no spare time. Mail gets to us within three weeks sometimes and the boys need it.

Don't ever let me hear anyone gripe about trouble in the U.S. – I've seen hell and anything in better that that. Everyone should be on the front line for one night just to appreciate life.

Thank goodness the war situation does look well. I'll be home again sometime soon. So Dad can prepare to make a double car deal because I'll need one. I'll be able to pay cash!

I don't want to marry for a year after I return because it will spoil my chances to getting my feet solid into business. Keep up the spirits at home and I will be home soon as possible.

Best wishes for a happy birthday October 10th Dad; also Guy's birthday is near. I remember all the dates well and wish that I could be with you all to celebrate.

Keep writing and give my wishes to all.

Love,

Joe

p.s. Say hello to Mrs. Gibbs

Joe was killed five days later.

From there we drove to Pointe Du Hoc, a few miles west of Omaha. We took the road parallel to Omaha Beach, where the shingle (small stones) once was. We were shocked to see the tide had come in so fast. What had been a wide sandy beach was now, four-hours later, covered with water. I could understand why many said the ocean turned red.

Pointe Du Hoc is a jutting peninsula that once held a battery of massive German artillery. On D-Day the 2nd Rangers took it, which was no easy task because the hundred-foot cliff drops straight down to a narrow apron of shingle. You stand on the bluff and wonder how they ever got up that vertical wall. They did it with rope and a few feeble ladders and clawing. The edge is still laced with concertina wire, rusted of course. There's not much left of the bunkers, but what stands is impressive. A couple remain, pocked marked from bombs, with entrails of twisted metal poking out from the concrete. You wonder how they could have survived the heavy bombardment by the B-17s. But close inspection explains. The walls were eight to ten feet thick, layered with half-inch steel plate and webs of reinforcement bar. Most, however, simply couldn't hold up to the punishment. Scattered about are blocks of concrete the size of a truck (forklift, pickup, U-Haul). Many slabs are half buried in the impact craters. Dozens of craters now carpeted with grass give an eerie undulation to the otherwise flat peninsula. You sense the destructive power of those bombs when you walk amongst the detritus – and wonder if they've left it there with intent (as a memorial) or simply by default because it's impossible to move it. But you don't *feel* that power until you scuttle down into a crater. Standing on ground-zero is spookier than you imagine. You know it's benign, but still you feel abnormally vulnerable. Not simply because you're standing ten or fifteen feet below the earth's surface. Rather, because your surrounded by… nothing. Look up and

you see sky (which is close to nothing). Look around and you see a massive hole filled with… nothing. You think, "Where did it go? The soil and rocks?" Then you realize it vaporized. The earth just vanished. Like time itself, all gone. I climbed out like a diver hitting the surface. The fresh ocean breeze was alive, like the panorama. The depth and breadth of the experience was beyond words.

The next day we headed to the village of Sainte-Mere-Église, just a few miles south of Utah Beach, and home of the Airborne Museum. Ironically (or perhaps, appropriately) the museum now stands where a house burned in the early hours of June 6th, its fire illuminating the paratroopers as they dropped helplessly into machinegun fire. A parachute still drapes from a church gable in the town square. After visiting the museum John and I walked over to the church to inspect the unusual, if not unique, stained-glass windows, which depict paratroopers floating down like angels. As we approached John spotted a group of elderly veterans in red berets gathering by the door. They were unfurling flags. Our pace slackened because it seemed something rather official was about to begin. Sure enough, others started showing up. Most were wearing dark suits, but one fellow caught my eye: a tall American solider. His uniform sported an eagle patch (101st Airborne) topped with a Ranger insignia, and his chest was covered with campaign ribbons. An imposing figure indeed. I approached him quietly and asked if a ceremony were to commence. He explained the curator of the Airborne Museum – who was a D-Day paratrooper – had died Sunday and the funeral service was about to begin. John and I quickly slipped in to catch a glimpse of the famous stained-glass windows then quietly padded out.

We toured Utah and explored the surrounding low ground. The Germans had flooded the area to slow down an invasion. One airborne objective was to secure the roads leading in from the beach to Carentan. As we drove along the back roads I was surprised by two observations. First, the countryside looked as if nothing had changed. I'd read that much of the hedgerow was gone, which is true along the major roads, but the country lanes were edged with impenetrable walls of vegetation. The landscape looked rather common and uneventful until we spotted little white markers here and there. Along shoulders, or tucked in the hedgerows, countless plaques memorialize a fallen soldier: name, unit, date. The second observation was how easy one can get lost in that lowland. The tiny hamlets and farms that clot the countryside look much the same, and there are few if any topographic reference points. Although it was daylight and we had a car, and maps, and there were directional signs at most junctions, we were always getting twisted around. I can't imagine how they maneuvered around on foot – slogging through those flooded fields – in the dark.

We drove back to Caen via Sainte-Mere- Église. We'd spotted an army surplus store earlier and I wanted to pick up a souvenir. You'd think most war surplus would have had been gone by now, but not so. Uniforms, webbing, ammo pouches, trenching tools… even weapons. In the back of the shop was the real booty. I'd intended to pick up a little something – I mean little – but I ended up with a helmet. And not just any helmet. The store had picked up the surplus from the *Band of Brothers* film. So after much deliberation I walked out with a paratrooper's helmet, complete with leather chin cup, netting and burlap camouflage, and the distinctive white spade insignia of the 101st Airborne. The actor's initials were penned on the helmet liner, PY. Later John checked an Internet site for actor: Peter Youngblood-Hill played SSgt Darrel "Shifty" Powers.

The following morning we caught a train to Tours. John's niece Carrie met us at the station. She's attending the university there for her junior year abroad. Her host family was gone for the weekend so we were invited to stay at the house, which was located right in the heart of town. We strolled the cobblestone streets and admired the 14th century buildings, then sat in a sunny square and enjoyed life the way the French do, by watching people walk by.

A highlight was visiting Villandry Chateau outside of town. It was the last of the large Chateau built during the Renaissance. It's an impressive building complete with a moat and fountains, but the real attraction is the garden. Actually there are several, which together occupy the space of an airport: the ornamental garden, the water garden, the herb garden, and France's largest kitchen garden. The tulips were in bloom and a few fruit trees had blossomed. And everywhere topiary was pruned with surgical precision. All the gardens were laid out in geometrical symmetry, like a herbaceous kaleidoscope, the edges defined by manicured boxwood and gravel paths. Not coarse gray gavel, but the finest pale pebbles that issued a satisfying crunch as you strolled about. Rumor has it that crowds of aristocrats would show up at the Chateau and simply perch to party and play until all the food was consumed. Then they'd move onto the next Chateau. They had a good thing going until the Revolution.

The next morning we headed back to reality. We caught a high-speed train that hissed us to Paris, then caught a bus to Charles de Gaulle. At the beginning of the week, John mentioned that his father-in-law, a veteran, had only two words to say about the war, "It's over!" In one way, that pretty much summed up the trip. The long awaited dream finally came – and went. But now, sitting at home, it still seems like a dream, but not quite. I look out the window and somewhere between the white birches waving in the wind and the still grayness of the infinite sky I can still see Omaha Beach. Not vague dream-like images, but details from reality. Details not suited for words but for memories.