

# Tours drop customers onto D-Day battlefield

By [Mary Paulsell](#)

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When John Brueck was 7 years old, his father took him to an Army surplus store. Surrounded by uniforms, ammunition boxes and boots, John began to think about the people who had used that equipment. He began to wonder about what had happened to them. He wanted to know their stories.

John's interest in military history was awakened, and in the coming years, that interest was fueled by stories told by World War II veterans in his Chicago neighborhood. One day, one of the veterans gave John his well-worn canteen from his time in Gen. George Patton's Army. John treasures it still. Today, it rests along with hundreds of other relics of World War II in John's private collection of memorabilia from the European theater.

John's interest in World War II lay rather dormant for many years as he built a career in information technology, higher education and private business. Then in 2005, he visited Normandy, France, at the invitation of another collector of battlefield relics.

It was then that John planted his feet for the first time on the beaches of Normandy, and a childhood interest became an adult obsession to learn more about the sacrifices made on those beaches decades ago. That desire to learn quickly became a desire to share and to remember. After many more trips to France, many conversations with French citizens who were both survivors and children of the invasion and an introduction to some French entrepreneurs, John founded Normandy Drop Zone Tours LLC.

This unique company, with offices in Columbia and France, provides weeklong immersion tours of the Normandy beaches, villages and battlefields that figured in the D-Day invasion and subsequent battles. In particular, the tours focus on the experiences of the paratroopers who dropped into a darkened maze of hedgerows on June 5 and 6, 1944.

Wearing battle fatigues, carrying authentic weapons, riding in World War II-issue military vehicles and drinking from the same tin cups used by weary GIs, participants experience Normandy in much the same way those heroic forces did in 1944, except, as John says, "You aren't being shot at."

John describes the tours as something akin to a fantasy sports camp. But "fantasy" gives him pause.

“We have three guiding principles for this experience,” John says — “authenticity, remembrance and respect. The Normandy countryside and villages have not changed much in more than 60 years. Things are very much as they were when the Americans and British took the beaches and formed the largest invasion force in the history of warfare. So, it is important to us that our experience be as authentic as possible.”

To that end, in a one-of-a-kind simulated “night drop,” John and his partners leave participants in a drop zone in a pasture after dark. Using vintage compasses and maps, participants attempt to find their way to “meet up with their unit” on the beach, much as the paratroopers of the 101st and 82nd Airborne divisions did.

They travel the roads the GIs took as they pushed the Germans back from the beachfront. They meet villagers who were children at the time of the invasion and who stop tour participants in the streets to hail the Americans as heroes. Local re-enactors play German troops, and the entire experience is designed to honor the memory of those who actually walked the path to freedom.

Which brings us to remembrance and respect. John’s eyes fill with tears as he describes how each tour starts and ends in the WWII Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, above the Normandy beaches.

“We have to start there,” John says. “We have to pay respect, we have to remember, we have to honor these men and women who paid for our freedom with their lives. When we return there after the tour, we have a heightened awareness of what they experienced. It gives us one more opportunity to thank them for everything we enjoy today. It is our responsibility to ensure that they are not forgotten and that the memory of their sacrifice lives on through educating future generations about the Normandy experience.”

Right now, John’s tours fill through word-of-mouth. The timing for such a venture is perfect. The children of the World War II generation have reached a stage of maturity and financial security that enables them to benefit from the experience. And although there are many tour operators in Normandy, John’s venture offers a unique perspective that no one else can duplicate.

“Everyone in Normandy has a story,” John says. “Everyone can tell you something that the history books will never teach. What it was like to live then, to have Germans billeted in your attic, to have paratroopers dropping through the mists to land in your fields. We take you to those people to hear those stories. This is not a tour in an air-conditioned bus. This is a physically and emotionally demanding experience like none other.”

Like many others of my generation, I was raised at the elbow of a World War II veteran who was extremely cryptic about his war experience. My father, a member of the 84th Infantry, recipient of the Silver Star and veteran of the Battle of the Bulge, went into Normandy in November 1944. Based on his study of the region and familiarity with the troop movements of that time, John says he could show me where my dad would have first set foot on French soil.

I might have to take John up on his offer. I know I can never fill my father's shoes. But to follow his path? That, as they say, is priceless.

*You can reach John at [johnbrueck@centurytel.net](mailto:johnbrueck@centurytel.net) or visit [www.normandydropzonetours.com](http://www.normandydropzonetours.com) to learn more.*

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