


# Aerial Invasion!

**Skyschool Boss Alex Ledger reports on an epic road trip, starting in Northern Spain and culminating in the realisation of a dream as he finally gets to fly over the D-Day beaches in Normandy, France.**

**A**s I cruised down Omaha Beach at 500ft, I realised I had finally achieved one of my main ambitions. Ever since learning to Paramotor I had always wanted to fly over the D-Day beaches and now that I was doing it I felt on top of the world. As a passionate Historian I had visited the beaches many times before, always with the aim of flying over them, but the weather had never allowed me to do so. On this occasion there was an ideal 5 mph on shore breeze and not a cloud in the sky, ideal conditions for what was to be my best Paramotor flight ever! I left Spain two weeks earlier with fellow instructors Kester Haynes and Harry Hayes, as well as ex students Ian Hadfield and Tim Reeve. Our aim was to Paraglide, Paramotor and Skydive our way through France! Our first calling point was St Andres les Alpes in the Haute Provence region. We spent five fantastic days Paragliding

around this beautiful part of the of the southern Alps before heading to Laragne near Sisteron. Here we tried to log some big cross country Paragliding flights but instead ended up flying helicopters, swimming in the stunning gorges and going skydiving at the drop zone nearby at Gap-Tallard. The third leg of our journey took us to two of the best Paragliding sites in the Alps, St Hilaire, the location of the Coupe Icare Festival, and Annecy, the home of Paragliding.

Up until this stage the weather had allowed us to fly every day however we thought our luck was about to change when the heavens opened during lunch one day in Annecy. We therefore made the decision to drive through the night all the way to Bayeaux in Normandy. My heart sank when I woke up the following morning to the sound of rain on the wind screen and the sight of grey clouds blanketing the sky. It seemed as if the 'Epic Road Trip' was going to come to



Alex and his team flying over the D-Day beaches in Normandy, France.

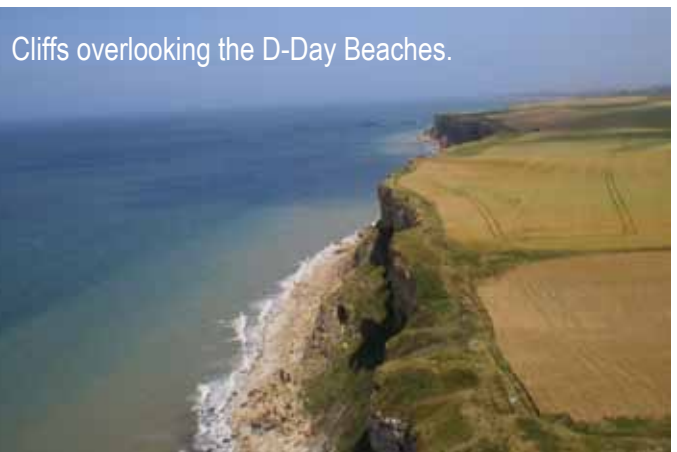
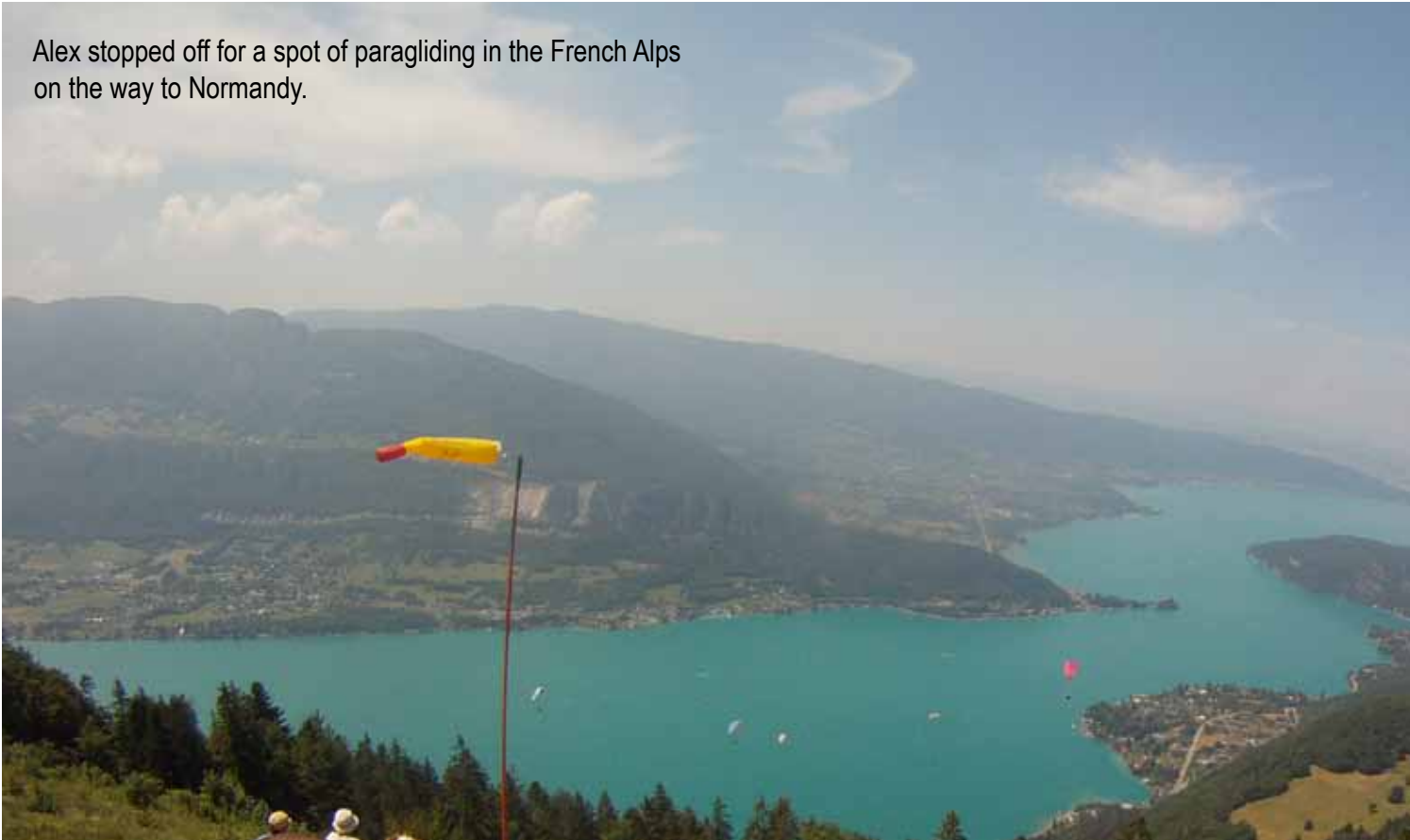
a disappointing end and my dreams of flying the D-Day beaches were to be dashed again.

While miserably reflecting upon our situation the clouds started to clear and the rain stopped so we made a group decision to visit some of the beaches. Our first port of call was Arromanches, the site of the British Mulberry Harbour, much of which still survives to this day. As we drove west along the coast we stumbled across a Paragliding site between Arromanches and Port en Bessin and to

our amazement there was a Paraglider in the sky. After my initial surprise I noticed that the wind was almost directly on the ridge and blowing at a steady 10mph, creating the ideal ridge soaring conditions. After looking at a map, it became clear that the ridge line ran for over 15 kilometers and it would be possible to fly all the way along it. I therefore took to the skies for the first time above the Normandy coast line and proceeded to paraglide all the way down the coast heading east

towards the concrete caissons surround Arromanches. I was joined by the four other members of the team and we all enjoyed over an hour of Paragliding heaven in this beautiful part of the world. We were quite literally skimming over the remains of 15 kilometers of Hitler's Atlantic Wall and almost within touching distance of some of the old batteries. After landing we all agreed that this had been the best flight of the entire trip and that evening we drank a little bit too much calvados while

Alex stopped off for a spot of paragliding in the French Alps on the way to Normandy.



Cliffs overlooking the D-Day Beaches.

celebrating what had been a fantastic day. The following morning we all woke up with headaches which would kill a small child, however the sun was out and wind was light. The prospect of another fantastic flying day, as well as a few ibuprofen, helped to cure our self inflicted head injuries and after a hearty breakfast we set off for Vierville sur Mer on Omaha beach.

As there were only two Paramotors available we decided that Harry and I would take off and find the

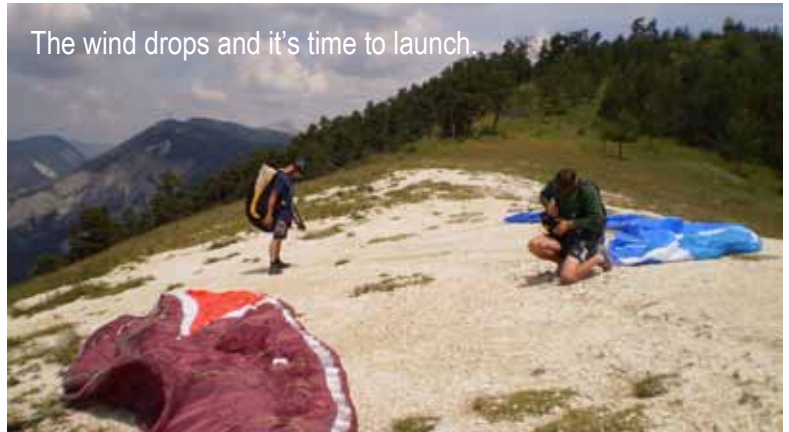
Paragliding take off site above Omaha beach which we had noticed on a map.

The others would then try to do some ridge soaring before joining us at Utah beach. The 5mph on shore breeze made taking off extremely simple and I was quickly airborne, followed by Harry. I quickly found the Paragliding site on the cliffs and informed the others by radio, after which Harry and I set off on the first stage of our epic flight. At first we headed east and cruised along the whole of Omaha beach as far as the American

Cemetery, which was an amazing spectacle to view from the air. As I took in the open expanse of the beach below, the thought of crossing it while under heavy machine gun, mortar and artillery fire was not a nice one. We then turned around and headed towards Pointe du Hoc which is a cliff top location where the Germans had built six large casemates for a battery of 155mm guns. The battery presented a considerable risk to the troops landing at both Omaha and Utah beaches



Alex and Co 'parawaiting.'



The wind drops and it's time to launch.

on D-Day and was therefore heavily bombed from the air and by naval guns prior to an assault by the 2nd Ranger Battalion.

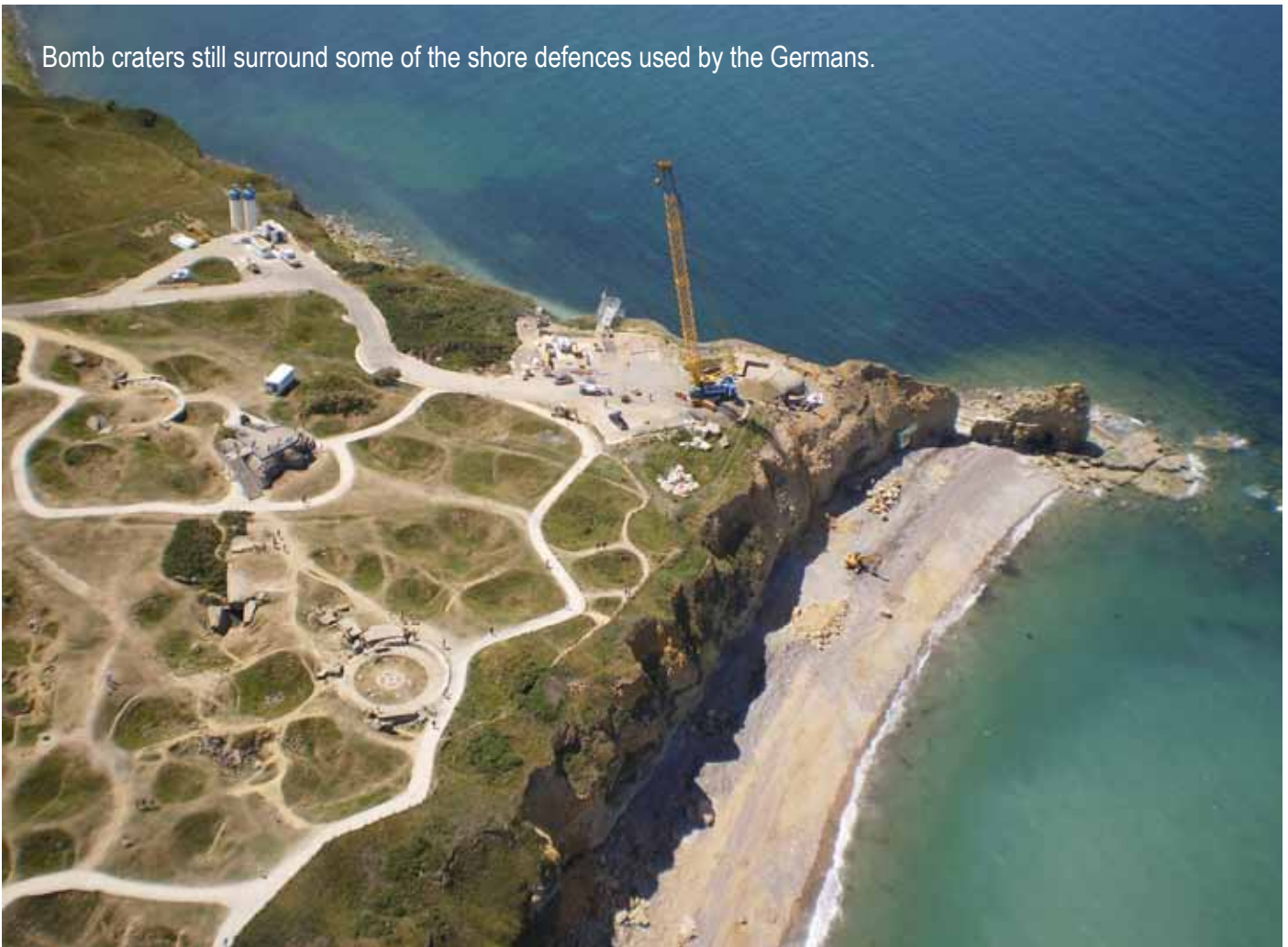
When I visited Pointe du Hoc on foot the year before I had been amazed by the size of the shell craters however as I flew over them at 500ft they looked even more amazing. Harry was equally impressed and I revelled in giving him an aerial History lesson which probably explains why the radios failed from then on. We continued heading west towards the Douve River Estuary where we saw a colony of seals sunbathing on the exposed sand banks below. Until now we had been flying with a 10mph tail wind which gave us a good 45mph over the ground. As the Estuary was quite wide we climbed to 1,000ft and started to head north-west towards the Cherbourg peninsular. This gave us more of a cross



Alex and his group follow the historic Normandy coastline.

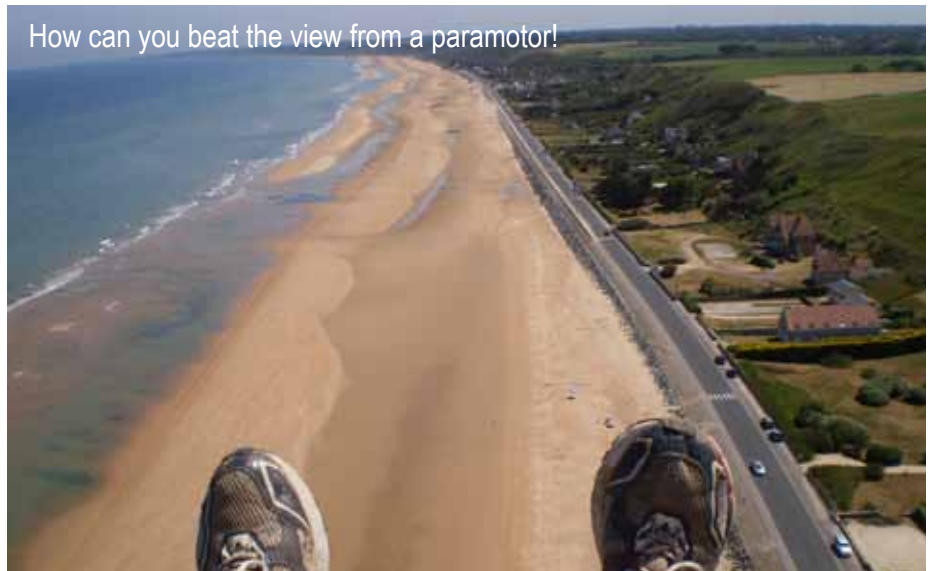


Bomb craters still surround some of the shore defences used by the Germans.



wind and reduced our ground speed to around 30mph. Once across the Estuary we dropped down low over the deserted beach and started to play! It was the ideal area for low level flying and we both had a great time dragging our feet through the sand and playing with the on shore breeze. As the Utah Beach Memorial came in to view we climbed back up to 500ft and started to look for somewhere to land. At first I thought the beach would be more than suitable and then Harry pointed out a patch of perfectly mown grass just behind the memorial itself. We both proceeded to drop in for text book landings before celebrating what had been a truly awe inspiring flight and one which neither of us will ever forget. In total we flew for

How can you beat the view from a paramotor!



one and a half hours and covered more than 30 miles. The others joined us little later and we spent the rest of the afternoon having fun on the sand dunes which, even though they were only 20ft high, generated just enough ridge lift to soar along with our paragliders. That evening we reminisced

on the day's activities while enjoying some local cider in the square of St Mere Eglise. To this day there is still a dummy parachutist attached to the church spire in remembrance of the 82nd Airborne who landed in the area, one of whom was unfortunate enough to land there. On the penultimate day

The zig-zag cut outs on top of the cliff mark the site of yet more defences.



I managed to have another great flight and ended up near the Merville Gun Battery, which was captured by 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Parachute Regiment on D-Day. All in all, a pretty damn good three consecutive days of flying! On the ferry back to England we all agreed that this had been the best flying trip ever. The weather been extremely kind to us and we had managed to take to the skies in five different ways in some of the most spectacular parts of France. The only sore point was the knowledge of what the British weather had in store for us on our return. That said, I am glad to say we have all managed to get airborne again during what has turned out to be quite a good summer in the UK. However, I am definitely looking forward to my trip through France on my return to Spain at the beginning of September!





## **The biggest invasion in history**

June 6, 1944, will forever be known simply as D-Day, for it was on this day that allied forces launched the biggest military invasion in history. Around 5,000 boats and ships set sail from southern England carrying over 160,000 soldiers, mainly from Britain, the USA and Canada. The troops landed on five separate beaches and the force sustained heavy casualties from stiff German resistance. The five beaches were given names by the Allied high command; Gold, Juno, Omaha, Sword and Utah. The British Second Army was

tasked with taking Sword, Juno and Gold, while the US First Army took the remaining Omaha and Utah beaches.

Launching the assault at low tide meant that soldiers had to leave their landing craft and cross wide open beaches under machine gun and mortar fire with little or no cover. A massive airborne operation also took place to support the sea landings. 24,000 troops were either parachuted into the battle zone or landed by assault gliders.

The main objective of the allies was to secure a beach head so that a harbour could be constructed, allowing ships to bring supplies to the invasion force.

By June 9, the first sections of the huge Mulberry Harbour were in place. These consisted of giant concrete blocks which were floated across the English Channel and sunk just offshore so that ships could dock and unload cargo. The supplies were then brought ashore via floating pontoon bridges.

Parts of the Mulberry Harbour can still be seen today just off the Normandy beaches.