Sculpture

This article is more than **4 years old**

Comrades for ever: how D-day bravery was sculpted in bronze

Dale Berning Sawa
Thu 6 Jun 2019 09.21 BST

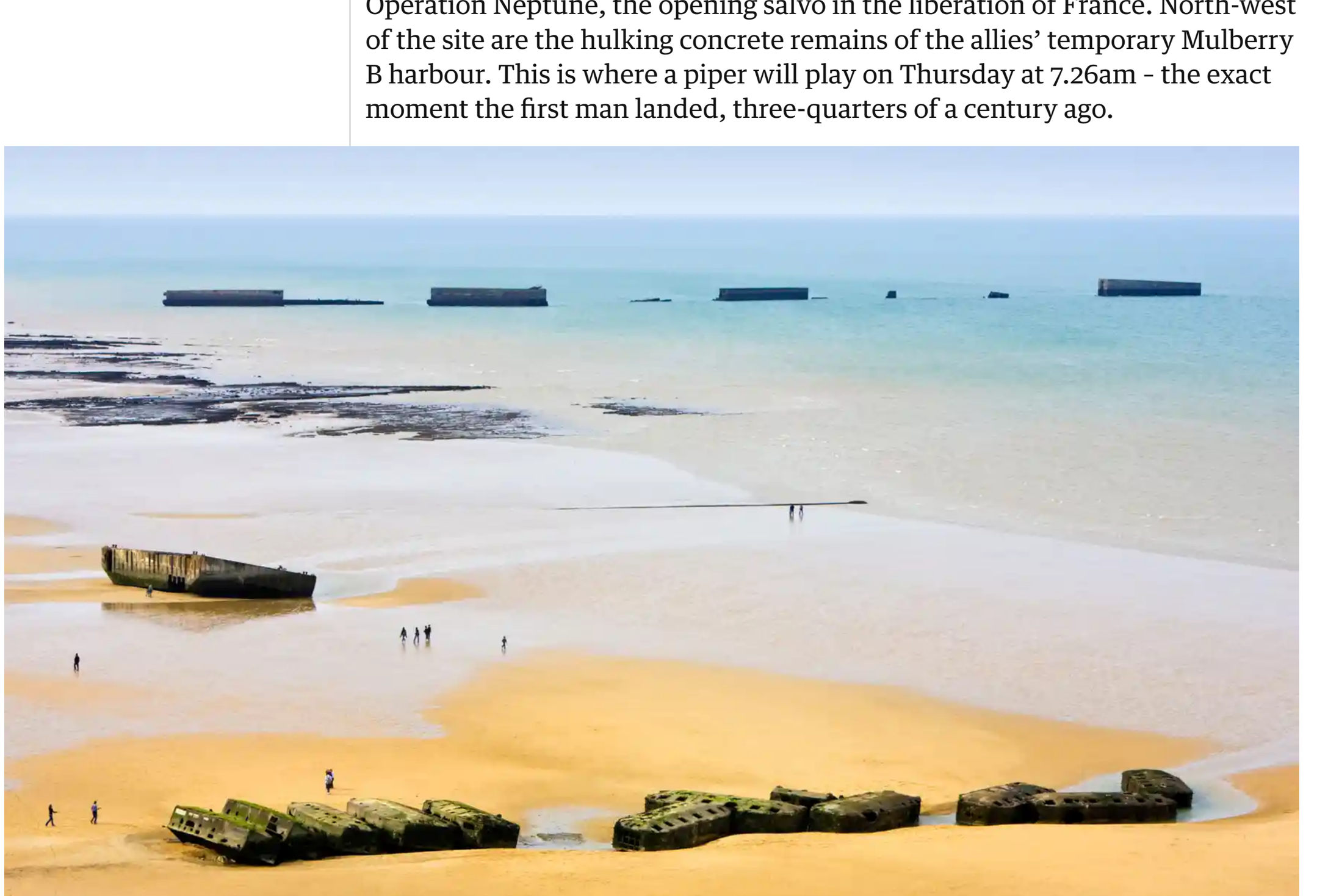
264

'Leadership and comradeship'... David Williams-Ellis's D-day sculpture in Ver-Sur-Mer, France. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and the Normandy Memorial Trust

As a new British memorial to the Normandy landings is unveiled today on Gold beach, artist David Williams-Ellis talks about its creation

As D-day's 75th anniversary unfolds, one man in particular has been holding his breath. The sculptor David Williams-Ellis has created the centrepiece for the new British Normandy Memorial, in Ver-sur-Mer, France: a trio of soldiers surging forward on a triangular granite plinth. With its balletic grace and lack of triumphalism, it marks the great turning point of the war and represents the changing face of war memorials in recent years.

Until April, the site on which Williams-Ellis's sculpture stands was just a green field on a small hill overlooking a beach. It is, of course, not just any beach, but Gold beach, the middle one of five codenamed by the allies for Operation Neptune, the opening salvo in the liberation of France. North-west of the site are the hulking concrete remains of the allies' temporary Mulberry B harbour. This is where a piper will play on Thursday at 7.26am - the exact moment the first man landed, three-quarters of a century ago.



Remains of the Day ... Mulberry B harbour on the Normandy coast. Photograph: incamerastock/Alamy

In recent years, the number of war memorials in the UK has rapidly increased: according to the Imperial War Museums' national register there are now more than 80,000 of them. And yet, of all the countries that took part in the allied invasion in 1945, Britain has been the only one not to have a dedicated memorial where forces landed in France. It is something Williams-Ellis has helped rectify.

In his Oxfordshire studio, the artist shows me the original sculptures he worked on, using leftover armature of one towering, full-size figure and a digitally rendered 3D scan of the finished piece in miniature. When we meet, the bronze is in a foundry in Basingstoke, from where it will be picked up and put on the back of a low-loader and taken by ferry to France. The piece has taken months of all-consuming focus and heavy lifting, not to mention trips to several sites in France and sessions with veterans and their children who are still grieving 75 years on. Seeing it finally in place will no doubt come as a relief.

David Williams-Ellis with maquettes of his D-day sculptures. Photograph: Normandy Memorial Trust Commission

Williams-Ellis worked with an ex-footballer and a ballet dancer in order to model his statues from life: "I wanted to have leadership and comradeship, but nothing too obvious," he says. The soldiers' kit (entrenching spades, gas masks, water bottles, a mug) and weaponry (a .303 rifle, a Bren machine gun and a Sten gun) are rendered with detail but not hyperrealism. He knows his way around the human head, but these faces really pushed him: "I took the head of one of them off twice, it just looked awful."

Unusually for a commemorative tableau, the figures rise from the base in distinctly limber silhouettes, because, as William-Ellis puts it, "if you were hanging around, you weren't going to survive". By 2020, the sculpture will stand in front of architect Liam O'Connor's neoclassical memorial - a walled forecourt with colonnades and gardens on either side. To be inscribed on the 160 columns will be the names of 22,442 servicemen and women who died here.

Quick Guide
What happened on D-day?
Show

Richard Kindersley and Robbie Smith have spent months creating a typeface with which to record the deceased. The roll of honour specifies rank and age: the youngest soldier Smith has come across so far was 16. "That's quite shocking," he says. "They were kids." Kindersley thinks about how they all had parents, siblings, friends: "The amount of sadness and distress aggregated must have been calamitous."

Frances Moreton, director of the War Memorials Trust, points out that the vast majority of last century's memorials are not memorials but proxy graves for mourners to grieve those buried too far away or never buried at all. But the Normandy memorial represents the beginning of a shift away from living memory and into a collective commemoration of the conflict as a whole.

The design for the British Normandy Memorial. Photograph: Liam O'Connor Architects

Victorian memorials often focused on military leaders - for example, the Henry Havelock and James Napier statues that bracket Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square - and that tradition has continued, with field marshals, majors and generals set in bronze until as recently as the 1990s. But recent efforts have seen a shift. The Normandy memorial, much like the 2007 Armed Forces Memorial in Staffordshire, the 2014 Korean War Memorial in London and the 2017 Iraq and Afghanistan Memorial, also in the capital, all focus instead on ordinary soldiers and civilian losses. Beyond that, there are modern monuments that acknowledge the complexity of what they represent (millions of lives lost or names unknown) which have used more abstract or symbolic forms. These include the bronze maple leaves floating downstream on Green Park's Canada Memorial and the rack of hats and jackets for the Women of World War II on Whitehall.

From an aesthetic and conceptual point of view, the Normandy memorial is extremely conservative, its design far removed from what one would expect of contemporary work. This is an indirect result of the process: war memorials, by and large, are privately funded and created. There is no public call for submissions, no curatorial committee, no wider art-world input. This means that, contrary to, say, the exciting sense of possibility each new Fourth Plinth commission brings to the public - Michael Rakowitz's astonishing tin-can winged bull; Elmgreen and Dragset's playful rocking-horse boy - memorial statues exist in a cultural vacuum. Williams-Ellis was chosen by the architect O'Connor who was picked by the Normandy Memorial Trust. "I think it's a good thing they're not trying anything controversial or radical," says the historian Antony Beevor, noting how this memorial fits with tradition. Essentially, it's a monument for generations past.

So what is it like creating a commemorative sculpture in the context of current controversy surrounding historical statues - such as Cecil Rhodes in Oxford and Robert E Lee in Charlottesville? Only time will tell, but Williams-Ellis feels that in another 70 years, we will still think people died on D-day doing something they felt was right. And, contrary to the 2012 Bomber Command Memorial, there is no question in the UK over whether the 22,442 should be memorialised. In France, feelings have been more mixed. Beevor highlights the considerable losses the Calvados region incurred at the hands of the allies. O'Connor's neoclassical monument will include a large French memorial recording that nearly as many French civilians - about 20,000 - were killed and many more wounded. Compared to the almost tokenistic catch-all dedication on the Bomber Command pavilion - "to those of all nations who lost their lives in the bombing of 1939-45" - this, at least, has the benefit of greater precision.

A detail from Williams-Ellis's D-day sculpture in the workshop. Photograph: courtesy David Williams-Ellis

One of the most powerful aspects of last year's first world war centenary events was the attempt to fill the gaps in how that history has been told - the African porters whose names and numbers went unrecorded; the unheard stories of Caribbean servicemen. Here, all three figures are white and male. Had this been in Italy or the far east, Beevor says, the demographics would have been different. Here, though, any ethnically diverse portrayal would have raised eyebrows, because only a very small percentage of the people involved were not white men. The trust's website notes that only two were women. "There was an expectation to be truthful," says Williams-Ellis.

He talks of the many boxes his sculpture needed to tick - symbolism, accuracy, relatability. Mixed reactions to recent memorials show that, if anything, a memorial in 2019 should allow for complexity and national humility, too. Despite the profusion of new memorials, Luytens' minimalistic Cenotaph still turns heads for its profound simplicity, its few words.

What seems undeniable is that this Normandy memorial could not be more relevant now. The irony, as Beevor puts it, is that at a time when we're doing almost everything to undermine international cooperation by leaving Europe, here is a monument to one of the greatest examples of international cooperation - to liberate western Europe.

Explore more on these topics
Sculpture | D-day | Military | Art | Second world war | France | Europe | features

Reuse this content

Advertisement

12 issues for £12 · Try a subscription today · The Guardian Weekly

Most viewed
Live Rishi Sunak refuses to apologise to Brianna Ghey's father over trans jibe - UK politics live
Italian man removed from UK despite post-Brexit Home Office certificate
'He was meant to be a mentor': extent of claimed MoD sexual assaults revealed
US supreme court hearing focuses on Trump's eligibility for 2024 election
How we met: 'I wasn't open to a relationship. But we ended up kissing and it felt very welcome'

More on this story
No D-day veterans on Normandy beaches as anniversary events cancelled
5 Jun 2020

Wrecks of US vessels from D-day rehearsal given protected status
1 May 2020

These D-day heroes evoked a glorious shared purpose. It's now under threat
9 Jun 2019

I'd do it again, says D-day Omaha beach 'suicide wave' veteran
6 Jun 2019

Early holi move with
8 Jun 20

Comments (...)
Sign in or create your Guardian account to join the discussion

Most viewed