

INTRODUCTION

This is a story to remember. It is not a well-known story. At 2:38 a.m., on 6 June 1944, a date to be forever known as “D-Day,” nine C-47 transport planes dropped 143 paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division near the village of Graignes in Normandy, France. This was not where the paratroopers were supposed to be. They were about thirty-five kilometers away from their drop zone. Many landed in marshy water, the *marais* of the Cotentin Peninsula. A few became entangled in their parachutes and drowned. Another C-47 dropped a contingent of paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division near Graignes. They, too, were hopelessly off target. A glider plane attached to the 101st, with two pilots, two enlisted men, and equipment, slammed into the marshes. The wet, confused paratroopers made their way to Graignes. The village was visible from the *marais*, because it was on a hill. The troopers could also see the steeple of the village’s remarkable twelfth-century Romanesque church.

By the end of D-Day, the commanding officer had ordered that the paratroopers would defend Graignes and wait for the Allied invasion forces to reach them. The officer’s decision was facilitated by the enthusiasm of the villagers. On their own initiative, villagers had taken their boats into the flooded areas to retrieve the bundles of equipment that had been dropped in distinctive blue parachutes. The paratroopers now had radios, machine guns, mortars, and ammunition. With visions of first communion, confirmation, and wedding dresses in their heads, girls and young women gathered up the unused white silk reserve parachutes. On 7 June, the men in the village assembled in the church,

and, with the encouragement of the mayor and priest, voted unanimously to support their unexpected guests. Villagers, including Albert Mauger, the leader of the local Resistance, carried out reconnaissance missions in the surrounding areas for the paratroopers. Germaine Boursier, the owner of the local café, organized women in a round-the-clock effort to cook for the paratroopers. Women drove their horse-drawn wagons into villages occupied by German troops and surreptitiously purchased bread and food. Children brought meals to the paratroopers ensconced in their foxholes.

Until 10 June, the paratroopers and the 900 people of Graignes enjoyed a semblance of peace. The US men offered their chocolate and chewing gum to the children. The children taught the soldiers Norman songs. Plans were made to stay in touch in the postwar world. Hope for liberation arose when two infantrymen who had landed at Omaha Beach, some twenty-five miles from Graignes, wandered into the village on 9 June. But the troopers had destroyed a bridge to their north and twice clashed with German troops. The Americans knew on 10 June that a *Waffen-SS* division had entered the area.

The battle for Graignes began on the morning of 11 June, when villagers and troopers of the Roman Catholic faith were attending Sunday mass. The well-prepared US forces routed the German invaders. But in the afternoon and then in the late evening, a battalion of the 17th *SS Panzergrenadier* Division launched assaults and pounded the village with artillery fire. The church suffered heavy damage. The paratroopers began to take casualties, with more than twenty dying of battlefield wounds. By the end of Sunday, the paratroopers were shooting off their red flares of distress and preparing to withdraw from Graignes. The *SS* invaders had at least a five-to-one numerical advantage, and the US mortars did not have the range to hit the German artillery. Most important, the paratroopers had run out of ammunition. One frustrated machine gunner took to hurling pieces of slate from a roof at the advancing *SS* men.

What happened after the withdrawal order proved even more haunting. Nineteen US uniformed men stayed behind. They included a medical doctor, medics, and the wounded. The *SS* men murdered them all. Their war crimes included bayonetting badly wounded men and pushing them into a pond. Nine other men suffered similarly hideous fates at the hands of the Nazis. They were forced to dig their own graves and then were shot in the back of the head. Two officers, one of whom

was the doctor, were interrogated and then executed. The Nazi rampage was not limited to uniformed personnel. The SS murdered the village priest, his religious associate, and two elderly housekeepers. Their crime was that they had ministered to the wounded soldiers. German troops subsequently torched the village. Of the 200 structures in the town, all but two were either destroyed or damaged by fire or artillery bombardment.

In the midst of unspeakable horror and depravity, the people of Graignes remained defiant. The SS men rounded up forty-four villagers and tried to intimidate them into identifying collaborators. No one broke. Indeed, the resistance continued. Individuals hid fleeing soldiers in their homes. Approximately ninety Americans made it to the regional center of Carentan, thirteen kilometers from Graignes, by the evening of Tuesday, 13 June. US forces had just liberated the strategically vital town. During their difficult journey through the *marais*, the paratroopers received guidance and food from country folk.

Two extraordinary young women, nineteen and twelve years of age, saved twenty-one paratroopers. They led fleeing men to the loft of the family barn, some three kilometers from Graignes. For three nights, the girls and their parents concealed the men and shared their meager rations with them. Looking for Americans, German soldiers actually entered the barn but did not investigate the loft. Discovery of the paratroopers would have inevitably led to the execution of the family. Germans typically shot male resisters and dispatched female resisters to Germany to be beheaded. On the night of Thursday, 15 June, the twenty-one paratroopers made it to Carentan. Their hosts arranged for a guide and a large, flat boat to navigate the marshes and canals.

The farm family and the people of Graignes would soon themselves be refugees. The Germans ordered an evacuation of the village and the region. Villagers could not return until the middle of July, when US forces liberated Graignes. On 22 July 1944, a US priest and a French priest celebrated mass in Graignes to commemorate the military and civilian victims. Postwar celebrations included weddings, where the heroines of Graignes took their marital vows in gowns made from white parachute silk. The D-Day “silk from the sky” had become a tangible symbol of liberation and the enduring nature of the Franco-American alliance.¹ The village would not, however, be fully restored until the mid 1950s. The grand church could not be saved. One arch was preserved as a memorial to the soldiers and civilians who had died defending Graignes and France.



Figure I.1 Here are two of the many intrepid females who lived in the village of Graignes, Normandy on 6 June 1944, or “D-Day.” They are sisters. Behind them is their brother Jean Claude Rigault, who was an infant in 1944. To the right is Odette Rigault Lelavechef, a self-described “soldier” of the French Resistance. She was nineteen years old in 1944. Odette passed in October 2018 at the age of ninety-three. The younger sister, Marthe Rigault His, was twelve years old in 1944. In 2021, Marthe remains as lively as ever, cooking enormous feasts for visitors from America and painting scenes from the family home for the children and grandchildren of the US paratroopers she knew in 1944. The two women recounted their story innumerable times. But, in Marthe’s words, “we always live and feel it.” Photograph courtesy of the Rigault family.

What happened at Graignes was historically significant. The battles of 11–12 June had slowed the progress of the 17th SS *Panzergrenadier* Division. Their primary mission was to recapture



Figure I.2 The “silk from the sky” wedding of Odette Rigault and her older sister, Marie Jean in 1945. The third person to the right of Marie Jean is Marthe Rigault, sitting next to her little brother, Jean Claude. Gustave and Madame Rigault are standing behind Marthe. Courtesy of Marthe Rigault His.

Carentan, the port town which lay between Utah and Omaha Beaches. German control of Carentan would prevent the US invaders from joining forces. The defenders of Graignes had delayed the attack on Carentan by at least a day, giving the 101st time to consolidate its hold on Carentan. They had also bloodied and wearied the SS attackers of Graignes, the 1st Battalion of the 37th Regiment. That very same battalion led the 17th SS *Panzer* *grenadier* Division attack on Carentan on 13 June and reached some of Carentan’s outlying streets. The 101st Division held on, however, and, by the end of the day, tanks of the 2nd Armored Division had forced the Germans into retreat. Carentan remained liberated.

By helping to save the lives of well over 100 paratroopers, the bulk of whom were members of Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 507th Regiment of the 82nd Airborne, the people of Graignes contributed to Allied victory. These survivors of Graignes participated in future combat in Normandy in June and July 1944, in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium in the winter of 1944–1945, and in a combat jump over the Rhine River on 24 March 1945. The paratroopers then waged war in

the Rhineland area, before Germany finally surrendered on 8 May 1945. The paratroopers also freed thousands of Eastern European slave laborers toiling in German factories. In their individual ways, the defenders of Graignes, many of whom were repeatedly wounded during their eleven months of combat, contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany and the liberation of Western Europe.

The memory of D-Day looms large in the popular imagination. As Olivier Wieviorka, a French scholar, has noted, the invasion of Normandy “unquestionably ranks among the greatest events in human history.”² The stakes could not have been higher. The forces of liberation embarked on a journey to defeat and eliminate the murderous, genocidal, imperialist regime that was Nazi Germany. That odious Nazi regime slaughtered Professor Wieviorka’s Jewish grandparents. One would spend a very long time trying to master the ever-expanding literature on the invasion and the liberation of France. Films like *The Longest Day* (1962) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) are considered cinematic classics. The quintessential American movie hero, John Wayne, played the role of an officer in the 82nd Airborne in *The Longest Day*. President Ronald Reagan gave a memorable speech in 1984, when he became the first US president to attend in Normandy a commemoration of D-Day. The president hailed the “boys of Pointe du Hoc,” the American Rangers who scaled the cliffs of Omaha Beach. The Rangers, who suffered appalling losses, had, in Reagan’s words, “fought for humanity.”³

What happened at Graignes is part of the storied history of D-Day and its aftermath. But what happened at Graignes was also distinctive. It is a case where an entire locale rose in defense of the Allied troops. To be sure, individual Normans and Resistance members aided the Allies. French partisans began carrying out sabotage missions against the 17th SS *Panzer Grenadier* Division, as the division made its way from the interior of France toward Graignes and Carentan in the immediate days after the invasion. Other French towns and villages, such as Oradour-sur-Glane, suffered foul war crimes at the hands of SS units. Nonetheless, what prompted an entire village to act spontaneously to protect men that they and their descendants continue to refer to as “the liberators” or “our paratroopers” deserves analysis. Despite losing friends and relatives, their village, and, for a time, their way of life, the people of Graignes never regretted their commitment. At a twentieth anniversary service in 1964, the village priest drew an

analogy between the *paras* floating down toward Graignes and God sending his only son, Jesus, to earth.⁴

The people of Graignes also do not fit the standard characterization of French partisans under German occupation. Those who pledged allegiance to the French Resistance tended to be politically active, urban people who disproportionately identified with leftist groups like the Socialist and Communist parties. Graignes was a rural village. People worked with their famed Norman cows and the butter, cheese, and milk byproducts and on orchards that produced the fruit for distilling Normandy's sublime Calvados brandy. The French Department of *Manche*, where Graignes was situated, tended to vote for political conservatives, not political leftists. Women, both young and old, played principal roles in defending their *paras* and the village. This was a notable development in a country that, as late as 1944, still denied French women the right to vote. Histories of D-Day and its aftermath traditionally focus on men, not the adventures and contributions of Norman women and girls to liberation.

The war crimes that the Nazi soldiers committed at Graignes against civilian and military personnel have not been thoroughly assessed. One high-ranking enlisted man in the 17th SS *Panzergranadier* Division was found guilty in 1947 by a US military tribunal for overseeing, on 17 June 1944, the execution of US soldiers in a village a few kilometers away from Graignes. US military investigators interviewed the villagers of Graignes, including the mayor, in 1947 about the execution of the nineteen paratroopers. The decision was made, however, not to pursue justice, as the SS men that had perpetrated war crimes had vanished into eternity. During the summer of 1944, Allied forces destroyed the over 900 men of the 1st Battalion of the 37th Regiment of the 17th SS *Panzergranadier* Division. Finally, what also needs highlighting and remembering was the steadfastness of the doctor and the medics, who stayed with the wounded paratroopers in Graignes and were murdered for their loyalty to the ideals of medicine.

Graignes in Historical Writing

The people of Normandy and France are familiar with the story of Graignes. For a variety of reasons, the story is less well known in the United States. In 1948, France awarded the village the *Croix de Guerre*, with silver star. The next year, US Ambassador to France David K. E. Bruce attended

a ceremony to establish a Franco-American memorial in the ruins of the church. General Dwight D. Eisenhower had previously issued commendations to villagers who had rescued paratroopers. In the ensuing years, the village held memorial services to mark notable anniversaries of the dramatic days in June 1944. But in the postwar years, the villagers had to focus on rebuilding their village and their lives. European and US economic aid assisted the rebuilding of Normandy and Graignes.

For nearly four decades, contact between villagers and the surviving paratroopers was infrequent. The Rigault family, who had hid paratroopers in the barn, did not know the fate of the men. The family had lost the paper signed by the twenty-one paratroopers commending them to US authorities in the hurried rush to evacuate their home in late June 1944. For their part, the paratroopers were not fully aware of the death and destruction that SS troops had inflicted on Graignes. Between the middle of June 1944 and May 1945, the paratroopers concentrated on staying alive in Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, the jump over the Rhine River, and the concluding, dangerous house-to-house fighting in the Rhineland region. Some of the paratroopers also pulled occupation duty in Berlin in the second half of 1945. When they returned to the United States, the veterans wanted to forget the economic hardships of the Great Depression and the combat traumas they had experienced. They wanted a spouse, family, work, and a middle-class life. By the mid 1950s, most veterans had achieved this in an America that was growing and prosperous. Corporal Homer H. Poss, who left high school to enlist and at the age of nineteen was one of the youngest paratroopers in Graignes, served as mayor of his town of Highland, Illinois. Staff Sergeant Fredric Boyle returned to his wife Charla, set up housekeeping, and attended Palmer Chiropractic School in Davenport, Iowa. Dr. Boyle and his wife had four children. He also served as mayor of Keosauqua, Iowa. The veterans of Graignes did occasionally reminisce at barbecues in Stamford, Connecticut hosted by Technician Fifth Grade (T/5) Edward T. "Eddie" Page. Page had hidden in the Rigault barn with his buddy, Staff Sergeant (S/Sgt.) Rene E. Rabe. Rabe related how a "farm family" had hid him and others in a barn and provided them with a meal of cabbage with melting butter, when they were ravenously hungry. Page told his wife, Betty, that if he ever returned to Europe, Graignes would be his first stop.

The fortieth anniversary of D-Day in 1984 seemed to motivate the veterans to think about Graignes. President Reagan had given his

inspiring speech. Veterans of the 82nd and 101st Divisions, then in their sixties, initiated an annual ritual by jumping once again out of C-47s over Normandy on 6 June. The “experienced” paratroopers had white hair or no hair but seemed as fit and fearless as ever. American citizens saw on television visual images of the stunning but sad rows of Christian crosses and Stars of David at the American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, which is near Omaha Beach. Division and recrimination had characterized public debate in the 1960s and 1970s over the Vietnam War. D-Day seemed worth remembering as a time of national purpose and unity. Renowned television journalist Tom Brokaw kept the positive feelings flowing with his popular book *The Greatest Generation* (1998).⁵

The veterans of Graignes began to act individually and collectively. The large, extended family of Private (Pvt.) Arnold J. Martinez of Colorado, who had died at Graignes, began an extensive writing campaign to the Department of Defense trying to determine the circumstances of his death. In 1944, Martinez’s parents had initially been informed that their son was missing in action. Later in the year, they received another telegram saying that Arnold had been killed in action, but with no further explanation. Arnold’s younger brother, Samuel Martinez, Jr. would subsequently receive financial backing from his employer, Coors Brewing, in his quest to honor his brother. In the 1980s, veterans, who were approaching retirement, now had the time and money to travel to Europe. Some paratroopers approached the idea hesitantly, because they believed they had let the villagers of Graignes down, when they retreated in the dark hours between 11 and 12 June. To their relief, they discovered that villagers annually commemorated their “heroism” and “bowed in sorrow” for those who had sacrificed their lives “for the liberty of our people.”⁶ Veterans began to bring their families to meet the people that had aided them in Graignes. Most important, two career military officers, Colonel Francis E. Naughton and Lt. Colonel Earle R. “Pip” Reed, gathered information and lobbied the Department of the Army to recognize the heroism of the people of Graignes. Both men had been junior officers in 1944 and had helped lead the withdrawal from Graignes to Carentan. On 6 July 1986, in a grand ceremony, Secretary of the Army John O. Marsh, Jr. awarded eleven Distinguished Service Medals, several of them posthumously, to the people of Graignes. The medals are the highest award that the Department of Defense can award to a civilian. Five US veterans of Graignes and the brother of Pvt. Martinez attended the ceremony.

The story of Graignes thereafter entered public consciousness. Gary N. Fox's *Graignes: The Franco-American Memorial* (1990) offered a useful summary. Having attended reunions of the 507th Regiment, Fox wrote from the perspective of the veterans. Fox's book was published by a small press and had limited distribution.⁷ Two chroniclers of the 507th Regiment, Dominique François and Martin K. A. Morgan, tried to publicize the history of Graignes. François, who lives in Normandy, has a special connection to D-Day. His grandparents, who lived on the coast of the Cotentin Peninsula, were unfortunate victims of Allied bombing on 5 June 1944. The German defenders had built a large bunker near their village. The couple's three sons survived the bombing, and US soldiers initially cared for François's father and two uncles. François has written *La bataille de Graignes: Les paras perdus, 5-12 Juin 1944* (*The Battle of Graignes: The Lost Paratroopers, 5-12 June*) (2012), which includes testimonies by French citizens.⁸ François also assisted Colonel Naughton in establishing a memorial to the 507th Regiment in Amfreville, the village where the regiment, including the defenders of Graignes, were supposed to land.

Martin Morgan, who has worked with the National Geographic Society, has led battlefield tours around the world. Both his history of the 507th Regiment in Normandy, *Down to Earth* (2004), and his photographic history of D-Day (2014) have sections on Graignes.⁹ Morgan's approach has been to give equal weight to the memories of the paratroopers and those of the villagers. Morgan has also served as an authority for two television broadcasts, *D-Day: Down to Earth, Return of the 507th* (2004) by the Public Broadcasting System and *D-Day: The Secret Massacre* (2004) by the History Channel. François has also aided a compelling visual presentation, *Papa Said: We Should Never Forget* (2009) produced by Georgia Public Broadcasting. The twenty-four-minute story focuses on twelve-year-old Marthe Rigault and pointedly asks young people in America if they would be as brave as Marthe was in defending liberty. François's wife, Gaele, played Madame Rigault and Denis Small, the long-time mayor of Graignes and a historian of the village, played the father, Gustave Rigault. The historical recreation garnered significant recognition, including an Emmy Award.¹⁰

Despite these artistic and literary endeavors, the story of Graignes remains generally unknown and incomplete. As Martin Morgan lamented at the end of 2018, "despite my best efforts though,

the story of Graignes has still not reached a broad audience, nor has it been popularized to any meaningful level.”¹¹ A new look at Graignes is justified, because significant new evidence has become available. In the early twenty-first century, historical societies and universities in states such as Minnesota, Tennessee, and Wisconsin began projects to interview aging veterans. In part, these archivists and librarians were reacting to the “greatest generation” phenomenon. Research in the military records of the veterans of Graignes has always been difficult, because a massive fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis in 1973 destroyed 80 percent of individual service records of those who served in the Army. But some records, such as those of Private First-Class (Pfc.) Harold J. Premo, survived replete with burn and water marks.

Properly telling the story of Graignes also highlights developments in scholarship on US foreign relations. Scholars have increasingly employed innovative approaches to international history, such as “decentering” the United States as a foreign-policy actor and analyzing the roles of ordinary people in the making of international history.¹² This study is grounded in documentary evidence not just from the United States but also from France and Germany. In the case of Graignes, non-elite actors, the paratroopers and the villagers, made choices that affected the conduct of US foreign and military policy, the liberation of France, and the defeat of Germany. The women of Graignes were among those who made critical decisions and exercised power. The story of Graignes teaches us that a “local” event can tell us much about “global” history.

A complete understanding of Graignes also demands analysis of the roles and memories of French citizens and German soldiers. French archivists and librarians, such as in the Norman city of Caen, collected the memories of older Normans about D-Day and the subsequent warfare in Normandy. The interviews included testimonies by villagers from Graignes. As historian Mary Louise Roberts demonstrated in *D-Day through French Eyes* (2014), the joy of liberation was always tempered by the reality that nearly 20,000 Normans lost their lives in the fighting in 1944.¹³ After a long period of silence, the French have also been asking hard questions about official and private collaboration with the German occupiers from 1940 to 1944. The long-running television series *Un village français (A French Village)* (2009–2017) explored the compromises that citizens made with the Germans during

the occupation. The seventy-two-part series proved dramatically compelling and drew a large audience in France for seven years. In the twenty-first century, the government has declassified records that revealed painful incidents and uncomfortable secrets about French life under occupation. Ronald C. Rosbottom of Amherst College made good use of occupation records to write *Sudden Courage* (2019), his stirring telling of French adolescent resistance to Nazi tyranny.¹⁴

Probing the actions and rationales of the 17th SS *Panzer Grenadier* Division at Graignes is a scholarly challenge. For seventy-five years, SS officers and their civilian acolytes have been trying to cover up the division's war crimes. Massimiliano Aferio, a prolific Italian chronicler of the Axis powers, goes as far as to assert in his coffee-table-style illustrated history of the 17th SS *Panzer Grenadier* Division that "throughout its history, the division was never involved in any war crimes or in any war crimes against civilians, as witness of its character as a strictly military unit."¹⁵ Aferio and other chroniclers of the division conveniently ignore in their books the assault on Graignes on 11–12 June. But the Germans kept precise, comprehensive records of their military activities. Using German archival sources facilitates an understanding of the course of events in Graignes and further demonstrates how historical actors and their enthusiasts will try to shape an understanding of an atrocious history for future generations.

In preparing this study, the author has had singular access to the military veterans of Graignes. As a budding young historian, I soaked up the conversations that I heard my father, S/Sgt. Rabe, have with other veterans in our neighborhoods in Connecticut. I further listened in to the anecdotes that he and his colleagues told at Eddie Page's reunions. I now realize that some of these tales were about Graignes. I naturally spent most of my time at reunions with the other children. In the past few years, I have renewed my relationship with them and they have provided me with valuable written resources about their fathers. Many of these childhood friends had already traveled to Graignes and met the French heroines of Graignes. As an academic historian, I told myself that I would tell the story of Graignes. But for more than four decades, my scholarship focused on the history of US foreign relations with Latin America. It would have been preferable to conduct in-depth interviews both with the paratroopers and with the villagers, almost all of whom have sadly long since passed.

This study proceeds in a chronological fashion. To provide context, the first three chapters look at the preparation and training of the US paratroopers, the organization of the 17th SS *Panzer Grenadier* Division, and the character of life in France and Graignes under German occupation. In these opening chapters, readers are introduced to the background and lives of individual paratroopers, villagers, and SS officers. The opening section also focuses on the influence of a US military officer who was not in Graignes, Major General James M. Gavin, the Associate Commander of the 82nd Airborne. General Gavin put his imprint, in terms of physical fitness and mental agility, on the men of the Headquarters Company of the 3rd Battalion of the 507th Regiment.

The fourth through seventh chapters detail the intense scenes – the landing, the battle, and the escape from Graignes. These chapters emphasize the interactions between the villagers and the paratroopers and the central roles that the villagers played in the drama. Documentary materials provide insight into the three attacks that German military units launched against Graignes. The story is continued through July 1944. The villagers faced hardship, hunger, and death as refugees. The paratroopers who survived Graignes would spend another month in Normandy and would engage in hard combat. After their failure at Carentan, the SS soldiers who attacked Graignes and executed the wounded would be engaged in costly, futile combat in June and July 1944, trying to forestall the liberation of France.

The final chapter surveys postwar developments. The villagers worked on rebuilding Graignes and establishing their village's honored place in French history. The young US veterans of Graignes returned to America and started creating their civilian lives. Many veterans had, however, suffered grievous wounds, and all had to work through their respective traumas. Four decades would pass before they would return to Graignes, both mentally and physically. The handful of SS soldiers who survived World War II undoubtedly had their physical and psychological issues. But they never had to defend publicly their execution of priests, wounded soldiers, and medical staff in Graignes.