

# A MASTER CLASS IN TIME

by Alice Leader  
Grade 8 teacher

On Sunday, 9 May 2004, three buses were carrying ASL's Grade 8 students to Normandy for the annual trip to the World War II landing beaches. Suddenly, Elise Roth called out, "Hey! Look! Over there is the other bus, only they've aged!"

The bus Elise had seen looked exactly like those carrying the ASL students — only it was full of passengers between 60 and 80 years old. "Seeing the elderly people on that bus got my brain going on how veterans from WWII feel when they look back on memories of the war," wrote her classmate, Gabby Walsh. In particular, Gabby thought again about the interviews the students had conducted two weeks before with local senior citizens who had lived through the war. "The person I was interviewing was Mrs. Mollie Brumby, and she seemed quite calm when speaking about the war ..."

The Social Studies unit on World War II began with the usual reading of a textbook, *History Alive 4*, by Peter Moss, about the 20th Century. This concise paperback covers the main movements and events of that hundred years in just 100 pages, half of which carry excellent charts and graphs. The students loved its brilliant combination of brevity and depth.

We also read a memoir, Donald R. Burgett's *Currahee, a Screaming Eagle at Normandy*, a memoir of this paratrooper's training for and fighting during D-Day and the subsequent week.

Next, we welcomed to School actor-soldiers dressed in period uniforms, who showed and



Learning how it was

explained a WWII soldier's gear. Chip Guarente, a British-American actor, came dressed in the uniform of an American soldier of the IV Corps, the troop that had landed on Omaha beach. Another visitor, Brian Perkins, was a serving UK paratrooper; he came dressed in the uniform of an American paratrooper — the same type worn by Donald Burgett of *Currahee*. Two months later, Mr. Perkins would be among the men who parachuted onto the Normandy beaches during the celebrations to mark D-

Day's 60th anniversary in June.

"They had various knives ... rifles and machine guns, first-aid equipment, personal supplies, gas mask, boots, trench shovel," wrote Michael Phelps, Grade 8. "They explained the use for each piece of equipment, why they needed what they did. ... The actors confided to me that they had had quite a job getting past ASL's security with these weapons. 'Good thing, too,' I thought!"

Had my colleague, Ed Elliott, and I added just these elements to a few lectures about D-Day and its significance in the course of the war, our students would have received a sound, basic unit on World War II and sufficient background for the Normandy trip.

But we were all very fortunate that two other, extraordinary, new elements came along to make this year's WWII studies particularly compelling: Operation Overlord, a US-made research and role-playing simulation game which let the students make their own D-Day invasion plans, and the chance to interview local senior citizens who had lived through the war.

Bringing together old and young is always potentially magical. Doing so on the 60th anniversary of D-Day, and in a political climate in

which the commitment of troops to foreign lands is under intense scrutiny, combined to help make this experience superb.

The visitors were aged from 70 to 102. Some had lived through the Blitz here in London, some were evacuated to the country (including ASL's own security guard, Ian Broomfield). Some had fought on D-Day (like Chip Starr, a former ASL security guard). Others had lived through the war in Europe, like Francette Foss, who taught French in ASL's High School from 1965-90. Jack Black had been a child in the Kindertransport — child Holocaust survivors who were sent, without their parents, out of Austria, Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia to Great Britain.

They were English, Austrian, French and German. They were Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, atheist. They all had memories of and opinions about the events they had experienced. They had lived the century we were studying.

The roots of this oral history project date back to 2001, when three students then in Grade 8 interviewed senior citizens at nearby Greathead Lodge about their wartime experiences. This venture provided the perfect springboard two years later when, with the encouragement of MS principal Veronica McCaffrey, each teaching team sought to develop a curriculum-linked service project.

Donna Hirsh, ASL's service learning coordinator, began to set up the project in September, finding almost 70 willing senior citizens, staying in close contact with them over the intervening months, arranging transport to and from School. Many others also were pivotal in the preparation, including Grade 8 English teachers Susan O'Connell and Kim Zeineddine, and

Jean Hughes, who works with Ms. Hirsh (and is mother of three ASL students).

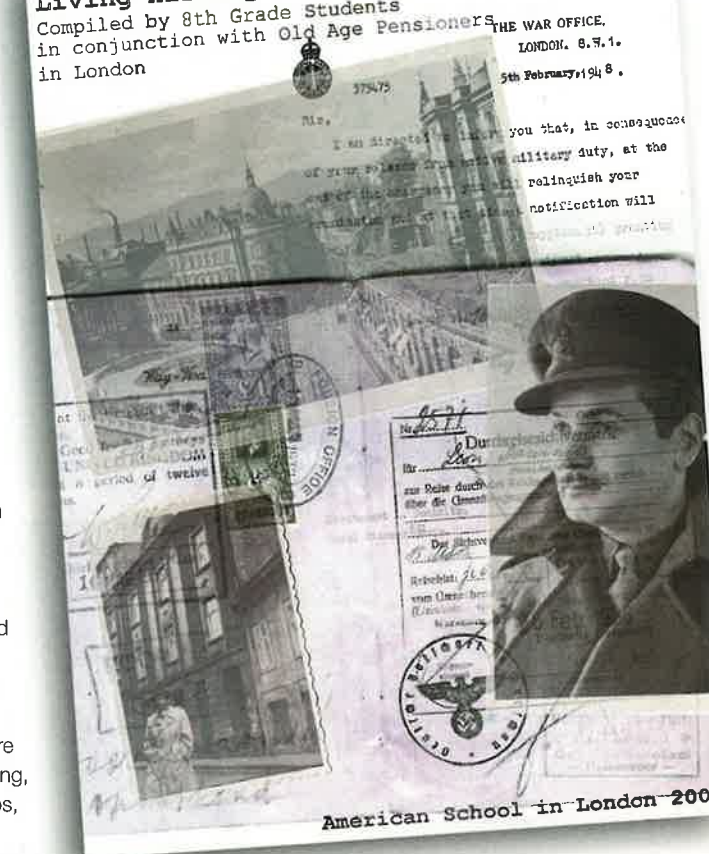
On 29 April, 56 senior citizens arrived at Waverley Place, most walking, some with help, one in a wheelchair. They were dressed up and smiling, carrying family photos, old letters and telegrams, ration books — even a Mickey Mouse gas mask. Among them was Muriel Nabbs, who celebrated her 90th birthday that day at School with 126 students and a grand birthday cake.

Over the preceding weeks, the students had read their history text and been tested on it, read *Currahee* and listened to lectures on The Great War, the buildup to World War II and WWII itself. At the same time, the English teachers taught them how to form their questions and conduct an interview. They organized the students into pairs: Each

had to develop his or her own questions, but one would ask them and the other would take notes. The note-taker wrote up the interview, which was peer-edited by both partners. Ultimately, Ms. Hughes compiled all the interview reports into a book, *Living History* (above). The book also includes excerpts from some of the thank-you notes the students wrote and sent to their interviewees with photographs from the day.

Before the big day, the students' preparation included an assembly on manners, in which we teachers showed them the right — and wrong — ways to greet older people, help them up the stairs when needed, ask them questions, serve them tea. Many of us at ASL live far away from relatives beyond our immediate families and haven't spent much time recently in the company of people two generations older than we

Living History Project  
Compiled by 8th Grade Students  
in conjunction with Old Age Pensioners  
in London



American School in London 2004

"The man I interviewed, Jack Black, was evacuated from Germany at the age of 6 and was adopted by a family in Great Britain. His story was very interesting and really made me think about all of the things that people had to go through during World War II. It really made me respect humans in general and understand their amazing coping abilities." Lizzie Wright, Grade 8



At the American Cemetery, Normandy

are. On the day, the students did us all proud, behaving with the utmost politeness, patience and sensitivity. (The boys even wore ties!)

"I loved talking to Mr. Simon Joseph [age 102] about real-life events that he had lived through — something that I had lost when my great-grandmother died," wrote Zoe Mercer-Golden.

Being with these elderly men and women touched wellsprings of delight in our students, and the actual interviews were fascinating. In several venues throughout the School, earnest — often nervous — students peered intently into lined, thoughtful older faces. The adults were ready and eager to talk of their experiences. They had all lived through WWII — one through WWI as well. The students wanted to know.

As the senior citizens told their stories, sharing personal letters and photo albums, 60-year-old newspapers and medals, the students gradually moved into their lives, if only for a brief visit. Some interviewees had never spoken before of their wartime experiences, not even to their own children. Some gave their mementos — WAC pins, newspapers, posters — to their stunned interviewers to keep.

The conversations varied. Some were halting, some flowed, some were monologues. Some enthralled not only their participants, but also many who had been passing by and stayed to listen. Later, when the last guest had left, the students marveled at what had just transpired, tumbling over each other to relate what they had heard and learned.

It was, in many ways, a master class in time.

To understand how deeply the connections forged that afternoon affected both sides, one need only look at the treasured mementoes passed on to youngsters who'd been strangers just the previous day (and soon to be displayed in a special case at School), or read the thank-you notes and course assessments the students wrote.



"...One man was a soldier under General Montgomery in the North Africa campaign. Another family friend, who lives in the British Midlands, was a rambunctious teenager whose most memorable experiences were of meeting her future husband during the war and of V-E Day, when she partied all night in Piccadilly Circus and slept out under the statue of Eros!"

Arianna Pittman, Grade 8

Beyond the strategic planning, the whole series of world-shaking events became much more real to these students who were born some 45 years after they took place — the tragedies and heroism on Omaha Beach, the glorious triumph at Utah Beach, the brilliance of the attacks on Sword, Juno and Gold beaches. Standing on Normandy's beaches and walking through its cemeteries taught unparalleled lessons in the forces of human determination, sense of responsibility, and courage.

Back home, on 6 June, many of the students watched the D-Day 60th anniversary events on TV and related to the veterans, the odds, the goals, the achievements and the human cost of that day that changed the course of history.

"It feels as if for those five days I was actually in WWII," wrote Matt Young. "I was actually in the battlefields hearing instant updates of how different missions were carried out and how successful they were. It has left a lasting impression on me: how huge a piece of history WWII was, and how

deeply it has affected everyone and everything I know, even if I don't always notice it. So many people died, so many great men died, it's a wonder that people aren't still constantly talking about it. ... Going to Normandy and hearing the things that I have, has permanently changed my view on history."

"If we had only had a textbook to work from, learning about World War II would not have been at all interesting to me, and I wouldn't have understood it the way in which I do now," wrote Francie Alexandre.

Last year, as ASL's Grade 8 students studied World War II, they saw themselves as children in the 1940s, as grandparents in 2004, as senior citizens in 2070. They slipped into other identities and understood — vaguely, imperfectly, but empathetically — what they might have faced had they been born in another time.

I wonder how many Grade 8 students and teachers elsewhere could say the same.



Meeting a war hero

"It really brought the history alive for me," wrote Stewart Long.

"Reading and studying about WWII is not enough because we do not find out about emotions or feelings," wrote Chris Simundson.

"I especially enjoyed the part when you told us how Hitler gave a talk in your classroom ....," wrote Sahim Naqvi.

## Taking command

As they had been preparing for their interviews, the students were also working on the simulation game Operation Overlord, doing their own "planning" for the D-Day invasion.

Over the course of several weeks, they worked in groups of four, with one student each as Location Commander, Strategy Commander, Weather Commander and Coordinating Commander. Each commander had "authentic documents" exclusive to his or her post. Thus, each group's final plan was

based upon four individual sets of recommendations.

With the academic groundwork laid, draft invasion plans in hand, and new-found friends' memories in head and heart, we headed across the Channel.

In London the students had already begun to appreciate the dizzying complexity of D-Day planning. Once in Normandy, they realized much more acutely the effect of those June 1944 storms, and how the power of unforeseen forces can derail even the best in human planning. Each student stayed in role, daily recording observations that might fundamentally change his or her invasion recommendations. Given ASL's and London's proximity to places where the battles of WWII actually took place, we were able to take the Operation Overlord game a huge step further than its Californian author ever envisioned. In Normandy, we saw for ourselves the five beaches, the villages, the rivers and canals.



**In their notes and assessments, the students related what they learned in Normandy:**

"Today we were told that the weather was very similar to how it was on D-Day. This gave me a sense of exactly what the soldiers went through during battle. It was fairly cold and rainy, pretty rough conditions. We were taught that, in order to be successful with paratroopers, it was vital to have a full moon. This might involve some changes in our plan. Paratroopers are a key part of the attack but because it is mandatory to have a full moon, it is also mandatory to have floating tanks, considering it is a beach attack."

Abigail Hollar

"When coming across the Channel, it would be more intelligent for us to use larger, more heavy boats. The weather is unpredictable and could go to a storm at any moment. ... The coast is perfect for invasion. Sandy and not too steep, it will be perfect for infantry and tank units."

Matt Young

"Being able to go and stand on the exact places that they fought in 1944 and being able to see all the artifacts that have been found from the war is one of the most amazing things that I've seen in my life."

Margot Knight

"Today, I noticed another thing that should have been more clearly in my invasion plan. With the invention of the modified tanks with the duplex drive, we should have included that we want to land in low-tide to avoid the slim possibility of having one of the special landing craft hit one of the mined obstacles. ...

"After this trip to Normandy and hearing about the Canadian armed forces that gave their life at Juno Beach and elsewhere along the continent, I feel a tremendous sense of national pride. Ever since attending ASL and, more particularly after September 11th, I have begun to feel increasingly American. However, after visiting the Allied landing beaches, and, more specially, Juno Beach, I came to realize a great sense of national pride and thus after this trip I am starting to feel more and more Canadian. ... [In] Normandy I felt a surprising connection and discovery of my true cultural identity."

Graham Robertson