"Canadians Landing at Juno Beach, D-Day," a painting by P.E.I. Artist John Bradford MacCallum

72 years ago today, on June 6, 1944, 160,000 troops boarded landing crafts in the wee morning hours, traveled across the English Channel and landed in Normandy France. These 160,000 troops came from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and some smaller contributing countries such as France and Australia. They took part is what is known as the largest amphibious operation of the Second World War, "D-Day," or Operation Overlord.

The painting behind me depicts the Canadians landing at Juno Beach, which was a code name given to one of five Allied beaches. The code names where simply to designate specific areas of the coastline in Normandy, France, where the Allies were to land, try to avoid some confusion between the troops. The Canadians landed at Juno Beach. The Americans had two designated beaches of Omaha and Utah and the English, the British (United Kingdome) had two designated beaches of Sward and Gold.

The Canadian landing at Juno beach saw roughly 15,000 troops taking part, Canadian troops accompanied as well by tanks, supporting aircraft and a navel bombardment. So just before the Allied troops were to land at their designated beaches, navel guns opened fire on designated targets on the French coastline and in behind the French coastlines. The idea was to soften up the German positions who had been there for the last four years in order to facilitate the Allied landing on those beaches.

So, the Canadians landed at Juno Beach and Juno Beach itself was divided into a couple of sectors so each landing regiment or battalion knew exactly where they were supposed to go. Planning started for Operation Overlord back in 1943 and it involved the Dieppe Raid of August, 1943 which was just kind of a test to see how such a large and amphibious landing could go. In any case, so when the Canadians landed at Juno Beach, each section or company of men knew exactly where they were supposed to go. The landing crafts which were flat bottom ships carrying troops into the beaches, knew exactly where they were to go as well. What the planners did is they talked to the British citizens and any French and any other country visitors that were in the United Kingdom at that time, asking them to send them their personal postcards and pictures of the French coastline. The idea was to build an image of the French coastline where the Allies were supposed to land and designate specific buildings along that coastline that the landing craft sailors could steer towards specifically.

In the painting behind me, what you see is a nice big house and I'm going to move to the painting. So, the house of the top center of the image is what is known today as Canada House, if you will and today it is the official museum for the Queen's Own Riffles of Canada and they were one of the regiments that actually landed in this very section of Juno Beach and this is where within the first few minutes of the landing craft door coming down and the soldiers coming down the ramp, the Queen's Own Riffles lost almost 100 soldiers within the just very first few minutes. This is one of the most heavily defended areas where the Canadians landed at Juno Beach.

A neat little thing and I've been doing these tours for a number of years and talking about this painting for a number of years and I just happened to notice it today, sitting here is up in the far right hand corner of the painting is a machine gun nest and if I remember correctly it's one of three German machine gun nests which had direct line of sight right along the front of the beach. So, when the soldiers of Queen's Own Riffles landed on Juno Beach these machine gun nests opened fire, killing or causing those 100 causality's within just a few minutes.

There are a couple of neat stories about Canada House. Where around 2009 there was a memorial or anniversary taking place of the D-Day landings and some Queen's Own Riffles Veterans of D-Day went to the museum and in the museum registry they wrote in "Nice to see the house, so sorry about the grenades we threw in your cellar." So, the house itself had to be cleared of German snippers positioned on the top floor and a machine gun nest on the lower ground floor.

The great thing about this painting is it depicts what D-Day would have been like for the Canadians when they landed at Bernières-sur-Mer this little village. In the background here you can see what is known as an anti-tank ditch and it was a sloped wall and it basically could not, did not allow tanks to come up the beach and go right over the wall. Along the top of that sloped wall was barbed wire which would impede the advance of the infantry. A little further up the beach you can see some of the German defenses. An important thing to note is that the Germans had had control of France since 1939 -1940 ah, so in those four years leading up to D-day they were able to spend four years of building defenses. Those included huge cast mats or concrete bunkers filled with large guns that could hit ships way out in the English Channel, you had mines spread-out throughout the sand you had machine gun nests with interlocking arches of fire all along D-Day beaches and you had these obstacles right in the water. And they came in various shapes and sizes some were I can't remember the exact name but basically it was metal crosses and they would be interlocked and you also had simple telephone poles sitting in the water with mines sitting on top. The idea being, that any landing craft trying to land on D-day would hit those mines on top of those obstacles and be blown up in the water.

Canadians on D-Day, we suffered about 1000 casualties, 359 confirmed killed on D-Day. Some historians will say that the Allies did not succeed in meeting their objectives on D-Day. Which is true, but what is important to note is the tenacity of the German defenses along D-Day, along the beaches on D-Day and the fact that the Canadians advanced further than any of the allied forces on D-Day. They reached almost their final objective but had to pull back in the face of German tank units moving in to counter attack. So the French coastline today has changed a lot of those German anti-tank defenses, some of the German bunkers are no longer there but you can still visit a large portion of the defenses that are still there and preserved so that we then there for remember and of *course La Maison des Canadiens de Bernières-sur-Mer.*