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Make Your Community Band's International Trip One that "Matters" And Reap the Benefits

City of Fairfax Band Helps Commemorate D-Day in France

~ Dan Merriman, City of Fairfax Band - Trombone

Bonjour, d'autres musiciens! (Hello, fellow musicians!)

Going on an international trip can yield a community band lots of fun for players and many potential benefits for the organization. But to get the most from such a trip, make it one that matters. Just ask the City of Fairfax Band (CFB) about its June 1-8, 2017 trip to France.

France may be a common overseas destination for bands, but somewhat uncommon was the CFB's motivation behind its France trip. It wasn't an all-pleasure excursion sprinkled with some concerts. Instead, the northern Virginians focused on paying tribute to the Americans who fell during and after D-Day (June 6, 1944).

The CFB provided music for commemoration ceremonies at two of the largest U.S. military cemeteries in northern France: the Brittany American Cemetery and Memorial, situated near the village of Saint James, and the Normandy American Cemetery, located just above Omaha Beach at Colleville-sur-Mer. The thousands of men buried at those sites remain on duty every day – reminding the world of the cost of war.



In Sainte-Mère-Église, France, the City of Fairfax Band played a D-Day themed concert in the town square and marched a packed parade route. Photo by Dan Merriman

The band also performed in the town of Sainte-Mère-Église where U.S. paratroopers night-dropped in and around the town hours before the beach landings. Some were dropped off target and landed in the middle of town, suffering major casualties.

D-Day saw history's largest amphibious military landing. The Normandy invasion on France's northern coast launched the Anglo-American campaign to liberate France from Nazi-German occupation. The European war ended less than 12 months later due to

Anglo-American forces fighting against the Nazis' west flank and Russian forces advancing from the east.

What Meant the Most

While they enjoyed Normandy and Paris, band members said that honoring the D-Day and Brittany campaigns' fallen heroes definitely meant the most.

Clarinetist Jack Aubert said the American Cemetery at Omaha Beach marked his memory well. "I'm usually kind of flippant about stuff. I have sort of a nonchalant attitude. But I really couldn't maintain that when I looked at all the crosses and when I thought about all the young men that were killed during the invasion. It was really quite moving. Even for me."

Aubert's home group is the Main Street Community Band (MSCB), which is part of the City of Fairfax Band Association. A number of MSCB members joined CFB players to make up the France ensemble.

In Sainte-Mère-Église, CFB flutist Jeanne Crowley remarked on the town's celebratory spirit. Perhaps it was reminiscent of the mood when U.S. troops liberated the town 73 years ago. "There was so much joy and real energy and happiness in all of the people cheering like it was back in 1944," she said. CFB Clarinetist Inge Pisano sensed a deep underlying appreciation among townspeople. She remembers making eye contact with a woman in the crowd in her 80s. "In her eyes were 'thank you' and in my eyes were 'you're welcome.' We were friends without saying a word."

The "Taps" Story

Main events weren't the only deeply felt moments. At the Normandy American Cemetery, individual tributes were paid to three interred Virginians. Two were from the then-town of Fairfax and the third had attended Virginia Tech.

The two Fairfax soldiers were Staff Sgt. Maurice M. Williams and Pfc. George T. Sutphin. Fairfax Mayor David Meyer led a remembrance at each resting place and CFB principal trumpet Terry Bradley performed "Taps." Some soil brought from Fairfax was left at each site. "Since they couldn't come home, we brought a little bit of home to their gravesite," Meyer said.



Principal trumpet Col. Terry Bradley (ret.) renders honors to the fallen at the Brittany American Cemetery and Memorial near Saint James, France. Photo by Jackie Bradley (this is also the cover photo)



The City of Fairfax Band prepares to honor the fallen at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial just above Omaha Beach in France. Photo credit: Curt Nette

Also honored was posthumous Medal of Honor recipient 1st Lt. Jimmie W. Monteith, Jr. At the Virginian's grave three Virginia Tech alumni played an echo version of "Taps": CFB trumpeters John Cox, Glenn Maravetz, and Curt Nette. "I thought it would be appropriate if we went down there and played taps for a fellow Hokie," Maravetz said. *(See video on the City of Fairfax Band's Facebook page.)*

"Everyone stops and listens. It echoes all over the shoreline," Maravetz added. Afterwards, two of the trumpeters independently encountered several clusters of people at other gravesites who spontaneously asked for "Taps." It moved some to tears. Among them was a man in his 90s – old enough to have served with the fallen.

An International Trip Provides Long-term Benefits Potential

The impact of such a trip – one that "matters" – is far reaching, long term, and full magnitude. "The experience has made us stronger musically, socially and organizationally," said City of Fairfax Band Association Music Director Robert Pouliot. "The lessons we learned from planning and fundraising for the trip are invaluable. And the renewed relations with city officials, businesses and the community at large will pay off in the long run."

For one thing, the France trip has greatly bolstered the band's online presence. On social media, the CFBA Facebook page had 744 likes at most before the trip. But during the trip there was a blast e-mail pitch, individual Facebook posts/shares by band members, and daily

Some Travel Tips/Lessons Learned

Here are travel tips/lessons learned from the City of Fairfax Band after its trip to France:

- Be sure the tour company understands the needs and interests of your adult group. They differ from agile and quickly bored band kids. That includes planning plenty of sightseeing time. Consider adding a day or two to the school-group trip model.
- Work directly with the airline, not the tour company, on handling large and/or heavy instruments. "On the day you show up at the ticket desk or baggage drop it's all up to what the carrier thinks the rule is, or even what kind of mood the baggage or gate clerks are in that day," said Pouliot.
- Minimize bus riding time by choosing within-budget hotels that are close in.
- Make sure your tour guides speak the local language and are current on the various venues.

... Fairfax Band in Paris

video updates from France posted on the CFBA Facebook page. The outreach expanded to more than 9,600 people. On the website (www.fairfaxband.org), traffic during the pre-trip runup hovered around 1,000 monthly visitors. During and after the trip that number more than doubled.

Longer-developing benefits expected to occur during the CFB's 2017-2018 season include:

- More attendees, donors, and advertisers
- Expanded local media interest and coverage
- Strengthened morale, commitment, and retention among the musicians
- Improved recruitment of new players in numbers and playing quality
- Increased camaraderie, cohesion, and pride amongst CFBA musical units
- A better sounding ensemble



Ashley Salo (left) and Angela Galper at the Sainte-Mère-Église, France town square. The white parachute on the church steeple is a replica of one from which a U.S. Soldier had to dangle during the D-Day pre-dawn while a firefight raged below. Photo credit: Yvonne Wilson

German guns believed to be there. Band members also toured the famous Mont Saint-Michel abbey.

In Paris, band members enjoyed the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, Notre Dame cathedral, and other attractions. At Notre Dame, some band members were in the area when police took down a hammer-wielding and knives-carrying attacker. The news-making incident also af-

But be Sure to Have Fun

Make no mistake. The France trip was 51 percent serious but also 49 percent fun. Having both elements made for a doubly interesting, exciting, and memorable experience. In Normandy, the sights included the Arromanches-les-Bains landing area where prefabricated artificial harbor structures remain. Another location was the Pointe du Hoc site made famous in books and movies. U.S. Rangers rope-climbed the cliff under heavy fire to take out large



The ceremony to honor the fallen is about to begin at the Normandy American Cemetery, located just above Omaha Beach. Providing music were the City of Fairfax Band, the young voices of Salt Lake City's One Voice choir, and the Belaire High School marching band from Baton Rouge, LA. Photo credit: Brian Combs

fected other band members inside or in line at the Musée d'Orsay, which was evacuated.

Regrets? None!

Nobody interviewed regretted the trip. Almost all said they'd do it again. But views differ on when to go next. Pouliot cautions band leaders to go slow. "Planning a special event like this, whether a trip or some other kind of out-of-the-ordinary experience, for your group can have a tremendous impact on the strength of your organization. [But] this is not something I would recommend any group do every year, maybe not even every two years."

However, others are ready to travel immediately. Among them is CFBA president and oboe player Libby Fike. "Absolutely! Let me grab my passport and let's go right now! I'll call in sick to work."

(Learn more about the City of Fairfax Band Association at www.fairfaxband.org. The association's Facebook page is at: www.facebook.com/FairfaxBand. The 2017-2018 season's first concert is October 28)



In Paris, the City of Fairfax Band gave a concert at the Jardin d'Acclimatation, a large complex that includes a children's amusement park, a zoo, a science museum, an art museum, and other attractions. Photo credit: Brian Combs