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Description

On the 60th anniversary of D-Day, European leaders and President George W. Bush gather in France to honor the soldiers who liberated Europe from the Nazis. These same European nations are today divided over the war in Iraq.

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D-Day -- 60th Anniversary Ceremonies

TOM BROKAW, anchor:

Of course, D-Day was not just about the Americans, and not just about the French, there were so many other participants as well. For the news of the day, on this 60th anniversary of the greatest military invasion in history, here’s NBC’s Jim Maceda.

JIM MACEDA reporting:

Across Normandy, it was the sights and sounds of commemoration. D-Day, plus 60 years, and veterans who once invaded the beaches to defeat Hitler, today moved, some with help, in parade march, applauded by a dozen world leaders, 14 veterans receiving France’s highest medal of honor. The main ceremony in Arromanches, one of several events meant to pay homage to D-Day’s heroes and give a boost to relations between the U.S. and it’s European allies, strained by differences over the war in Iraq.

President GEORGE W. BUSH: France was America’s first friend in the world.

MACEDA: Earlier, President Bush emphasized the positive, speaking alongside French President Jacques Chirac to thousands of veterans and their families at the American military cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach.

President BUSH: You will be honored ever and always by the country you served and by the nations you freed.

MACEDA: It was here on June 6, 1944 that U.S. forces suffered their heaviest casualties of the Normandy invasion. 2,500 soldiers killed in less than two hours. Chirac said all French owe America a debt of thanks. It was a day of firsts, Vladimir Putin, the first Russian leader, and Gerhard Schroeder, the first German Chancellor to join in any D-Day celebrations, but most likely the last time that D-Day will be marked with such pomp and glory. Over a thousand World War II veterans are dying every day. It’s perhaps why so many of the veterans say they feel a special emotion this D-Day, as they look around for the graves of buddies who died almost as boys. Bill Sullivan was an 82nd airborne paratrooper who jumped and survived on D-Day. It was a struggle, but he found the grave of his commander, dead at 19.
BILL SULLIVAN: They called him the milk bar commando. He didn’t drink, smoke, use bad language, didn’t have any, I mean the guy was always smiling.
MACEDA: And as some relived D-Day memories, others wondered if all the good will between old allies would last. Jim Maceda, NBC News, Normandy.
BROKAW: And of course, the American cemetery behind me here in Normandy, is not just about anniversaries, it’s a permanent reminder of all the sacrifices 60 years ago.