

**Ted Barris –  
Tribute to Garth Webb  
May 12, 2012**

Ted Barris is a Canadian writer and broadcaster, whose books include Juno: Canadians at D-Day June 6, 1944 and Victory at Vimy: Canada Comes of Age, April 9–12, 1917.

On May 12, 2012, he presented the following tribute at Garth Webb's funeral in Burlington, Ontario, and he has kindly given permission for it to be posted here:

"As many of you know I've been a journalist and broadcaster for many years. I've learned to fear certain things – no research, guests who don't show up, and kids scared of microphones... But Garth Webb put the fear of God in me the first time I interviewed him, when – just before we turned the mikes on – he said: "You know, I make a lousy interview."

It was one Saturday morning back in the late 1990s. I was filling in as substitute host of the CBC radio program "Fresh Air." It was late in the program. In he lumbered, brief case under his arm... and giving me a handshake as big as a bear's.

He sat in the guest's chair and repeated those ominous five words: "I make a lousy interview."

Moments later – on the air – we began our conversation about this incredible plan of his – to build a museum in France to commemorate the service of all Canadians during the Second World War. He called it the "Canada Normandy Project."

His premise was not new. But his optimism was.

"Tens of thousands of tourists visit Normandy and the invasion coast each year," he said. "But Canada's contribution to the D-Day landings and the liberation of Europe are largely ignored."

He was right. Aside from the surviving towns themselves... some empty beaches... a few tired-looking markers, and a few streets named in honour of the liberating Canadians... There was no evidence on Juno Beach that on a grey June morning in 1944... 15,000 Canadians had stormed the place – on air, sea and land – and put the first irreversible dent into Hitler's Fortress Europe...

Garth's Canada Normandy Project was born in that moment.

You'll remember Garth first proposed that his fledgling organization might purchase a building in Bernières-sur-Mer adjacent to the famous "house on the beach" depicted in all those D-Day stills and movies. Garth told me and my radio audience the site would include a café, a terrace, and an interpretive centre. Inside that facility, visitors would encounter artifacts borrowed from the Canadian War Museum as well as newsreel footage, photographs, audio recordings and touch-screen computer terminals telling Canadian veterans' stories from D-Day to the Battle of the Atlantic to the Italian campaign.

I told him I could picture the site perfectly. What I said I couldn't picture, were the millions of dollars it might require to actually finance the project.

"Oh, it's going to happen," Garth said.

"How much have you raised so far?" I asked.

"We expect the Canadian and provincial governments, corporations, and the Canadian public will be very interested in donating to this cause," he said.

"If you say so..." I said... and I thought, "what a pipe dream."

He smiled, as if to say, "Just watch me."

The next time I met Garth... it was a couple of years later. He had invited me to a luncheon at The Queen's Own Rifles Officers' Mess inside the Moss Park Armoury.

I was merely there to observe the latest meeting to see how things were coming along and then write a story about it. I learned at the luncheon that Webb's "pipe dream" had evolved into something quite tangible. The enterprise had a board of directors, a critical path, a budget, a design, and a new name, the "Juno Beach Centre."...

Garth had gathered designers, engineers, businesspeople and a band of prominent veterans around him. This was no longer a pipe dream. The JCB had a shape, a heart and a soul – **Garth's!**

Not surprisingly, I got caught up in his vision and optimism. I offered whatever public relations skills I thought might help. Not long after I joined the committee, Garth and his team landed Wal-Mart Canada as a major sponsor... In addition to the money they agreed to donate, Wal-Mart asked me to interview D-Day veterans on camera for the Centre. We recorded a number of sessions, among the most interesting, it turned out, was my interview with Garth.

Once again, just before we began to speak on camera, he repeated those ominous five words: "I make a lousy interview."

By now, I was learning the truth was just the opposite... I had learned about his dedication to a dream, his way of instilling passion in others and – most of all – his "damn the torpedoes" attitude when it came to causes he believed in.

Of course, as with all those Wal-Mart interviews, eventually I came to his account of the crossing on D-Day morning... he commanding the crew of a self-propelled Priest with the 14<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment of the Royal Canadian Artillery.

Naturally, I asked him about the fear and anticipation the men felt during the crossing, not to mention the seasickness. Every channel swell and trough, every hour and minute of waiting, and every imagined enemy ship or plane played on their fears, I thought.

Not Garth Webb. When he wasn't studying the firing plan for the morning landing, he was checking and rechecking the 105, and handing out anti-nausea pills for his seasick crew members.

"Guys that waited all night wondering, 'Am I going to live through tomorrow?' They had more concern and fear than I did. I was too busy... The same when we landed. Everybody talks about all these casualties on the beach and the confusion. I looked where I was going and walked right through it. I was too busy to stand around counting..."

Garth insisted that his D-Day story was almost pedestrian. Again, he repeated, "It's not great interview material."

But then our conversation led to events up from the beach, beyond Bernières-sur-Mer, where in the early afternoon his squadron took several direct hits from a hidden German 88mm gun. In a matter of minutes guns and artillery crew were gone.

"The 88 blew up three of our guns, and killed all the crew on two of them," Garth said. "This was the first day of the invasion. Just two and a half hours ashore...and we saw a lot of people killed right in front of us."

Garth remembered every one of those men lost on D-Day – Sciberas, Hooton, Goff, Massey, Clavelle and Dupuis... But, he added, none of the remaining artillery crew could stop, even for a second... The order was to keep moving and gain as much ground as possible...

Again, he said he was too busy to stop and reflect...

In our on-camera interview, I suggested to Garth that maybe his recollection of staying busy during the night time crossing of the channel... then ignoring the carnage on the D-Day beach... might have been a defence mechanism (staying focused on the task at hand, suppressing any emotion he might have felt). Then, all these years later, he had learned to deflect any interest by saying repeatedly: "I make a lousy interview."

I suggested maybe his selective memory had helped him get the job done... and had helped him block out the loss of his fellow gunners on D-Day afternoon.

"I don't know what I blocked out," he admitted to me. "Everybody knew some of us would get killed. But we didn't ever worry about it," he said.

When Garth opened up his Juno Beach Centre on June 6, 2003, he reflected on his D-Day experience this way:

"It was like the Grey Cup and the Stanley Cup and the World Series all played on the same day... and I'm not only there, but I'm playing!" he said.

I wasn't always big supporter of veterans' issues. I wasn't originally a big fundraiser for vets. I never considered myself an advocate for veterans' causes... Then, I met Garth Webb... and because he was such "a lousy interview"... he made me all of those things – a supporter, an awareness raiser, an advocate.

If I'm any good at any of those things...

I have Garth Webb to thank.