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Welsh soldier a part of French history

BY AUBREY BROUSSARD

Betty Demarest Spell said her father never knew his brother died a hero in France during World War II.

Spell and her brother Randy Demarest, both of Welsh, said their father's youngest brother was killed long before they were born.

"My daddy, George, never knew how his brother Tousin Demarest died in France, or the details surrounding his death," said Spell. "We never had his body sent back and just didn't even know what happened."

On August 16, 1944, Tousin, a private in the 5th Armored Division of the U.S. Army and eventually a Purple Heart recipient, was

only 23 when he and nine other American soldiers were killed while liberating the French town of Dreux from German invasion. Dreux is a town located in the southern portion of the region of Normandy in northern France, with a population of approximately 28,000 people.

"In the summer of 2013, Paul Guillory, a family friend, went over there and found where he was buried," said Spell. "He sketched a picture of my Uncle Tousin's name from his grave and brought it back. My brother told my daddy about it about a week

before he died. That was the time our dad learned any details about his brother's death, he was so overwhelmed, tears streamed down his face. However, he was never actually to see it because he passed away before we could show him."

Spell's father passed away in August 2013. The following summer, Spell's son traveled to France on vacation and found his uncle's grave.

"My brother told my daddy about it about a week before he died. That was the last time our dad learned of any details about his brother's death and he was so overwhelmed, tears streamed down his face."

- BETTY DEMAREST SPELL





ABOVE: Betty Demarest spell holding a photo of her late uncle, Tazsin Demarest.



LEFT: The monument in France commemorating the 10 fallen American soldiers who liberated the town.

BELOW: Refurbished military vehicles line up for the annual parade celebrating the revolution of the French town.



brother Kandy received a letter from the president of a French organization called Association Française des Collectionneurs de Véhicules Militaires (AFCVM), or the French Association of Collectors of Military Vehicles, in Dreux," said Spell. "The organization was researching the 10 American soldiers who were killed liberating their town in 1944. Originally, all they knew was that they were members of the 5th Armored Division and didn't even know their names. They began doing research, and about two years ago were able to begin finding out their identities and locating some of their families. They collected biographies and photos of each soldier, and one member of the group compiled this information, along with the historical documentation of the attack, in a book."

In their research, the organization came across George Demarest's name and old address, which is how they located Spell and her brother.

"They were traveling in tanks and were ambushed," explained Spell of her uncle's demise. "The first three soldiers were killed when they went through in a tank. The second set of seven came through in another tank, and they were killed in a second ambush. My uncle was in the second set."

Spell said the organization wanted to hold a celebration in Dreux honoring the 10 American soldiers.

"They tried to hold the ceremony in the summer of 2016 and invited us then, but were unable to contact more of the American families," she explained. "We were also unable to go at that time, as my mother was dying."

Celebration plans were postponed but the president of the organization, Michel Argence, and Spell's son kept in touch.

"They decided to have it this year on August 16, to honor those Americans who lost their lives for their freedom 73 years ago," said Spell. "This time, we were able to

our entire trip. All we had was for our plane tickets."

Two family members of the other fallen soldier also in attendance, as well as the son of Lt. Sam Isaacs of the 5th Armored Division.

"Mr. Isaacs was the lieutenant of the 5th Armored Division these were his men," said Spell. "He had been to Dreux in 1944 and 1994 before his passing in 1998. Since his second visit in 1994, a tribute was paid to him every year, and his family regularly travel to Dreux for the anniversary of the town's liberation."

Spell said during her visit to the town scheduled two ceremonies in honor of the fallen soldiers. One was presenting a monument listing the soldiers, and the second was a ceremony honoring the memory of the soldiers, along with the parade of refurbished U.S. military vehicles through town.

Although she understood the importance of the event and honored at the invitation, Spell was unprepared for the warm welcome her family received when they arrived.

"Everywhere you go through this entire town, there are monuments to America these American soldiers," said Spell. "You just can't imagine how grateful they were to America. Because of these men, this town is free, and the people there never forgotten about them."

Celebrations began on Wednesday, August 16, and continued through that Saturday. On Wednesday morning, festivities began when the parade line of military vehicles and guests rode with town dignitaries on refurbished military vehicles.

"The organization restored these vehicles and keep them in a warehouse," she said. "I rode in the amphibian with the mayor, and the lieutenant's son rode on the inside with the mayor."

After the parade, the family went to the Dreux City Hall for another celebration and ceremony.

"They unveiled the monument they made that featuring the names of the 10 soldiers," said Spell. "They did some salutes and called out their names, then played 'Amazing Grace' on the bagpipes. It was so emotional. Everyone was choking up and crying."

They were later taken to the site of the soldiers' ambush.

"There was a little old man there who said he would be 90 the following month," Spell said. "He said he was just 17 when he saw the soldiers pass down that road. He said he also saw a French woman praying for them as they headed to their unknown deaths. He was crying as he told us about it, and kept saying because of these American soldiers, they were free. This was so important to them."

Spell said the entire memorial was not only an emotional experience for her and her family, but for every American and Frenchman involved.

"One of the men with the family we were staying with said he

was six years old during the war," she said. "He said he remembered an American soldier shook his hand and gave him his first piece of gum. That made such an impact on him. He never forgot it."

The Demarest family visited several historical military sites, including a museum in Dreux, which featured an extensive historical account of the war, as well as the role the American soldiers played in the town's liberation. In the museum, the book filled with biographies of all the soldiers was also on display, the largest of which features her uncle.

Spell said the author of the book was also in their group, and he gave her, her son and her brother each one copy, as well as a copy to donate to the Friends of the Welsh Museum.

"We are an important part of their history," said Spell. "Not just these men, but for us here in Welsh, as well."

The group made its way to the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial located in Colleville-sur-Mer, Normandy

France, to see the 9,387 graves of the American soldiers buried there.

"My dad also had a cousin killed in World War II," said Spell. "I asked Michel (AFCVM president) if he knew of a Sam Monceaux. He said he didn't, but we could look it up."

Monceaux was also private in the U.S. Army and a member of the 230th Field Artillery Battalion, 30th Infantry Division when he was killed in France. Spell's son Googled the information on Monceaux and located his grave.

"As it turned out, he was buried just a few rows away from where we were standing," she said. "Although discovering and visiting his grave wasn't originally part of the trip, it was a pleasant and unexpected surprise, as well. This was a special day for our family."

They also traveled to the Brittany American Cemetery and Memorial, located in Saint-James, Normandy, France near the northeastern edge of Brittany. There lie the graves of 4,410 American sol-

diers killed in Europe.

"That's where my uncle was buried," said Spell. "They would take sand from Omaha Beach and rub it on his name on the monument, causing it to highlight in a golden glow. They then placed a small American Flag and a small French Flag in the ground in front of the monument, and we had a moment of silence."

Afterwards, Spell said their hosts removed the flags and gave them to her and her brother.

Spell said although she never knew her uncle, this experience has given her a deeper connection to him.

"I've always had pictures of him, but I feel like I know him better, now," she said. "This experience was so emotional, but it has given my family such a deep sense of closure. My daddy was only 26 when his brother died, and he never knew what happened. He passed away before he could ever find out, and I wish my he could have been a part of all of this."

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