

Remembering the glory of their spirit

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Each day of the school year I teach French at Baker High School. I speak in French; I teach about the French language, and about francophone culture, history, literature, politics, geography, music, and food. At home, my family speaks French and English and each one of us has two passports: one from the United States and one from France. However one day of the year, things are different. That day is June 6: D-Day. On that day, I am not a French teacher; I am the American daughter of a World War Two Veteran. On that day, I show my students a video that one of my students filmed at the Normandy invasion beaches, and we listen to a French song expressing France's gratitude for the sacrifices of the 10,000 American soldiers who crossed the ocean and did not come home.

My father was a hero, like each and every one of the members of the armed forces. He was a navigator in the Army Air Corps, until his plane crashed. He spent well over a year in the hospital, and though he would have loved to make the military his career, he was forced to retire. For the rest of his life, he was crippled by his injuries. Strangely, his children, my brother and I, never noticed it. Despite having fused ankles and wrists from rheumatoid arthritis, taking massive doses of medication that ended his life far too early, walking with a severe limp, and tiring easily, he went to work every day and took care of the yard and our house. Not only did he not complain, he often spoke of his love of the United States and the military. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Every other year for the past twenty years, my husband and I taken a group of my students to France. We get off the plane, board a bus, and head – for Normandy. Somehow, on that day, my students – most of whom have never left the United States, learn what it means to be an American, learn what it means to serve your country. I had always packed American flags for the students to place at a grave of their choosing in the American Cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, overlooking Omaha Beach. In 2003, I let the teachers in my school know what I was doing, and several joined my students in writing messages of gratitude which we attached to the flags. Two months later, Heidi Lloyd, a colleague of mine, received a letter from a man in Australia. Her message had been placed at his grandfather's grave, and he wrote to thank her. Each trip, we tried to bring more flags, opening this project to the members of the Baldwinville community. Each time, we receive messages – now emails, from people visiting the cemetery who were so touched by the sentiments expressed in the messages. The students themselves are often moved to tears as they choose graves to honor: a soldier sharing their name, a soldier from their birth state, a soldier whose name is known but to God. The inscription inside the chapel says it all: *Think not only of their passing. Remember the glory of their spirit.* For the past three trips, we have held our own ceremony at one grave in particular: that of Albert Cassidy, a close friend of the grandfather of five Baker sisters. His message is always simple: *Forever Friends.* This past April, we packed 500 flags and laminated messages. At the end of our visit, as we met to board the bus, we turned around and took

one last look at the cemetery; our flags were on one of twenty graves – they were everywhere! And yet, we all had one thought: "we can do better". It was on that day that I knew that we would be going back with twice as many flags and messages, a goal of 1000.

And so, we have begun collecting our messages for the cost of the flag: \$1. We sold them in class, in French Club, and at lunches during the week of Veterans' Day, November 11. We sold them at the annual Craft Fair at Baker. Thanks to the efforts of the chairman, Rona Rich, every crafter received an email informing them of our project. The 108 members of the Mattydale Women's Auxiliary of the VFW each bought a message. One crafter made a substantial contribution in memory of a relative. Thanks to their generosity, we now have 400 flags. Though we are not there yet, we are overjoyed by the generosity of all who have supported us. Each dollar means another flag, another message that these young men who sacrificed their future for a just cause have not been forgotten. The message form is available on the Baker French Club website: www.bhscerclefrançais.com if you would like to participate. Though the cost of the message is \$1, if circumstances prevent you from making a full donation, please know that we would be happy to bring your message regardless of the contribution.

We may have to pack an extra suitcase for all our flags, but we will do whatever we have to in order to see those Baldwinsville messages on American soil in Normandy, France. I do this for this for those men, and I do this for my father. He would have approved.