

The 'Dead' Yank Hero of Orleans Forest

A World War II fighter pilot, listed as killed in action on Aug. 10, 1944, actually died four days later with the maquis

THE STARS AND STRIPES

25 Nov '59

By PAUL KACKLEY, Staff Writer

A ROW OF NINE simple wooden crosses, deep in the heart of the Forest of Orleans in France, marks the spot where an American fighter pilot enjoyed his last moment of peace on earth.

Just as the crosses were being driven into the ground at the head of the nine freshly filled graves, a series of shots shattered the dawn quiet of the forest.

Minutes later, Capt Edward K. Simpson was dead. But he died a hero — sacrificing his life that a group of freedom fighters he had known only a few days might live.

This was Aug. 14, 1944, the day remembered by the people of this part of France as the "day that the maquis were attacked."

Members of the maquis who were in the forest that day remember that Simpson joined them late in the evening of Aug. 10, after his fighter plane was shot down south of the Loire River and several miles from the maquis' forest hiding place.

Just after landing, Simpson was contacted by two of the freedom fighters who were returning from carrying messages to Col Marc O'Neill, commander of the maquis in four districts of France, who was then near Orleans.

"Our couriers led him back through the German lines to our hiding place," recalls Madame O'Neill, widow of the former maquis commander. "They thought he was British, since the only other English-speaking persons they had met during the war were a few British agents who worked with us."

At the time Simpson joined the maquis, the Allied forces had pushed to within a few miles of Orleans, and the German troops in the area were showing signs of a retreat to the north. The Free French fighters who had been operating from the

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Orleans forest for several months were awaiting orders to break out of the woods and join other maquis units in the push to Paris.

Rather than run the risk of trying to slip Simpson back to American forces, the maquis leaders suggested to him that he remain with them until time for the whole unit to break through the German Panzer division surrounding the forest.

The funeral service Simpson was attending when the attack began was for nine members of the maquis who had been killed in a fire-fight on the outskirts of the forest. (The bodies of the nine were moved after the war, but the crosses marking the graves are still there.)

Although several of the freedom fighters fell when the patrol opened fire, the well-armed group quickly overpowered the Germans and drove them off. But knowing that their hiding place had been discovered, the Free French—numbering between 200 and 300—decided the time had come to escape from the woods and join the Allied forces near Orleans.

Hurriedly breaking the camp they had occupied for several months—signs of which can still be seen—the hunted men rushed through the woods to their well-hidden motor pool nearly a mile away. Most of their vehicles were captured from the Germans.

Simpson found a place on the last truck of the convoy as it broke from cover and raced down one of the forest's narrow trails leading to the Orleans highway.

As the maquis vehicles turned on to the highway, they were spotted by a German column of trucks and armored cars. The Germans pursued the maquis convoy and were rapidly closing in, when Simpson made his decision—and died.

Knowing that the German column had to be stopped, one of the Frenchmen riding in the truck with Simpson called for the driver to slow down, and reached for a heavy machine gun.

As the truck slowed, Simpson and five of the Frenchmen dropped from it and set up the machine gun in the center of the road as the truck roared away. All six of the men surely realized that they could not escape death, since the point where they established their roadblock was flat and completely without protective cover.

The final action those men fought was brief, but successful. Their first burst of machine-gun fire stopped the lead German vehicle and blocked the road. They kept firing until all six were dead.

But the time they gained was enough, for by the time the road was cleared, the maquis convoy was well on the way to Orleans and out of reach of the Germans.

"I was with my husband when the convoy reached us," Madame O'Neill recalls. "When he asked for a report of the action, all we heard for nearly 15 minutes was an account of the bravery of the six men—especially the English-speaking one."

She continued, "Our soldiers were so impressed with the fact that Simpson gave his life for them even though he didn't have to, and didn't even know those he died with."

Simpson's action impressed the people of Ouzouer-sur-Loire—a village just a few yards from where he died—so much that they collected enough money to build a small monument at the scene of the roadblock. Many of the villagers were members of the maquis during the war.

The monument lists the names of the six men killed there:

Simpson's name also appears on a large monument dedicated to all of the maquis. This second memorial, located where eight of the forest trails converge on a circle in the center of the forest, is inscribed with the names of those who lost their lives during the bitter fighting in the woods in August 1944.

Near the monument to the maquis is O'Neill's tomb. He was killed in Algeria in 1956. The French government granted his wish to be buried in Orleans forest in gratitude for his leadership of the maquis.

Ironically, while the French people haven't forgotten the actions of the brave young American pilot, it is possible that no one—including his own family—from his own country even knew how he died.

"I told the first Americans I met about Simpson," Madame O'Neill recalls. "But they were combat troops, busy fighting, and I've wondered ever since if the manner of his death was ever entered in his official records."

Marc Grippon, who operates a café in Ouzouer-sur-Loire, and who buried Simpson's body in the local cemetery, also tried to tell the Americans how Simpson died.

"When the graves registration soldiers came here to move his body, I tried to tell them about Simpson," Grippon said. "But I don't speak English and they didn't have anyone who could speak French, so I'm sure they didn't understand me."

Evidently his words were not understood, for Simpson's official record of service, on file at the U.S. Army Records Center in St. Louis, states he was killed in action in France on Aug. 10, 1944—four days before he actually died.

Thanks to Olmsted



Madame O'Neill stands near the monument to Simpson and the maquis fighters.



Crosses mark scene of maquis funeral interrupted by Nazis.

COMBAT

12 AOUT 1944
 PASCAL MEUNIER GEORGES
 LOUIS SET DANAUX JACQUES
 AT ALBERT MOUGET MARCEL
 BOIS 13 AOUT 1944
 UL

14 AOUT 1944
 BEAUDEAU ANDRE
 SIMPSON EDWARD
 OUT 1944
 HURTAULT PIERRE
 23 AOUT 1944
 PLOUIN ALBERT

Monument records Simpson's death on Aug. 14, four days later than in U.S. records.



Marc Grippon picked up Simpson's body.



Autumn leaves mark the spot in road where Simpson died helping to man machine gun.

Wednesday, November 25, 1959

Roepkes Visit Brother's Grave At Normandy

By Ellen Young

It wasn't really a pilgrimage. It wasn't just a pleasure trip either, although there were pleasures to be enjoyed. The trip from which George and Frances Roepke just returned could only be described as a step backward in time.

George Roepke was a mechanic - a crew chief for the 357th Fighter Group - during World War II. He had two brothers, Alvin and Paul, who also fought in World War II, and who died in that war. The Traer couple had visited his brother Paul Roepke's grave in Sicily-Rome Cemetery in 1988; now it was time to visit brother Alvin's grave.

And it was time to visit some other sites, too, which George remembered from those days of war, when he was stationed a long way from Oelwein, Iowa where he grew up.

The Roepkes flew to London, England April 10. After a day of sightseeing in London, the couple took a train to Ipswich, England. There, at the hotel, they were visited by a German pilot who was shot down by the 357th Fighter Group, of which George was a part. They also were visited there by an English couple who put together a display at the Leiston Museum of the Fighter Group which had been stationed there. George's picture with his plane happened to be on museum display at the time of their visit.

Also visiting them at the Ipswich hotel was a lady who lived in the area, and as a girl of 14 years, had visited the base (in a well chaperoned group), to dance and talk

with the boys stationed there.

The next day, the Roepkes visited the old Leiston Air Base, viewing the old runways and seeing the Memorial there for the 357th. They also visited an old friend in the area, and toured the museum.

George Roepke recalls how this base, on the seacoast of England, was located on a direct bombing path between Germany and London. Blackouts were critical at that location, and any light carelessly shown at night would draw enemy strafing. Night after night there there bombing runs overhead, as the Germans sent bombs to destroy the English.

He recalled when the invasion of D-Day came, how the sky was black with airplanes moving towards the continent. The fighter planes from his base escorted bombers to their destinations.

They also visited Southwick village in England, and Southwick House, where a fine D-Day Museum is kept. Eisenhower's planning for D-Day was carried out here, and the Roepkes were shown where he lived, and where the actual planning took place, with the large map showing D-Day deployments still displayed on the wall in the building.

The Roepkes took the ferry across the English Channel to Cherbourg, France. Near there lies Normandy Cemetery which is the resting place for 9,386 of our US military dead, in a cemetery which covers 172.5 acres. On the walls of the semi-circular garden on the east side of the memorial are inscribed the names of 1,557 of our Missing who

rest in unknown graves.

It was to visit this cemetery that the Roepkes had come, and it was there that they paid their respects to Alvin Roepke, a brother who had never returned home. A cemetery worker used a bucket of fine sand from Omaha Beach to fill in the carved letters in the white stone so that photos could be taken of the memorial cross on the grave, and it would clearly show Alvin Roepke's name and service data. Flowers were laid at the foot of the memorial cross which marked the grave.

The cemetery's meticulous care drew both of the Roepkes' admiration. "There was not a blade of grass out of place," George commented. "It is beautifully run." Frances explained that US Civil Service employees run the cemetery, and they treat any visiting relatives with great respect. The Roepkes were expected, since they had been in touch with The American Battle Monuments Commission in Washington

before they made this journey, and the other journey a few years ago, when they visited the other brother's grave.

The Roepkes also visited Omaha Beach nearby, where Alvin Roepke died July 16, 1944, and Utah Beach, the other American

landing point. At the Utah Beach Memorial they saw a movie about D-Day. "It was almost more than we could take," Frances said, after all the painful memories they had relived.

It was while they were visiting the Normandy Cemetery, however, that

they learned something which they hope will answer some questions for them and for George's other family members.

Upon learning that the Roepkes had never been told how either Alvin or Paul Roepke had died, the cemetery attendant gave them the address to write to find out all the information that is in the military files about both of them, including any information at all about the circumstances of their deaths. The Roepkes are excited to think that after 50 years, answers to long-asked questions may be finally on their way to the Roepke family.

After a few days in Paris, in company with a tour group of Titanic Historical Society Convention members, with whom they visited several sites relating to the Titanic, the Roepkes then enjoyed taking the Eurostar Channel train (under the English Channel at speeds up to 186 mph) from Paris to London, from which they returned home.

RIGHT AROUND TRAER

People And Places In The Local News

Thurs., May 2, 1996 The Traer Star-Clipper

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Might Be Interested
In This Article*

NO. 1000000
MAY 10 1996
TRAER STAR-CLIPPER

July 30, 1996

Mr. Joe DeShay
465 Northeast 34th Street
Boca Raton, Florida 33431

Dear Joe:

Thanks for transmitting the letter from Robert Clark. Clark's letter and your Newsletter story about my instrument landing with my two remaining wingmen, Roland Wright and Ernest Tiede, prompts me to write about the same story from my memory of the mission.

On January 20, 1945, I was Red Flight leader and my wingman was Ernest Tiede. Tiede had transferred to our Squadron from the 363rd. Ed Haydon was my Element lead and his wingman was Roland Wright. Dale Karger was leading White Flight. I have forgotten what the originally scheduled mission was, but about the time that we were to return home, we engaged 2 ME-262's near Brunswick. It appeared that one 262 pilot was checking the other one out in the jet.

They did not run away; it appeared that they wanted to engage in a fight. We were at about 20,000 feet and the two 262's split.....one went down to about 18,000 feet and the other stayed at about 22,000. Both flew in a large lazy circle, one opposite the other with me and my flight in the middle. Since it appeared that the upper jet was waiting for me to jump the lower one, I called Karger to turn back as if he were going home and climb back to jump the high jet while we circled. Karger and his flight did just that and the upper jet never saw them return. He was apparently concentrating on me and my flight. Karger got him with out any trouble and then Karger and his flight headed home.

When the upper jet was eliminated, the lower jet headed down for home in a hurry. I rolled over, split-Sed and poured on the power. In no time, I hit compressibility with no control at speeds in excess of 650 mph. After finally getting control at the lower denser air, I pulled out in a wide sweeping arc just over treetops and pulled up behind the 262 for a perfect shot at 6 o'clock. Unfortunately, I was out of trim and my tracers went right over the top of his canopy. He left me in a cloud of kerosene exhaust as if I were standing still. In the meantime, my flight caught up with me and we headed for Lechfeld Airbase which I anticipated to be his home field. Maybe we could catch him on landing. We flew over Lechfeld at about 6,000 which bristled with flak emplacements. There were about 100 jets nose-to-tail parked on the inactive side of the field which meant that they were out of fuel, insufficient pilots, or both. We were not sure of the traffic pattern or which end of the runway the jet would use, Tiede and I cruised toward the south end. Haydon and Wright spotted him on the approach at the north end. Haydon headed for the jet, but Haydon was too high and made an easy target for the flak guns. When they opened up, I swear they put 3 or 4-20mm shells in the same hole.....in the engine!!

On the R/T, Haydon said that he was on fire. He pulled up and bailed from about 400 feet and landed on the airbase, ending up a POW. Roland Wright, following Haydon, was fence-post high and the flak never caught him. Wright wiped out the 262 on the approach.

The remaining three of us reassembled south of Lechfeld and I called for them to check their fuel. We were briefed before the mission that our minimum gas to get home that day would be 135 gallons because of strong headwinds. I had 135 gallons, and Wright, who was "Tailend Charlie", was down to 85 gallons or less. It was pretty obvious that we were not going to make it home so it was imperative to find a "friendly" airport.

Flying at about 8,000 feet, deep in Germany in nasty weather, we headed west through a weather front with icing and instrument flying conditions. I was pretty concerned about Wright at about this time because his fuel was getting dangerously low, and being on instruments flying on me, he would not have a prayer if his engine cut out. We finally broke out and spotted a large town near a river and we turned to it. Lo, and behold there was an airport, covered with snow, no tracks from aircraft traffic, but there appeared to be an ME-109 near a hangar. I told Wright to land, tail-first because of the unknown depth of snow, and wave his arms if they were friendly. If they were not, then get the hell out of the way because I would shoot up his airplane. Out came a Citroen full of people to the airplane as I circled with Tiede. Finally, Wright waved his arms; Tiede and I landed. We were southeast of Paris at Auxerre, France, and the front lines were 60 km down the road at Dijon. When Wright landed, his engine quit for lack of fuel. The 109 I had seen was gutted and abandoned.

Auxerre had a small company of MP's and the town had been recently "liberated". I asked the MP's for help with communications to get fuel so we could get out of there, but in the meantime we got rooms in a hotel and some food. Our fuel would be coming from Patton's tank corp and there was no telling when that would occur. The small contingent of French aviation cadets on the airfield pushed Wright's plane to the hangar area where we waited for fuel.

Finally, after a 5-day wait on January 25th, a truck with a trailer full of 5-gallon Jerry-cans arrived and the French cadets filled up our planes. The weather was beautiful in Auxerre and we were anxious to get home.....so we took off for England. In Clark's letter, he thought that I had made a phone call to check the weather. I don't recall ever contacting the base since we had no available communication. There must have been confusion between this mission and another. The first knowledge I had of the weather in Leiston was when we were about mid-channel, and I contacted the tower for an altimeter barometric setting so I could have an accurate reading of altitude for an instrument letdown.

The weather at mid-channel was a solid wall of fog from 1500 feet down to the water. It looked like a wall of concrete along a straight vertical line. There was quite a roar on the radio when they heard from us because the last anyone knew was that we were in a dogfight with ME-262's. Major Gates got on the radio and said that there was no way that we could get in because the field was socked in solidly with fog. He thought that we may have to bail. Can you just imagine that one? I thought that I could give an instrument approach a try.....even though we had no GCA or instrument landing equipment on the field.

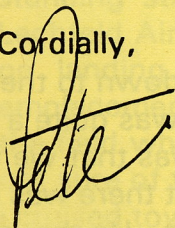
At mid-channel, we were flying in a "V" formation with both wingmen stacked above me as I started a letdown in an attempt to get under the soup. I got down where the altimeter read "0" and one of the guys said, "Pete, you better get up.....a wave just went by!" At that point, discretion was a better part of valor so we climbed back up above the fog to about 2,000 feet. When I guesstimated that we were within the general area of the field, I asked the tower to fire a rocket so we could get a fix on our position relative to the field. The rocket came up just above the fog and dropped back and I told the guys to circle the area of the rocket because I was going to try an instrument approach.

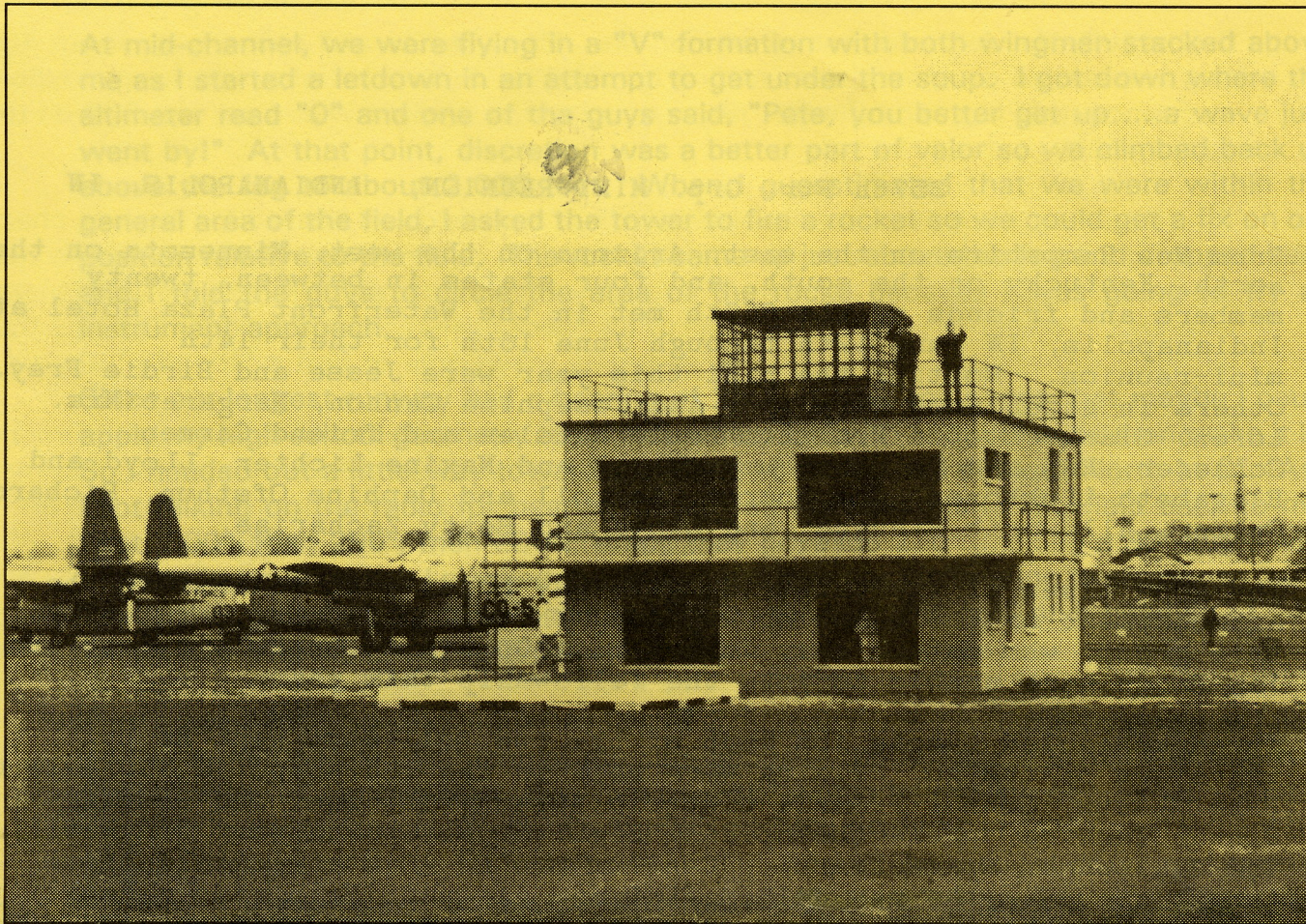
Since our longest runway had a bearing of 240° , it gave me a clue that maybe I could apply my high school geometry to an instrument letdown and we could then make it in. So I headed out a little way toward the channel and turned straight North at 0° . As I kept talking on the radio for bearings, they fed me bearings to the field back to me. First, 300° , then 290° , then 280° . When they gave me 270° (making a 90° angle with my heading true north), I clocked the time that it took for the bearing to change to 240° . Twice that time was the time it would take me to reach the field on a heading of 240° which was the alignment with the runway.

The runway 240° heading and a heading of 270° makes a $30^{\circ}/60^{\circ}$ right triangle as I flew north. In a $30^{\circ}/60^{\circ}$ right triangle, the side opposite the 30° angle is half the length of the hypotenuse. In this case, the "hypotenuse" would be my line of approach toward the 240° bearing, turning toward the landing on the runway. As I descended toward the runway and got to about 50 feet above ground, I could see straight down and spotted the end of the runway! I knew then that we could make it in by just repeating what I had done. I climbed back up on instruments and picked up Roland Wright who flew off my right wing and we went through the same triangulation. As we turned on the approach and started the letdown on instruments, I let down my wheels; Wright lowered his wheels and stayed back just far enough to still keep me in sight and follow my instrument flying. I dropped flaps; he dropped flaps. As I got to about 50 feet, I spotted the runway and called it out to him. He picked up the sight of the runway and landed. I did the same thing with Tiede and he landed. I then did a tight 360° turn about 50 feet off the ground and landed.

The people in the Tower could hear us; could hear the tires squeal on landing; could hear me powering up to go back up, but could not see us. At no time did the Tower see us until we taxied by. The Tower and DF guys did a helluva job or we could not have made it. It was the best flying that I had ever done.....or ever since. Without an automatic pilot, instrument landing system, or GCA to assist us, we managed to get in safely without losing airplanes or pilots.

Cordially,





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