

can fighter pilot from Altus, Okla., named Lt. Billie Dowe Harris. Quesnel also learned that the pilot's body had been moved from the town in 1946, although a large marker remained there, and he had been temporarily buried in another cemetery, and then later permanently transferred to the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-Sur-Mer. Quesnel made a trip to the Normandy cemetery and confirmed the information. She then began research through the Department of the Army in Alexandria, Va., In September 2005, Quesnel received over 200 pages of information concerning Lt. Harris. It was about this time that Alton Harvey, a cousin of Harris who had been doing research on his fate for a number of years, contacted the same department, and also was able to obtain the information.

In October 2005, Harvey and his wife, Gaye, drove from Austin, where they resided, to Harris' home in Vernon to personally present her with the documentation and perhaps the last pieces of a puzzle that had gone unsolved for over 60 years. Among the information was the name and address of Quesnel. Harris immediately wrote a letter expressing her appreciation to the small town of Les Ventes for the original burying of her husband there and the subsequent years of tribute they had paid to his honor. Thereafter a correspondence began between the two women, and Harris was able to finally learn what had happened on that July day in 1944.

Through records, documentations and eye-witness accounts, Harris learned that on July 17, 1944 around 7 p.m., Harris' plane had crashed in the forest outside the small village of Les Ventes, France, about 90 miles southwest of Paris. The plane did not burn, and French resistance members were the first to get to the aircraft and discovered the pilot had not survived. The men removed his handgun and codebook. They quickly left, however, when they heard Germans approaching the crash site. "Because his flight jacket bore the letters Billie D Harris, it was assumed it was D'Harris," Harris said. "They thought from that that he was Canadian."

Among documents Harris received was a letter written on July 20, 1944 by the town's mayor, a "Mr. Desfriches," in which he stated that the Germans had removed an identification tag with the pilot's name, identification number and his mother's name and address, and a glass medallion containing a four-leaf clover. Found on the pilot was a ring with a "kitten" on it, bearing the inscription PLS, and Vernon HS1941.

This ring was actually Harris' high school ring, placed on her husband's finger on their wedding day in 1943 because she couldn't afford to purchase a wedding band. The ring has subsequently vanished.

"He wore it as his wedding ring," Harris explained. "I didn't have money when we married to buy him a ring."

According to the mayor's letter, the ring was kept by the mayor to be returned to the family along with two photographs also found, but somehow the ring disappeared while in U.S. military custody, Harris reported.

The townspeople retrieved the pilot's body from the plane wreckage, and it was wrapped in a sheet given by a "Mrs. Frichot" and placed in an oak coffin. It was buried at the cemetery at 9 a.m., July 19, 1944 in the presence of about 70 people. The coffin was covered with summer flowers brought by the townspeople from their own homes and gardens. The cemetery also contained the graves of others considered to be "heroes" by the villagers, including those who had died assisting the French freedom fighters. In fact, each year since the country's liberation, the people of the village had several times a year paid tribute to those buried in the temporary cemetery in Blossville, France, where he was listed as an "unknown." The townspeople continued to include him in their tribute.

"It was as if they adopted him as their own," Harris said.

In 1947, Lt. Harris' body was taken to a casketing point in Cherbourg where he was still listed as "unknown." In September 1948, he was interred in Normandy American Cemetery as Billie D. Harris.

The stark white stone cross bears his group and squadron numbers and "Oklahoma."

"When I received the information and files from Alton, I immediately wrote

to Mrs. Quesnel to thank her for the kindness of the townspeople," Harris said.

In her letter, Harris wrote: "I was overwhelmed by the caring kindness of your townspeople and wonder if any of them are yet alive. I want to thank them for their tender care... I learned at last that caring hands took him from the wreck-age."

As the women began to correspond and other town officials became aware of the situation, an invitation was issued to Harris from the current mayor, Christine Fessard, to visit Les Ventes. Meanwhile Harris' story was reported in a French magazine and on French radio, requesting anyone with additional information to come forward.

With an emotional heart, Harris accepted the invitation to go to France, and on April 6, accompanied by Alton and Gaye Harvey, landed at Charles DeGalle Airport in Paris. The next morning, the group was met by Valerie Quesnel, who drove them to Les Ventes. On the way, they passed through the town of Vernon, France, a coincidence not lost on the travelers. In fact, on their return trip, they would spend a night at a hotel in the town.

In Les Ventes, the group was provided with a house in which to stay, where a hot meal was waiting upon their arrival. American and French flags had been placed by the front door. The kitchen was stocked, and each day, the group was invited to a home of a different councilman for lunch and dinner.

It was just overwhelming, the way in which we were treated," Harris said.

On a trip to the nearby forest, Harris was at last able to see the site where her husband's plane had crashed. There she met Guy Surleau of Everux.

"He had been a young freedom fighter, and he had actually seen Billie's plane crash," Harris said.

"He told me he had run up to the plane, saw the pilot was dead and had run back into the forest because he thought the Germans were coming."

Harris also met B. Frichot, the son of the woman who had given the sheet for Lt. Harris' burial.

"He told me it was only after he read the magazine article that he found out about his mother's involvement. She had never spoken about it."

Harris also met a Madame Lorieux, who had heard about Harris through the radio broadcast, and wanted her to know she had been present on the day Lt. Harris was buried in Les Ventes. She gave Harris some small black and white photographs taken on the day showing the burial site piled high with flowers. Harris also received pictures of six young men who had served as pallbearers, and Surleau was able to identify them for Harris. Madame Lorieux also gave Harris a number of other photographs showing Les Ventes and the residents on the day it was liberated.

On Sunday, April 9, some 300 people gathered at a monument at the city hall, where Lt. Harris' name is listed among those martyred during the war. Mayor Fessard read aloud the names inscribed there. The group then made its way to the village cemetery for a ceremony similar to those that had been performed three times a year for over 60 years—on May 8, victory in Europe; Aug. 22, the day Les Ventes was liberated, and Nov. 11, the end of the war. A number of local as well as national dignitaries spoke, and an Englishman named Bob Goodall, who lived in the town, served as interpreter. Harris was presented with a large bouquet, which she placed on the gravesite in an emotional moment.

Back at city hall, displays had been set up for public viewing, which included pictures and memorabilia from the era and also pictures that Harris had provided. An eight-course catered luncheon was held in Harris' honor after which she made a speech thanking the people.

In her words, Harris told those present how the actions of the townspeople so many years ago "quiets and comforts my heart."

Certificates and proclamations from the Oklahoma Governor's office, the State of Oklahoma and the City of Altus were presented to Madame Quesnel and others of the city. The next day, Harris and the Harveys, accompanied

by Madame Quesnel, visited the Normandy Cemetery. There they were greeted by Supt. Daniel Neece and his wife, Yolanda. Neece told Harris she was the first widow to visit the World War II cemetery in the past five years.

"It was very emotional for me," Harris said.

Harris visited the Normandy Cemetery several times over the next few days. On one visit, she and Harvey were granted permission to sprinkle soil from Lt. Harris' parents' graves in Altus on their son's gravesite. She also has made arrangements for flowers to be placed on Lt. Harris' grave several times a year, including Valentine's Day, Easter, Christmas and on July 17, the date of the plane crash; Nov. 11, Veteran's Day, and Oct. 14, his birthday.

Harris never remarried. Billie, she said, was the most unusual person she ever knew. She recalled writing poetry in the letters she sent to him while he was overseas. Among the articles she received after Lt. Harris was originally declared missing in action was a page of poetry in his own handwriting, including the lines by a British Canadian poet, Bliss Carmon: "Lord of the far horizons, give us eyes to see, over the edge of the sundown, the beauty that is to be."

"We never talked about 'what if,'" Harris said. "We had friends who had been killed. We knew it was possible, but we never wanted to think about it. In his last letter, he was optimistic. He thought he was coming home soon."

During the ensuing years, Harris lived for a while in Boulder, Colo., where she worked for a mining company, a mineralogist, a surveyor's office, a savings and loan and the Boulder County Civil Defense as well as the Boulder Valley School District. She also wrote for several publications. She returned to Vernon, and in 1980 she graduated from Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls with a major in humanities and a minor in philosophy. She was librarian at Vernon College for a number of years.

As Harris reflected on the past, she feels overwhelmingly grateful to the people of the small French village who adopted her husband without knowing anything about him, other than he was a young man fighting for freedom.

"He is a hero to the people of Les Ventes," Harris said. "He represents all the young men who gave their lives."

In fact, during the brief time he was in service, Lt. Harris was awarded two Air Medals with 11 Oak Clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross. He was also posthumously awarded the Purple Heart.

Harris finds comfort in words penned in a memory book presented to her in Les Ventes and translated by Susan Coker and Mary Neuberger with Kent Butler doing the calligraphy. Many attending the luncheon wrote thanking Harris for her husband's sacrifice, including these words signed by C. Hardouin: "I was seven years old in 1944. I was there to see the air battles. I now know everything that this young American's sacrifice stands for, and I also understand in some small measure all the suffering endured by his young wife."

The tale of Peggy and Billie D. Harris has over the years evolved into a never-ending love story, and in 2015, a new chapter was added when Peggy Harris received a unique gift — a replica of her Vernon High School class ring.

"I was absolutely stunned," Harris said as she was presented with the duplicate ring by her late husband's cousin, Alton Harvey. The ring was a gift of Gary Andrejak of Ann Arbor, Mi., who had it reproduced to give to Harris as a token of the original class ring Harris gave to her husband, Lt. Billie D. Harris, when the couple wed on Sept. 22, 1943. The year would have marked the couple's 72nd wedding anniversary..

"I have always been fascinated with the 'wedding' ring she gave to Billie," Andrejak said. "I first heard the story when I met Peggy when she was in a group of Daughters of World War II that I was a volunteer tour guide for a D-Day trip," Andrejak explained.

A retired Air Force Colonel, Andrejak was a pilot and has been a volunteer tour guide for about 14 years, putting together such trips.

"The group wanted to go to Les Ventes where Billie was shot down, so I made arrangements for us to do that. It was a wonderful trip. They all think so much of Peggy over there."

Andrejak noted that on one of his visits to Lt. Harris' gravesite, he buried a set of his own wings at Lt. Harris' marker.

"It's a symbol of his service," Andrejak said. "I just wanted to do something special."

Peggy, who has visited Billie's gravesite every year with the exception of 2006 and 2009, was also on the tour again in 2014, and it was about that time that Andrejak became intrigued with the story of the missing ring.

"I had gotten to know her better. Peggy is just one of those people that makes you feel good by just being around them. I wanted to do something special for her. She is truly a shining example of the 'Greatest Generation.'"

Andrejak came up with the idea to duplicate the class ring, a task that turned out not to be an easy one.

"Finding just what it looked like was difficult. I had to do a lot of research."

While trying to track down some of Harris' classmates, Andrejak had a breakthrough. In searching a website about lost VHS rings, he came upon a '59 grad who mentioned that he got his ring at Balsler Jewelry in Vernon. He then contacted Linda Balsler, told her the story and what he was trying to do.

"She has been a huge help in solving the puzzle," Andrejak said.

But there was still the problem of which ring did Harris have? Still wanting to keep it a surprise, Andrejak clandestinely asked Harris more about the ring while they were on the 2014 tour to France. With that information, he ordered the duplicate.

"It's pretty close to the original," Andrejak said. "I added a fleu de lis that the original ring didn't have, but that is to represent France, and I had both Peggy's initials and Billie's initials inscribed inside."

Andrejak had planned to have the ring presented to Harris by Quesnel when Harris went to Billie's gravesite on their wedding anniversary this year, however, Harris made the trip a few months earlier than planned. He then enlisted the help of Billie's cousin, Alton, to make the special presentation.

Harvey explained that Andrejak had been in touch with him to see if he thought Harris would want a duplicate ring.

"I told him I thought she would most definitely be pleased," Harvey said.

Billie's cousin, Alton Harvey, invited Harris to lunch at Hillcrest Country Club. Also present were Harvey's wife Gaye, and Mary Neuberger, a friend of Harris who has accompanied her on several trips to France.

"We often have lunch together, so I really didn't think too much of it," Harris said of Harvey's invitation. "The only thing is usually we go on a Friday, and this was a Wednesday, so I thought that was kind of odd."

After the meal, Harvey handed Harris a small envelope. Inside was the ring.

"I had no idea Gary had this on his mind. It's just mind boggling. I was just overwhelmed," Harris said. "It was just amazing that he would do that."

Harris said she and Andrejak have corresponded over the past two years through email.

"But he never said anything about doing something like this. I am just bowled over."

Although Andrejak was unable to be present, he was eager to hear of Harris' reaction.

"I would have loved to have been there when she got the ring," Andrejak said by telephone. "I hope she was pleased. It was certainly an honor for me to do it."

The ring has the Vernon Lion on it just as the original. Inside are not only Harris' initials but Billie's as well. Harris slipped the ring on her finger, but said she eventually plans to put it on a chain and wear it around her neck.

"That way it will be closer to my heart."