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A Grateful Nation Remembers

Heroes not forgotten

Children of WW II fallen honor their fathers in a unique overseas tribute

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This Memorial Day, beautiful wreaths of flowers will decorate the graves of hundreds of thousands of fallen heroes who made the ultimate sacrifice serving their country.

For the Americans killed in World War II and laid to rest in 15 cemeteries overseas, Rik Peirson and his wife, Dianna, spend countless hours each year, making sure they, too, get the recognition they deserve.

It is a labor of love, and one that began nearly 70 years ago.

For the majority of his life, Mr. Peirson knew little about his father, 1st Lt. John S. Peirson; only that he was killed on Christmas Eve in 1944 while serving his country during World War II.

Mr. Peirson was just a few months old when his dad died, and his mother rarely talked about the man. He

would later learn, it was simply too painful for her to do so.

"Nothing was said because mom would cry, so we didn't bring it up," he said.

Mr. Peirson was not alone. He is just one of more than 180,000 other "orphans" of that war in which more than 400,000 Americans died.

"While victory came to the whole country, and it was very euphoric, victory never came to our house," Mr. Peirson explained. "We were the sad little secret of the cost of freedom. We didn't feel the same sense of euphoria."

During that time period, people rarely spoke about the casualties of war, he said.

"They called it the wall of silence," Mr. Peirson remembered. "They figured we were little kids and we'd had enough grief."

As he got older, Mr. Peirson often wondered about his dad and his ser-



Rik and Dianna Peirson show Memorial Day banners that are displayed at overseas cemeteries by the American World War II Orphans Network.

vice. He followed in his father's footsteps, joined the military and served in the Vietnam War.

When he returned home he went to work in marketing, eventually married and began a family. But the questions surrounding his fa-

ther remained.

Fast forward nearly 50 years. Mr. Peirson has unraveled much of the mystery surrounding his father, who was for so many years simply "a picture on the wall."

Please see **BANNERS** on A4



STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

The banners list Americans buried at each of the 15 overseas cemeteries in for the dead of World War II.

About 5,000 of 180,000 WWII 'orphans' have contacted AWON

■ BANNERS

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It all started with a box of love letters.

More than 10 years after his mother's death, Mr. Peirson and his wife opened the blue package containing more than 400 letters written between Mr. Peirson's mother and father over a three-year span from the day they met until Lt. Peirson was killed in action.

Through the correspondence, Mr. Peirson learned details about his dad he'd spent his whole life pondering.

"I never knew he had a sense of humor," said Mr. Peirson. "He was a Yale graduate. He was a playwright. He loved the stage. He loved anything theater, and he would have been somewhere in the creative end of show business if he had come back (from the war)," said Mr. Peirson.

But the new knowledge also sparked a renewed curiosity for Mr. Peirson. He began posting inquiries on military websites, looking for more information about his father's role in World War II, in hope of finding a service member who fought beside his dad.

In 1995, one of his posts was answered by fellow "orphan" Barrie Meehan Meller.

Ms. Meller's father, who was the original commander of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, was killed when his plane was

hit by enemy fire as it headed for Normandy in the first hours of D-Day.

Easy Company was later portrayed in the HBO series "Band of Brothers."

"There's a scene in the 'Band of Brothers' where they're all asking each other 'Where's Meehan? Where's Meehan?' He'd been lost before the jump," Mr. Peirson said.

When Ms. Meller discovered Mr. Peirson's online request, she pointed him to a group called the American World War II Orphans Network.

"Through AWON, and through each other, we've found ways to understand and in some ways reconcile a lot of what happened back there — of all we never knew, but finally came to learn," Mr. Peirson explained in a tribute written to his father on the AWON website.

"The picture on the wall we all had was totally inanimate, and we wanted to bring that picture to life and understand who our fathers were, where they had served and what their missions were, where they went down, if they were shot down, who their buddies were, so they could tell us exactly what had happened," Mr.

Peirson explained.

Through AWON, he discovered that his father was part of the 75th Infantry Division, 290th Regiment. He detailed the story of his father's death in the tribute:

"After several weeks of staging in Wales, the 75th, originally slated for action in Aachen, was diverted — and rushed to a hill called La Roumiere, on the Northern shoulder of the Belgian Bulge. Nearly 400 men from Task Force Hogan (later called Hogan's Heroes by some) were trapped in the Bulge, 10 miles to the South.

"In a Christmas Eve attempt to reach the safety of allied lines, they had destroyed their vehicles and were moving North, as La Roumiere was their only route of escape.

"So in the moonlight-on-snow conditions of Christmas Eve, without winter uniforms, proper maps, briefings, or air support, and with less than a normal combat load of ammunition, three companies of the 75th, including Dad's Company 'L,' were ordered to take La Roumiere — at any cost — from combat-experienced Panzer units and Volksgrenadiers who were well-dug-in at the top.

"And the cost would be high. It took three frontal attacks on La Roumiere to win the hill — one on Christmas Eve and two more on Christmas Day. By the time they watched Hogan's men tramp safely through their positions late that afternoon, the 75th had lost more than 250 officers and men."

Mr. Peirson's father was among them.

When he first joined AWON, the group did not even have a website. Mr. Peirson not only started one, he still maintains it today.

Several years after he joined AWON, he was contacted by a fellow member and friend, Regine Villers. She and her husband live in Belgium.

On Memorial Day 2002, Ms. Villers and her husband were visiting Henri-Chapelle, the American Cemetery in Belgium where Mr. Peirson's father is buried.

While wreaths of flowers were laid for many of the World War II soldiers, Ms. Villers and her husband felt it was a shame that Lt. Peirson and many of his fallen comrades did not receive any recognition.

She contacted Mr. Peirson, whom

she'd met through AWON, and asked whether it would be all right to lay a wreath for his father and others the following year.

Not only did Mr. Peirson agree, he wanted to take it a step further, and attach the names of all of the fallen, and not just at Henri-Chapelle, but all overseas cemeteries where the dead of World War II are buried. The 15 cemeteries are maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission.

Mr. Peirson, along with another AWON member, began the arduous task of coordinating with staff at each of the sites to pave the way for the AWON Overseas Memorial Day Remembrances Wreath Laying program.

They also worked to find AWON members stateside to act as coordinators for the cemetery where their loved ones are buried. The coordinator is responsible for finding someone overseas to arrange for a wreath to be laid at that cemetery.

More than a decade later, beautiful wreaths with banners, including the names of the World War II heroes, are placed at each of the 15 overseas sites, and at one in Honolulu.

"All the wreaths are gorgeous, but

the ones that people are drawn to are the ones from AWON because they have names," explained Ms. Peirson. "It brings them to life."

Each year, several months prior to Memorial Day, Mr. Peirson and his wife begin coordinating with fellow AWON members to compile the list for each cemetery site, and to create the banners that will accompany the wreaths.

They send the banners to each location and a representative from each location arranges the flowers and lays the wreath during a Memorial Day ceremony.

"The dignity and respect in which they remember our fathers is just immense," said Mr. Peirson.

Out of the more than 180,000 "orphans" of World War II, about 5,000 have contacted AWON. The Peirsons are always in search of others who might benefit from the network.

"We have barely scratched the surface," Mr. Peirson said. "If there's anyone out there who lost a father during WWII, we want to hear from them."

The Peirsons and AWON members continue to search for information to add to the AWON database, including pictures of their loved ones' markers and memorials "wherever they exist in the world."

For more information about AWON, visit <http://www.awon.org>.

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