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A wartime bond survives a lifetime

Louis LeDuc was 6 years old when the first convoys of Americans rolled into his hometown of Gudschoven in the northeast corner of Belgium, 40 kilometers from the German border, liberating his country from four years of Nazi occupation.

It was in the fall of 1944. The Americans were cutting a triumphant swath from Normandy, on their way to the Ardennes and the Battle of the Bulge. They selected Gudschoven as a maintenance post for their trucks and troop carriers, and the people of Louis' small village opened their homes to them.

Thirteen American soldiers stayed for two or maybe three months with Louis' family. One of the American soldiers in particular, U.S. Army Cpl. Jim Dougherty, made an impression on the boy that would last his entire life.

"My first memory was of them unloading these things, these boxes that unfolded into beds from a truck in front of my home," Louis says.

"Jimmy says to me, 'Here, you take one.' I tried to lift it, got it up so high — but it was too heavy, and I fell down. He laughed and gave me a chocolate bar. It was my first taste of chocolate.

"He gave me my first orange and my first banana, too. He was so kind, like an uncle to me. He let me sit in one of the trucks and start its engine. This to a kid was a very big deal."

In 1954, when Louis was in high school, he learned enough English to send a letter to Jim Dougherty, in care of The Cincinnati Post, where Jim worked in the pressroom before and after the war. They exchanged three letters, which Louis treasured and thought he was keeping in a safe place, until one day when his mother cleaned house.

He grew up, took a raven-haired woman named Denise to be his wife and found a job at the Ford Motor factory in Brussels, where he eventually became the plant accounting manager. Somewhere along the line, he joined the Kiwanis Club; from time to time he would attend the organization's international conventions.

It was at one such convention four years ago, in New Orleans, that he happened to strike up a conversation with Bill Spreen of Forest Park, a suburb of the American city of Cincinnati. Louis mentioned having a special place in his heart for Cincinnati, it being the home of an American soldier who, long ago, showed him certain kindnesses he had never forgotten.

Bill, who is the retired superintendent of Finneytown Schools, returned home and, with his wife, Marilyn, looked up every Jim Dougherty listed in the telephone book.

Through a series of unlikely connections — the Spreens had a friend who'd worked in the sales department at The Post, who put them in touch with someone else who hooked them up with George Singer, who worked beside Jim Dougherty in the pressroom — Bill learned that Jim had died in 1982 at the age of 72 and that he was buried next to his wife, Lois, in the new St. Joseph's Cemetery in Price Hill, the one where the Irish are buried.

Louis was unable to make the trip to Cincinnati last year because he had heart surgery. But one hot, muggy morning last week, he and his wife and the Spreens followed George and Marge Singer to St. Joseph's Cemetery.

There Louis placed a couple of miniature American flags on either side of the gray headstone Jim Dougherty shares with Lois. Then he placed a basket overflowing with roses, carnations, daisies and spider mums, all tied together with a ribbon of red, white and blue, at Jim's grave.

Denise taped the proceedings with the Sony videocam Louis had purchased especially for this purpose. A friend of the Spreens, Charles Kessinger, took photographs.

Louis wondered at the steel Disabled American Veterans stake, not remembering that Jim Dougherty had had any injuries when he knew him. Marge Singer mentioned that he'd suffered frostbite later on, at the Battle of the Bulge.

They all moved to the shade of a nearby pear tree, and Louis talked about what it was like to be a little boy in a war, having a real-live liberator bounce you on his knee.

Every couple of weeks, he said, they killed a pig for the Americans. His mother fried potatoes from the garden for them.

No one there quite knew what to make of it. But everyone understood that it was a significant moment.

"Jim was something so special to me," Louis says.

"I cannot tell you why it is. I cannot define it. I only know it."

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