

Belgium man adopts American GI grave

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Seventy years ago on Nov. 29, 1944, in a little town in Europe, a Logan County man by the name of Carl Homer Harris laid down his life for America, and the world as a whole. There was no fan fair when he left for the Army and none when he didn't return. Just a young man from the Spa community who earned both the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star and gave the greatest of sacrifices that most people never knew... until now.

In September of this year, Russellville city clerk Jan Robbins turned on her computer and was greeted with a very strange email. Robbins, who has the skills of an investigative reporter, clicked on the name of Christian Kaiser of Eupen, Belgium. Kaiser had sent a request through the city's web-page asking if

anyone knew a Carl Homer Harris.

At first Robbins was taken aback by the email and did not recognize the name of Kaiser or Harris. After reading the email, however, her interest grew as did her desire to help Kaiser locate anyone who could be related to Harris.

Kaiser, 38, is coincidentally also an administrative officer in his town of Eupen, similar to Robbins in Russellville. He is married and has two little boys. He grew up and lived all his life in Eupen, and went to school there. He recently became involved with a grave adoption program.

Kaiser spends a lot of time working on his website to help others find out the old battlefields, bunkers, fortresses, museums and memorials from wars past. He has visited the battlefields at Normandy, Hürtgen Forest, Battle of the Bulge (in the area which he lives), the Atlantic Wall in Belgium (coastal batteries like Raversijde) and participates on local memorial ceremonies to pay respect to fallen heroes from the USA and the GI's who paid the ultimate price for all freedom.

Kaiser recently participated in a ceremony on Memorial Day at the American Cemetery Henri-Chapelle. He walked through the rows of crosses and made some pictures and noticed that on some of the graves people had laid down flowers and/or a picture of the soldier. This sparked Kaiser to speak with some very good friends, who organized the ceremony, about the possibility of getting a sponsorship program started for one or more of the graves at the American Cemetery at Henri-Chapelle.

Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery and Memorial in Belgium, covers 57 acres, rests 7,992 of our military dead, most of whom lost their lives during the advance of the U.S. armed forces into Germany. Their headstones are arranged in gentle arcs sweeping across a broad green lawn that slopes gently downhill.

The cemetery possesses great military historic significance as it holds fallen Americans of two major efforts, one covering the U.S. First Army's drive in September 1944 through northern France, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg into Germany, and the second covering the Battle of the Bulge.

In 2001 Kaiser adopted his first grave of a Private First Class William Anthony Neudecker, 1st Inf. Div. 16th Inf. Reg. In 2013, he adopted his second-Private Carl Homer Harris 2nd Platoon Company C-4th Battalion. Kaiser found out as much as he could about the men under the graves, their history and combat stations, citations for medals and awards. However, he wanted to go one step further and try to find the family of those lost and laying so far from home. This is what brought Kaiser to Robbins and the small city of Russellville thousands of miles away.

Robbins answered Kaiser's email telling him she didn't recall anyone that would be related to Private Harris in Logan County but promised to write him if she located anyone. After a few hours it occurred to Robbins she used to issue a fishing license to a man by the name of Harris and wondered if he could be related.

Taking a long shot and using some of those built in investigative talents of hers, Robbins looked up the address of the Harris she issued a license to and went to visit him on her lunch break.

“I did feel kind of weird going to this stranger’s house,” said Robbins. “But something told me he could be related to the soldier buried so far away.”

After knocking on the door, Robbins was greeted by 71-year-old William Carl Harris looking at her in bewilderment and asking what he could do for her.

“I just came right out and asked him,” said Robbins. “Would you happen to know a Carl Homer Harris?” asked Robbins.

“Yes,” came back the answer, “he was my father.”

Bill, as the call him, invited Robbins inside his home and a long discussion followed with stories and photos and memories recalled by the younger Harris about a father he had lost in World War II when he was just 18 months old.

“I can’t really remember my dad,” said Bill, who wears his father’s ring that was sent back in pieces with his belongings after he was found killed in action. “I just remember my mom telling me he had died in the war and that was about it.”

When Bill’s mother Lola Harris died in 2001, he took ownership of his father’s Army truck and contents. There were photos of his dad in uniform, the ring and other belongings. Bill says his mother never remarried after his father died. He said she was both a mother and a father to him and did a great job.

“He was a good man,” said 92-year-old Odessa Oglesby Johnson, the sister of Lola Harris. “I remember him well. We used to call him Ike. It was sad when he was killed. Little Billy was so young at that time. He wasn’t over there hardly any time before he was killed. Sure was a sad time.”

Johnson’s husband, Leandery Boyd, was also drafted overseas with the Army. He served 23 months.

Bill was born in St. Louis, Mo., but when his father was drafted into the Army, his mother moved them back to her parents Author and Perley Oglesby in Everett, a little community on the Logan/Todd line. It was there she received the news her husband had been killed.

“I remember seeing a telegram where at first they said my father was missing in action. But later I suppose they found him and buried him in Belgium,” said Bill, who has never been able to go and visit the cemetery so far away.

“I’ve seen pictures of his grave and I’ve always wanted to go there, but I just never got the chance,” said Bill.

After talking with Bill, Robbins quickly made it back to the city to email Kaiser and let him know that she had found Carl’s son.

“I was so excited to email him back. I couldn’t believe I found his son. I just knew Chris would be so excited,” said Robbins.

From there on Robbins has been emailing photographs of Harris and a plethora of information Kaiser did not have.

“The next time I visit his grave, which will be Nov. 29th, the day he was killed in action, I will lay down some flowers on his grave and have a little prayer for him,” said Kaiser. “Between those graves I feel very thankful that my family and I can live in freedom.”

Bill Harris has one daughter, Teresa Lynn Poole, two grandchildren, and one great-grandchild. He loves to fish and spend time with his family. Bill joined the United States Navy during the Vietnam War and served his country for four years overseas. He said he wasn’t going to wait to be drafted, but found out later he never would have been since having a father who had died in action.

“I am proud to have served my country,” said Bill Harris. “That is what you do as Americans. When your country needs you, you go no matter what the cost.”

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