

H-France Salon
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The Épinal Project

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The Épinal project began with an email from Monsieur Joel Houot, a French citizen from the village of Val d'Ajol, to Mary Louise Roberts, professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Mr. Houot wrote to Professor Roberts, an historian of the American G.I.s in Normandy, to request information about Robert Kellett, an American G.I. buried in Épinal military cemetery. Mr. Houot had just "adopted" the grave of Kellett in a "parrainage" or gravesite adoption program at the cemetery. His responsibilities were to keep Kellett's gravesite clean and flowered and to visit it frequently throughout the year. Mr. Houot wanted to be in contact, if possible, with Kellett's family in Wisconsin. The email was as follows:

Bonjour madame...Je demeure dans le village du Val d'Ajol dans les Vosges, et non loin de la se trouve le cimetièrè américain du Quéquement à Dinozé-Épinal ou repose 5255 sodats américains tombés pour notre liberté. J'appartiens à une association qui consiste a parrainer une ou plusieurs tombes de soldat...a nous de les honorer et à fleurir leur dernière demeure... Nous avons les noms et le matricule de ces héros et également leur état d'origine...moi même je parraine le lieutenant KELLETT, Robert matricule 01061440 qui a servi au 315th infantry régiment de la 79 th infantry division, il a été tué le 20 novembre 1944 sur le sol de France...il a encore de la famille pouvez vous m'aider a la retrouver. Malheureusement je ne parle pas anglais et ne sait ou m'adresser pour orienter mes recherches...merci

Professor Roberts decided that the research requested by Mr. Houot might make a good extra credit project for one of the students in her class History 357, The Second World War, which she was currently teaching. She presented Mr. Houot's appeal to the class, showing them Val d'Ajol on Google maps, and reading aloud an English translation of his email. The students were touched by the request. When it came time to volunteer, every hand in the room went up. So Professor Roberts wrote back to Mr. Houot requesting more names of soldiers resting in the U.S. military cemetery in Épinal. Two weeks later, an email arrived from Jocelyne Papeard-Brescia, the director of the "parrainage" program at Épinal. A retired elementary school principal, Madame Papeard-Brescia started the adoption program in 2012. She sent Professor Roberts the names of several soldiers, describing them as "boys buried in Épinal World War Two U.S. cemetery." Most exciting to the students was the fact that all the soldiers were from their home state of Wisconsin.

In this way, the Épinal project was born. Over the course of the semester, 43 students worked on "their" boys from Wisconsin. They dug out local newspapers for obituaries and other bits of information about their chosen soldier. They worked with archivists at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. They learned how to use ancestry.com in order to access birth and census data. They researched and contacted living relatives of their soldier. Some students visited the old addresses of their soldier in order to take a picture of his home at the time of the war. Still others did web research, uncovering division and battalion histories for the units in which their soldier served. In short, the students learned the basics of research, using traditional resources such as archives and newspapers as well as newer web-based ones. We were able to locate members of Kellett's family, who have now met

Joel Houot. We were lucky enough to have a first-rate genealogist, Joyce Nigbor, auditing the class. Joyce's research knowledge proved invaluable, and she very much enjoyed pitching in to help the students.

Professor Roberts also worked to obtain official documents from the United States Army, in particular, the IDTP files (Individual Deceased Personnel File) which the Army keeps on file for each soldier. These files vary greatly in size and documentation, but in general they provided the students with a rich set of data: the location and date of the soldier's death and the medical reason for his decease. These files also contain correspondence with the soldier's family concerning their wishes for the burial of the body. Such correspondence was sometimes vivid and heart-breaking. As such, it brought home to the students the costs of war in a way which no other reading that semester had managed to do.

Our efforts culminated in a book entitled *Our Wisconsin Boys in Épinal Military Cemetery, France*. Each student who had participated in the project received a free copy of the book. We also sent several copies to the personnel in the Freedom of Information Act\Privacy Act Office Human Resources Command, which had cut so much red tape for us in delivering the IDTP files in a timely manner. One staff member in this office, Corinne Hagen, began circulating the book in meetings held around the nation for families of soldiers with MIA status. These families deeply appreciated the students' efforts. As Ms. Hagen wrote in an email,

Professor Roberts,

It is with sincere appreciation that I send this response to you. I want you and your students to know that your project touched the hearts of multiple family members who stopped to read about your soldiers. Grief seems to be such an individual and often isolating experience, but your research and the compassion that was conveyed through your narratives established connections with those who read your stories. These soldiers became more than just a name carved on a piece of stone or listed on a piece of paper. They became real people with loved ones who were part of a community and their stories generated cathartic memories and discussions.... The former spouse of a soldier who remains unaccounted-for from Vietnam was visibly moved by PFC Hinrichs's story and the compassion expressed by the former combat medic. She remarked, "we are family despite the passage of time or the conflict," adding that her sense of helplessness surrounding his death still haunts her.... You touched many lives and I truly applaud your effort! You gave these family members hope that their soldiers are as real to others as they are to them and hope that they will not be forgotten. Thank you!!

The final stage of the Épinal Project was a trip made by Professor Roberts to the cemetery in order to deliver the book in person to Jocelyne Papelard-Brescia. When she arrived in Épinal on a snowy day in January, she was greeted by a sizable group of local civilians, including Mr. Houot, U.S. Army personnel, and the Vosges press. Jocelyne Papelard-Brescia had brought a beautiful bouquet of roses, with one long-stemmed white rose to honor each soldier researched by the students. After a brief meeting and press conference in the office of the Epinal cemetery, Roberts and a delegation of French civilians and U.S. Army personnel visited each soldier's gravesite, flowering the grave, saying a few words of gratitude, and taking a photograph. After all the graves had been so honored, the delegation went out for a delicious lunch at a nearby restaurant where toasts were made to Franco-American relations. When Professor Roberts returned to Madison, she sent a photograph of the decorated grave to the student who had researched that particular soldier.

News of the Épinal Project was disseminated in the local Madison papers as well as several alumni and development publications. It created a groundswell of good will and appreciation for the University of Wisconsin Madison, particularly among alumni and donors.

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