

Searching for Frank

VFW member travels to Normandy to visit site of uncle's death

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Jim Pasqualini's search for his uncle's final moment landed him in Normandy, France, face-to-face with an old stone church sitting at the center of a roundabout and guarded by two oak trees towering over its steps.

He stood there, studying a World War II battle map that had taken him on a route through a swath of old farm homes flying both the French and U.S. flags across Saint-Georges-d'Elle, a small village about six miles northeast of St. Lo, France.

"I couldn't take my eyes off of this old stone church," said Pasqualini, a retired Army lieutenant colonel and member of the VFW Department of Virginia residing in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. "I just knew that my uncle had seen this church on the day he died."

Frank Pasqualini had lived through D-Day, being one of the first on the shores of Omaha along the coast of Normandy with the 741st Tank Battalion. But unlike the U.S. troops that would later bask in the glorious sea of Parisians welcoming their saviors during a parade across the Champs Elysees, he met his fate on July 11, 1944 — a month and 18 days before the liberation.

"He was the only one of my four uncles that died in battle during WWII," Pasqualini said. "I remember my grandma, Dina, speak fondly about him. I always wanted to honor him by visiting the site where he died 75 years ago."

Prior to his trip to France in November 2019, Pasqualini had previously honored his uncle Frank by arranging a memorial ceremony at Richmond National Cemetery in Virginia, where a joint grave held his uncle and two other men, Thomas R. Fair and Willis E. Nixon.

At Saint-Georges-d'Elle, however, Pasqualini came full circle.

The locals in Saint-Georges-d'Elle, a community of about 200 residents, showed Pasqualini and his girlfriend around, helping him decipher the exact location where in 1944 a German

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rocket obliterated his uncle's M4 Sherman tank — taking the lives of four of the five soldiers inside.

During a dinner visit with a French couple residing in one of the 20 modern townhomes in town, Pasqualini found his answer. The couple happened to live behind a ravine dubbed “Purple Heart Draw” by the Americans during the war, a nickname attributed to the loss of many U.S. soldiers that died fighting to overtake Hill 192 from the Germans.

“We started to line the roads up with the map at dinner, and it turned out that their house was exactly where two of the four Sherman tanks were destroyed. Now I'm not entirely sure if my uncle was in one of those two, but we were at least within 100 yards of where he was killed,” Pasqualini stopped. “I had seen what he saw on his last day of life.”