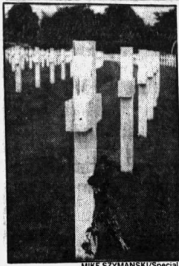


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Flowers recall Aibel war dead

## Belgians set big salute to American war heroes

By Michael Szymanski

**AUBEL, Belgium** — The Americans are coming — again. This Saturday and for the next two weeks, they will come to be part of this tiny farm village's biggest celebration ever.

The celebration here is one of hundreds in small towns across Europe this year to honor the Americans who came to free them in World War II.

Forty years ago this fall, a boy signaled the end of German reign when he ran down the cobblestone streets of his 3,100-person town yelling, "The Americans are here!"

Today, the 3,369 citizens in this community are welcoming back the liberators — or their survivors.

Overlooking Aibel in the Berwinne Valley of the Ardennes plateau are 8,439 white crosses that are part of the Henri-Chappelle American Cemetery, the largest of five American memorials in this lowland country. The cemetery commemorates the Americans who died in the Battle of the Bulge, and those who plowed through northern France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and Germany.

"So many more men than in our little village died for us," said Francois Flechet, a lifetime Aibel resi-

dent. "They were strangers. We are forever grateful."

Flechet, 66, will greet at the cemetery 300 soldiers and families of soldiers, including veterans from Florida and other parts of the Southeast. He has been greeting Americans here for more than 25 years.

Some of the French-speaking Belgians have never met an American, yet their loyalty is strong. Schoolchildren have learned songs in a language they don't understand. Housewives have prepared guest rooms for people they don't know.

In Aibel, everyone has a relative, friend or neighbor who was killed when the Germans invaded. Every-

one has a story to tell. The stories are most easily heard, and heard again, in the Cafe Pasteger, a tavern near the Saint Hubert Cathedral across from City Hall.

Tavern owner Alexis Jacquinet, known as Titi, a red-faced man with a gold front tooth, will pour Belgian Loburg beer while he reminisces in the tavern about "Yanks coming to town."

"It is not easy to tell our children what occurred, but we must," Titi said. "We must tell them how it was to be hungry or to have less liberty than our dogs. Dogs could run free, but we would be shot."

His uncle, then 45 years old, was one of the first people in the valley killed by Germans when a shell hit

his tractor in May 1940. Uncle Norbert Jacquinet's grave is in the church cemetery next to rows of others — mostly teenagers — who died between May and November of that year.

"We were not strong enough" to run away," Titi said.

Perhaps by choice, most people recall the good times of liberation rather than the bad times of occupation.

"It was much like this way 40 years ago," Flechet said. The church has been in the same spot since 1391. Jacques Pomme's family had a farm in the same place just as long. He still lives there. Pomme, 76, himself a farmer, downed a Stella Aertis, Flemish beer, before he told his story of the liberation, through Titi's translation.

"The Resistance knew that when the Germans were away from our village we would signal the Americans over the hill to come," Pomme said, "by putting Belgian flags in our fields. I waited by the small window in the farmhouse until they were gone and went out to put one up. Then bombs came down. I don't know where from."

The Americans brought butter, oranges and chewing gum. Belgian and American flags were hung in the windows, Pomme said.

"Everyone was singing and dancing with the infantry," Flechet interrupted. "They taught us many things, some not so good."

The Americans taught Titi how to smoke. He has a prized photograph of the soldiers, the tanks and himself, at 12 years old.

"I support America and their leaders," Titi said. "I prefer a missile in the garden rather than a Russian in the kitchen."

At the cemetery on a typical day, an old woman carrying pink roses wrapped in an apron walked through rows of identical crosses, stopped at one, knelt and prayed. She left the flowers. That ritual is common for the people of Aibel, some of whom have adopted certain soldiers' graves for decades.

During the celebration, Americans will be guided to graves of their loved ones by village children who will greet them with flags and hugs. Despite the usual 300 days of rain, a million visitors are expected at the cemetery this year, including 150,000 Americans.

Among the rhododendrons and weeping willows, three brothers lay side by side and 32 other pairs of brothers are buried. And, 123 Georgians are buried here.

One American returning to Aibel this month is Frank W. Towers, a 65-year-old captain of the 1st Army's "Old Hickory" 30th Division. Towers, a retired University of Florida computer worker, plans to present the flag that was flown at the White House on the day that each city in the area was liberated.

The missing commemorated Georgians at Henri-Chappelle are:

- Sgt. Corris M. Adcock, 341st Bomb Squad.
- Pfc. Hoke B. Evans, 12th Infantry, 4th Division.
- Cpl. Horace G. Meisner, 81st Combat, 106th Division.
- 2nd Lt. Robert W. Steele, 429th Bomb Squad.
- Sgt. Floyd Wingate, 545th Bomb Squad.

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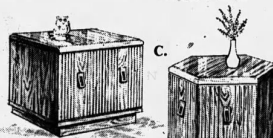
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