

D-Day's legacy

Humble men living in occupied France risked their lives to help a young American airman, Eliot Shapleigh Sr.



By Louie Gilot
El Paso Times

LA VALLEE-MULATRE, France — The letter arrived from the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

"Dear Eliot, the last page of a long story has just been turned. Our father, Albert, died two weeks ago. Both our fathers wrote a very great part of our history together. Times are different for your country."

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, reflected on those words.

"Albert" was Albert Vaillant, one of four French farmers who lied, stole and risked their lives to hide Shapleigh's father, Eliot Shapleigh Sr., after he parachuted into Nazi-occupied France during World War II.



Maes



Vaillant

► Cartoonist used D-Day experience 1B

"These men now have passed away, but their legacy of fighting for freedom will never pass away," the senator said.

Of his father's four rescuers, only one, Marcel Closset, survives. Marie-Josée Vaillant died of cancer in the 1970s. Pierre Maes died last September.

And in their thoughtfully worded letter, Albert Vaillant's children informed Shapleigh that their father died in November.

Shapleigh's father died of pancreatic cancer at age 70 in 1991. After World War II, Shapleigh Sr. went on to a successful business career in El Paso and raised three equally successful boys. None of it would have happened, however, had he not survived the accidental crash of his P-51 Mustang on its way to

Nacho L. Garcia Jr. / El Paso Times

Historic day still apparent at Omaha Beach

OMAHA BEACH, France — In the movies, Omaha Beach doesn't look so big. But in real life, the largest of the five landing areas of the June 6, 1944, Normandy invasion is six miles long. To my eye it was endless, fading beyond my realm of vision.

It was pleasant, too, when I came home to France for a visit in April. The sand was golden, soft — cleaned of all the ordnance from many years ago. The sun shone. Mine is a beautiful country, I thought.

But this beautiful beach



Louie Gilot

is made solemn by a past revisited in myriad D-Day museums that honor the 150,000 British, French, Canadian and American troops who landed on this coast in 1944, and the graves of nearly 10,000 at the American Cemetery in

St. Laurent-sur-Mer.

I mentally lined the immense beach with concrete tank traps, blackened the horizon with warships and littered the sand with the bodies of U.S. soldiers who traveled so far to die so mercilessly, mowed down by Nazi fire. How did it sound? How did it smell?

It's hard to fathom but impossible to forget once you've been there.

Local villagers protect the legacy. They opened the "museums," simple displays of artifacts and weapons that landed in their back yards 58 years

ago. Americans pay \$7 to \$10 in hopes of uncovering a relative's name or a familiar town.

Farther inland, where the news of D-Day drove Nazi occupiers to desperation and vengeance, there are no tourists — only the names of the Resistance fighters who were sent to concentration camps at the 11th hour engraved on granite in quaint town squares.

In this countryside, many U.S. heroes parachuted and died. Some were saved by equally brave Frenchmen and their families. They, too, are remembered.

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh asked me to deliver copies of Texas Senate Proclamation No. 393, which he drafted to salute the heroism of Marcel Closset, Pierre Maes and Albert Vaillant, the men who saved his father's life. At the sight of the official-looking paper with the gold seal of the state of Texas, Marcel Closset, 87, chuckled, flattered but modest.

And I thought how fortunate I am to witness this moment, to be a minuscule part of history.

Louie Gilot may be reached at lgilot@elpasotimes.com

Please see Legacy 2A

Legacy

Continued from 1A

Czechoslovakia, 10 days before D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Fifty-eight years ago today, the Allies invaded France. That day marked the beginning of the end of World War II. For Shapleigh Sr. and other U.S. pilots who had crash-landed or parachuted into Northern France near the Belgian border, it marked the beginning of a countdown to their return home.

The Maeses

This April, at a small farm in Tupigny, Marie-Therèse Maes respectfully laid on her kitchen table the family's prized possession — a pilot's whistle given to them by Eliot Shapleigh Sr. 58 years ago as a token of gratitude to her late husband, Pierre Maes.

She picked it up and put it back down carefully as she told her story.

On May 27, 1944, Lt. Shapleigh bailed out of his fighter plane when the engine conked out. He broke his ankle and limped toward the relative safety of the dark forest of Andigny. A lumberjack gave Shapleigh butter cookies but left him in the forest.

That afternoon, a young farmer named Pierre Maes was on his way to drain a pond and came face to face with the equally surprised Shapleigh. The American put out his hands, as if waiting to be handcuffed. The French man laughed and carried him on his back all the way to the family farm.

Both men were 23. "I think that's why (Maes) did it. (Shapleigh) was a young one, like him," Marie-Therèse Maes said.

Shapleigh wasn't the only downed American pilot in the area. About a dozen had white-knuckle landings in either their crippled planes or strapped into their parachutes. They had been flying over the area between their base in England and their targets in Germany. To this day, local farmers remember fondly the American airmen they helped, calling them by their first names, "Eliot," "Clyde."

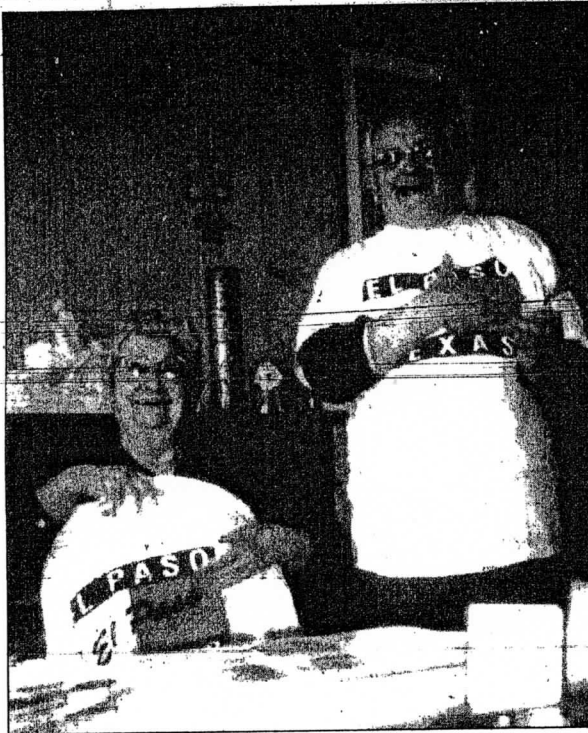
Those friendships and memories came at the greatest risk.

At a D-Day museum in Normandy, a yellowed Nazi warning dated 1941 reads: "Any person of masculine gender who helps directly or indirectly the crews ... of enemy planes by aiding their escape or hiding them or helping them in any other way, will immediately be shot to death."

Another warning dated July 10, 1942, added that the male relatives of such a person, including brothers-in-law and cousins, would also be shot to death.

Women would be sent to concentration camps in Germany, the warning went on.

At the Maes farm, Pierre Maes' father was growing nervous with the frequent visits of German soldiers looking for the downed plane's pilot. After two days, he commanded his son to turn



Photos by Louie Gilot / El Paso Times

Alice and Marcel Closset model some of the El Paso souvenirs they brought back from their numerous trips to the United States. In 1944, Marcel Closset helped hide Eliot Shapleigh Sr.



Marie-Therèse Maes, widow of Pierre Maes, received a proclamation from state Sen. Eliot Shapleigh honoring her husband's bravery. On the document is the pilot's whistle Shapleigh's father gave Pierre in 1944.

Shapleigh over to members of the French Resistance.

Before leaving, Shapleigh slipped his whistle in Maes' hand. "(Pierre) never parted with it," his widow said.

The Clossets

German soldiers and the jack-booted Gestapo regularly roamed the countryside in 1944 because under the seemingly peaceful surface worked a vibrant Resistance network with about 250 members.

The Resistance fighter who came to the Maes farm to see about the downed American pilot was Marcel Closset, who was then 29 and "hot-headed."

"We were young. We listened

to (Resistance leader Gen. Charles) de Gaulle on the (London) radio, and we were fed up with the German occupation," said Closset, now 87. "We blew up bridges, hid in fields and the forest."

But rescuing an American soldier would be the greatest act of defiance against the Nazis.

"We had almost gotten one," said Closset, an excited smile rejuvenating his wrinkled face.

A little before Shapleigh landed near the forest, another American pilot had fallen into a tree. But that man was so badly wounded that the Resistance told Closset and his friends to smuggle him out of the region for medical treatment.

So, when Closset heard about Shapleigh, he couldn't wait to meet him.

The two men, who relied on Shapleigh's Army-issued foreign phrase book to communicate, became fast friends. Always on the move, they stayed in the forest and in neighboring fields, avoiding Nazi roadblocks.

Nowadays, Closset and his wife, Alice, live in a traditional French farmhouse and raise cows and chickens.

The interior, however, is unexpected.

"Here, everything is El Paso," Closset said.

On his walls are copies of paintings of desert dunes by Tom Lea and Native Americans by Manny Acosta, a U.S. flag and a menu of La Posta Restaurant in Old Mesilla. Closset writes with an El Paso Museum of Art pen. He wears "El Paso, Texas" T-shirts.

They are all souvenirs from their 10 or so visits to the hometown of the man he rescued.

The Vaillants

In June 1944, however, Closset was desperate for a permanent hideout for Shapleigh, a place where the American could nurse his throbbing ankle.

Closset took Shapleigh to the home of his sister and her husband: a farm at La Vallée-Mulâtre, on the north side of the forest.

In their children's bedroom, Marie-Josée and Albert Vaillant hastily plastered a false wall, cutting the space into two. The entrance to the secret room, a trap door near the floor, was camouflaged by their sons' bed and crib. There Shapleigh stayed still and quiet during the day, as Nazi soldiers had decided to use this farm as one of their headquarters and often walked in and out of the boys' bedroom.

At night, the American crawled out of the room, and under the cover of dark, shook off his stiffness in the nearby fields. Sometimes he went on sabotage missions with his Resistance friends. Many nights he cried for home.

This lasted three long months. At the same time, the Vaillants were hiding another Allied soldier in their attic.

The danger of the situation was evident to his late parents, said Gérard Vaillant, their third son, who was not born at the time. It wasn't rare to be betrayed by neighbors who talked to the Nazis for favors or under torture.

Albert Vaillant was not a member of the French Resistance. He was a family man and a farmer.

"But he was a man of character. He couldn't stand the invasion of his country, and he thought it was normal to help out," Gérard Vaillant said.

Shapleigh was reunited with his compatriots in the beginning of September 1944, as American troops painstakingly made their way through French villages, liberating them from the German invaders.

Shapleigh and the Vaillants kept in touch through letters, and in 1980, Gérard Vaillant took his father to El Paso.

"It was a great moment," he recalled.

Marie-Josée Vaillant died of cancer at age 63. Her husband lived until the age of 95. Strong-willed until the end, Albert Vaillant drove his car until the age of 91 and didn't quit working the farm until he was 93.

The two families established a bond, and in time, Vaillant family members went to El Paso. The Shapleigh sons, Ballard, Eliot Jr. and Colby, visited La Vallée-Mulâtre as vacationing college students.

When in France, Sen. Shapleigh met people who had kept pieces of his father's wrecked plane and who could still recall a day-to-day account of the events.

"This story captures a larger-than-life era," said the senator, sitting in his Central El Paso office recently. "These young men of different cultures and those four months defined their entire lives and our countries."

Louie Gilot may be reached at lgilot@elpasotimes.com

U.S. to ask E to urge Pales

By Barbara Slavin

USA Today

WASHINGTON — When Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak goes to Camp David this weekend, he will do so as the only foreign leader besides Britain's Tony Blair ever invited by President Bush to the Maryland retreat. The favored treatment is a sign of the importance Bush places on Egypt in the war on terrorism and the search for Middle East peace.

But Mubarak, 74, who arrived in Washington on Wednesday and sees Vice President Dick Cheney and other top officials today, will not hear what he wants: a plan for Israeli-Arab peace and a deadline for creating a Palestinian state.

A senior administration official says Bush instead will urge Mubarak to put more pressure on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to reform the governing Palestinian Authority.

The Bush administration has yet to give specifics about how it

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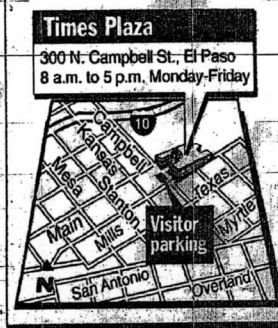
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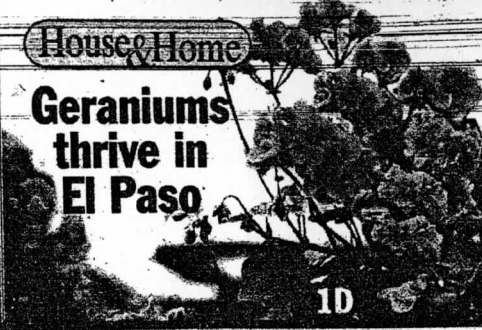


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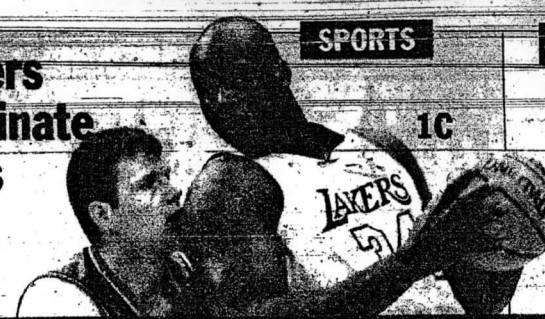
Scorpions still rock



Geraniums thrive in El Paso



Lakers dominate Nets



Wal-Mart to open East Side grocery

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JUNE 6, 2002

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Perry Reyes

U.S. to help build 1-stop inspection sites in area

By Gary Scharrer
Austin Bureau

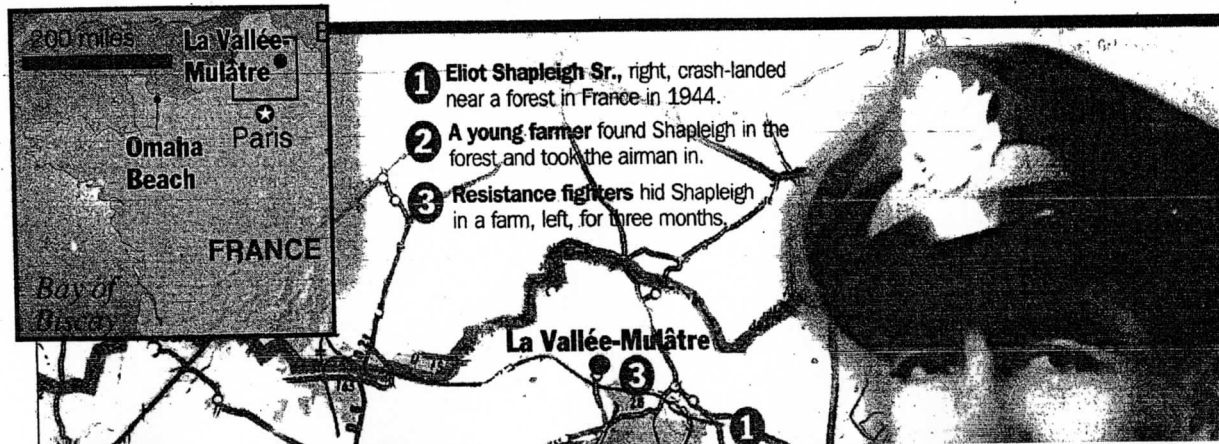
El Paso will get the first one-stop border inspection station from \$40.8 million the U.S. Department of Transportation is giving Texas to help expedite border traffic safely and efficiently.

The first one-stop station is to be built at the Zaragoza-Ysleta border crossing, officials said. Another one-stop inspection station will be built at El Paso's Bridge of the Americas.

Brownsville and Laredo also will get two one-stop

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- 1 Eliot Shapleigh Sr., right, crash-landed near a forest in France in 1944.
- 2 A young farmer found Shapleigh in the forest and took the airman in.
- 3 Resistance fighters hid Shapleigh in a farm, left, for three months.

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