The French have not forgotten her husband

Larry Alexander Staff | Posted: Thursday, March 16, 2006 8:08 am

A small bronze plaque being erected in France to commemorate an American airman who died six decades ago tugs at the heartstrings of a Lancaster County woman.

In 1945, Mildred Steed was just 26 years old and the mother of a 7-month-old infant when a plane piloted by her 25-year-old husband, 1st Lt. George Hubert Steed, crashed in France following a bombing mission over Holland.

"It was absolutely devastating," Mrs. Steed said. "But that was 61 years ago."

That's why Mrs. Steed was so taken aback when she was contacted recently for information about her late husband. Both Ralph Conte, a veteran who served in the same bomb group as Lt. Steed, and a Frenchman named Jean-Louis Robin wanted to talk to her about her long-dead husband.



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First Lt. George Hubert Steed during World War II

Robin, now 77, remembers being a teenager and living under Nazi occupation in France. Today, he is part of an organization called the Le Souvenir Francais, the French Remembrance Association, one of goal of which is to erect monuments in France where Allied airmen died in the fight to liberate Europe.

Men like Steed.

The only son of a minister, George Steed was born in Lynchburg, Va., and later attended Franklin & Marshall College. While living in Lancaster, he met his future wife, who lived in Paradise. After Steed graduated from F&M in June 1941, he and Mildred were married and moved to New York City.

With the war on, Steed enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Force in early 1942 and was trained to fly twin-engine bombers.

Mrs. Steed dutifully followed her husband from camp to camp during his training, trying to grab every moment they could spend together before he was shipped overseas. Their son, Alan, was born during this time.

Shortly afterward, Steed was off to war.

"I am so glad he got to see his son before he left," Mrs. Steed said.

With her husband gone, Mrs. Steed returned to Paradise with their child. She eventually took a job in the credit office at Watt & Shand department store.

The dreaded War Department telegram came a few months later, telling her Lt. Steed had died in action on Feb. 9, 1945.

Steed, who had been attached to the 416th Bomb Group out of Melun, France, had been piloting a Douglas A-26 Invader fighter-bomber on a mission to Holland. On the return flight to his base, a former Luftwaffe airfield taken over by the Americans when the Germans retreated, the young pilot's plane ran out of fuel and he was forced to crash-land near the town of Oissel near the Seine River.

Steed's gunner, Carl E. Tranchina, was badly injured. Pulled from the wreckage by French civilians, he spent the next five months in a hospital, but recovered.

The crash killed Steed, who was buried in a temporary grave until his widow requested in 1948 that his remains be returned. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Robin found the crash site a few years ago and began trying to track down information about the American who died there, intending to place a bronze tablet atop a small granite marker.

His search led him to Conte, who discovered that Robin already had a great deal of information about Steed.

"He had done a tremendous job in tracking down more information than I can get here in the states," Conte said.

But Robin did not know the whereabouts of Steed's surviving family until Conte discovered that the airman had a connection to Lancaster County.

With the help of the Intelligencer Journal, Conte was able to find Mrs. Steed. Finding her made Conte happy, but unnerved the war widow.

"There are so many telephone scams around that I didn't know what to think," she said.

She finally decided that Conte "sounded authentic," and cooperated.

Mrs. Steed was very surprised, yet very reluctant to dredge up all of the old memories.

"I wasn't too thrilled at first," she said. "That was 61 years ago, and I wasn't anxious to go through it again."

However, she appreciated the gesture of the Souvenir Francais.

"I think it's a very nice thing they are doing," she said.

Although her son, Alan, died 10 years ago at age 51, she has a grandson, Andrew, whom she felt would be "very interested in hearing about this."

Today, the 87-year-old widow still chokes up at the memory of her strapping, 6-foot-tall husband, with his quick smile and wavy, reddish-blonde hair.

"He was quite fun-loving," she said.

"It was absolutely devastating. But that was 61 years ago."

Mildred Steed

World War II widow