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Normandy: One Soldier's unexpected home away from home

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SAINTE MERE EGLISE, France -- In the few days that I have been in this town I have continuously heard about the great respect and friendship between the French citizens here and American servicemembers, and in my ventures into town I have felt a great deal of camaraderie. But I believe it was not until last night that I was able to truly experience the bond that exists between the American military and the people of Normandy.



SPC ADRIENNE KILLINGSWORTH

Residents of local communities in and around Sainte Mere Eglise, France hand out champagne to servicemembers in preparation for a friendship toast, June 3. The group of more than 350 servicemembers, currently in the Normandy region supporting events in honor of the 65th anniversary of D-Day, was invited to dinner in the citizens' homes as a show of appreciation for the liberation of France as a result of the Normandy invasion.

Families in and around Sainte Mere Eglise volunteered to share their lives with more than 350 servicemembers from Task Force Normandy by taking small groups of the troops into their homes for dinner.

When I found out I would be one of the invited servicemembers, I saw it as an opportunity to broaden my experience here and to enjoy some delicious French food. I also -- perhaps mistakenly -- thought it might be a good chance to use some of the four years of French I endured in high school 10 years ago.

Last night -- the night of the dinner -- my fellow invited servicemembers and I were ushered into a warehouse, where we were stood in formation before the host families. As I waited, I felt almost like I was at a high school dance. We looked at them, they looked at us. Who would pick me? I secretly hoped I wouldn't be left standing there with no family to take me home.

It wasn't long before I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see the kind, smiling face of

Didier Corniere. He motioned to me and his gestures asked if I would like to come with him. He pointed to two other military police Soldiers from my brigade who were also going with him. I smiled and said, "Oui."



MASTER SGT DONALD SPARKS

Spc. Adrienne Killingsworth, public affairs specialist for the 18th Military Police Brigade, stands with her French host, Didier Corniere, at a memorial to World War II veteran Sgt. Owen B. Hill in the town of Chef Du Pont, France, June 3. Killingsworth was one of more than 350 servicemembers invited to dinner in the homes of Normandy area families as a gesture of appreciation for the Soldiers who liberated their town on D-Day, 65 years ago.

and that she spoke some English. Now it was my turn to look relieved.

We gathered around the table: Didier, Sandrine, their children Amandine, Geoffrey and Melanie, some more extended family, our unofficial translator Elodie and we three Soldiers. We laughed as we struggled to find a balance between hand signals, broken English and my dreadful French. It was a laughter that would come to epitomize our night.

As we made our way through course after course of delicious French cuisine we toasted anything and everything that bonded us. Growing up, these were the kind of dinners I experienced with my own family. Laughter, silliness and warmth were a part of almost every dinner at my parents' house. Now I was experiencing them with a French family I had just met.

The night passed quickly and they didn't want to seem to let us go. "No curfew," they said. But it was late and we all had to work in the morning. They resisted, but we traded contact

I stumbled through explaining that I spoke a little bit of French. A look of relief washed over his face as he started asking me questions in French and gathered us together to head to his home. I began to think I might be in over my head by claiming to speak his language.

Didier and I struggled through some conversations about the history of World War II and the paratroopers who landed in the fields near his home. He took us to a monument in his town -- called Chef du Pont -- in honor of World War II veteran and 82nd Airborne Division paratrooper Sgt. Owen B. Hill, and then we headed to the Corniere home for dinner.

The home is a cozy one, and when we walked in I could smell dinner cooking and hear the sound of laughter coming from the back yard. As the rest of the Corniere family came to the foyer to greet us, I felt a familiarity and a comfort I hadn't expected.

Sandrine Corniere introduced herself and when Didier told her I spoke French she smiled and had the same look of relief I had seen on her husband's face earlier. She explained to me that one of her daughter's friends, Elodie, would be joining us for dinner

information and said we would keep in touch. Many, many cheek kisses later, we were on our way back to world of the U.S. Army.

Despite the language barrier, or maybe because of it, I had more fun last night than I've had so far during this week in Normandy. To think that the gratitude of the residents of Normandy has not just survived the six and a half decades since D-Day, but really thrived, was not something I would never have believed had I not experienced it myself.



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