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Nashville World War II flier's heroism bonds cities, souls

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Tennessee Voices

The request from Steve Schmoldt came in the form of a forwarded e-mail in October of last year: Capt. Charles M. Peal, a 25-year-old World War II ace fighter pilot from Nashville and graduate of Hume-Fogg High School, was killed while flying a mission over Crouy, France.

In appreciation, the people of Crouy erected a monument in Peal's memory and named a street after him.

"Therefore, I propose that the citizens of Nashville extend their hand in friendship in appreciation of Crouy's care and respect in honoring the memory of Capt. Peal," Schmoldt wrote, "and declare Nashville and Crouy friendship cities."

Soon after, I met with Schmoldt. I learned that while working as a cemetery groundskeeper in Nashville, he had noticed with dismay that the grave marker of Capt. Peal was in disrepair. He asked his supervisor for permission to refurbish it. In working on the marker, Schmoldt's curiosity led him to the Internet and to the Tennessee State Archives for research that revealed the details of the death of Peal, a native Nashvillian.

While flying over Crouy, a tiny village about 72 miles northeast of Paris, Peal saw an enemy supply train loaded with munitions stopped at the train station and fired on it. The train exploded, Peal's plane was caught up in the explosion, and he was killed.

The townspeople of then-occupied Crouy retrieved the soldier's body and risked their own lives to give him a proper funeral service and burial in the town cemetery.

After the war, Peal's parents were asked if they wished to transfer the body of their beloved son to a U.S. military cemetery in France or to bring him home and bury him in a cemetery here in Nashville. They wanted him home.

After my meeting with Schmoldt, my family and I went to Woodlawn Cemetery. We found Peal's grave. His marker is simple but looks shiny and new; his mother and father are buried next to him.

Keeping pilot's memory alive

Since then, I have seen pictures of young Charlie, as he was known to his family and friends. I've seen his senior signature in the Hume-Fogg yearbook and the description of him as "bashful" by his classmates. And I've seen a picture of him and his bride, Norma Moore, beaming with joy on their wedding day, only a couple of months before he was killed.

Thanks to Steve Schmoldt, the memory of Capt. Charles M. Peal is being kept alive here at home as well as in the little French village where he lost his life. The proposal Schmoldt made last fall has come to fruition.

Monday, it will be my privilege to serve as interpreter for Schmoldt as he travels to Peal's memorial halfway around the world. On that day, Crouy and Nashville will officially become international friendship cities.

As the mayoral proclamation declares, this relationship "will remind all the citizens of Crouy and Nashville that the personal and national ties that bind us all together are much stronger than any challenges to peace and liberty that we may face individually or collectively."

Rita Richardson is a French teacher in Nashville and vice president of Sister Cities of Nashville.

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