

May 12, 2013

## TRACING PASTS

# Genealogy with a French twist

By **JOAN POTTER**

Bay County Genealogical Society

On a trip to France on July 4, 2012, my daughter and I visited the American Cemetery, which is in a beautiful, serene setting overlooking the Normandy Coast. After the shock of seeing row after row of white marble crosses marking the graves of the 9,387 Americans—most of whom lost their lives in the June 6, 1944 D-Day landings and ensuing operations—we noticed tables with baskets of flowers on them. When we inquired about the flowers, we were told they were freely furnished by the French people as a small way to show their appreciation for the sacrifices made by American Soldiers on D-Day 1944. We were encouraged to pick a soldier, locate his grave, and place a flower in his honor. We chose Army Private 1st Class Thomas P Rogan. Thomas was born in 1913 in New York and died Aug. 21, 1944, in Normandy, France at age 31.

While we were looking for his gravesite, we encountered two ladies with baskets of flowers. After chatting with them, we learned that they visit the cemetery every 4th of July. We expressed our profound thanks. They quickly stopped us and said, "No, thank you for what your soldiers did for us."

We learned that the French felt it was so important to perpetually honor American soldiers who helped liberate France that an organization, Les Fleurs de la Memoire (Flowers of Remembrance), was

organized to keep their memory alive. Members show their eternal gratitude by adopting an American soldier. This adoption is a promise to visit and place flowers on their soldier's grave at least once a year and to pass this commitment down to succeeding family generations.

When I returned home, one of my first projects was going to Ancestry.com to search for descendants so that I could share pictures of Thomas' gravesite. Unfortunately, I found no surviving relatives. Ancestry showed that his sister, Jean, had joined the US Cadet Nurse Corps in 1945, only a year after Thomas' death. His father died in 1976. I can only imagine the conflict his family felt when their only surviving child chose to put herself in harm's way. No record was found of his mother's or sister's death.

Our day had started with a visit to the Normandy beaches. My daughter insisted we do this and nothing could sway her resolve. I was reluctant to see a visual reminder of the estimated 2499 American D Day casualties and the "The Walls of the Missing" which listed names of the 1,557 Americans whose bodies never were found.

Unlike that fateful, cold, stormy day in June 1944, the day we visited was a crisp, cool tranquil morning and the visit turned out to be a highlight of the trip. Gathering sand from Omaha Beach where the Americans landed gave one a feeling of closeness with the young American men who bravely fought and died that day, and the outpouring of appreciation from the French citizens was heartwarming.