

FROM THE S&S ARCHIVES: FRENCH WELCOME THREE YANKS ON HAND FOR D-DAY EVENTS

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STE. MERE EGLISE, France – Three Army paratroopers came to this historic French town during D-Day 1974 commemoration activities to strengthen ties of friendship that have existed for 30 years.

The soldiers, members of the 82nd Airborne Div at Ft. Bragg, N.C., spent the week of the D-Day commemoration in Ste. Mere Eglise, meeting with city officials and residents and acting as official representatives of the division at several ceremonies.



Sgt. Maj. John T. Diffin, left, 2nd Lt. Lee McBride, center, and M. Sgt. Tommie McKoy of the 82nd Airborne Div., during a visit to Ste. Mere Eglise, Normandy, in 1974.
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Sgt. Maj. John T. Diffin, M. Sgt. Tommie McKoy and 2nd Lt. Lee McBride said they had come back here to assure the townspeople that the 82nd values the friendship begun in 1944.

In the predawn hours of June 6, 1944, 14,000 members of the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions dropped into the area around Ste. Mere Eglise as part of the first assault of D-Day. Their assignment was to prevent any German reinforcements from reaching the invasion area on D-Day. It was carried out successfully.

Townspeople gave the three 1974 visitors a warm welcome. Diffin was a special celebrity during the week. The 52-year-old, 30-year Army veteran from Fayetteville, N.C., dropped into a field just outside the town on D-Day as a member of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd.

"When there's a ceremony or an observance in this town, we never have to stay in a hotel," Diffin explained. "We always stay in the homes

of the people. They remember Ste. Mere was the first town in France that was liberated and they remember who did it."

The three soldiers were sent to the observance by 82nd commander Maj. Gen. Frederick Kroesen, Diffin explained.

"He wanted the people to know that the bond between our division and this town is as strong as ever."

McKoy, a veteran of the Korean and Vietnamese wars, said he could sense the friendship when talking with the townspeople – adults and children. McBride noted, "There's something more than just the fact that it's the anniversary of D-Day. There's real affection."

The three paratroopers were presented with two urns of earth by Mrs. Alexandre Renaud, widow of the wartime mayor of the town.

The earth was taken from the site of temporary cemeteries no longer used. American servicemen – many of them members of the 82nd – who were killed in the first hours of D-Day were buried in these cemeteries.

"The urns we had filled with this earth had been accidentally broken at Ft. Bragg and these urns will replace them," Diffin said.

Diffin, McKoy and McBride accepted the urns and presented the town with a plaque from the 82nd at a special banquet in their honor the evening of June 6, 1974.

Diffin told the townspeople he hoped the friendship with Americans would continue always.

"We all have a favorite place and a favorite people, and for me and lots of other soldiers in the 82nd, Ste. Mere is the place and these are the people," he concluded.