

North Carolina Senior Games



Silver Arts

Title of Entry: Lorraine
Sub-category: Personal Experience
Author: Martha E. Pedersen

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Artist's Name: Martha Pedersen
Title of Entry: Lorraine
Category: Literary Arts
Sub-Category: Life Experiences
Outer Banks Senior Games

Lorraine

Here we and all who shall hereafter live in freedom will be reminded that to these men and their comrades we owe a debt to be paid, with grateful remembrance of their sacrifice and with the high resolve that the cause for which they died shall live.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower

Lorraine American Cemetery, in Saint-Avold, France, is the final resting place for 10,489 World War II service men and women. It's the largest of the 12 World War II American cemeteries in Europe. Knowing this didn't prepare me for what was to come.

To enter the cemetery grounds, my husband Jim and I traveled down a short drive to the Visitor's Center. On our left, a row of Scotch pine trees and a long limestone wall shielded the cemetery from view. Upon entering the Visitor's Center, we heard a woman on the phone speaking French. We looked at the photos on the walls and browsed through the books. One listed those buried by date of death. My dad's older brother Nels was shot down and killed during the war. Nels's name was listed on the page for June 29, 1944. The day after his 22nd birthday.

The French government gave the land for Lorraine to the United States as a permanent burial ground. Twenty-six burial grounds and twenty-seven memorials around the world are

administered by the American Battle Monuments Commission. Lorraine is one of them. Each site has a U.S. civil servant employee in the role of Superintendent or Assistant Superintendent. Non-US citizens are hired locally to help with the smooth operation of the cemetery. Valerie, the French national we heard on the phone, worked in the office and became our guide.

“Hello. I’m here to see a grave,” I said.

“Are you family?” she asked.

“Yes. He was my uncle.”

“Let me get a few things and I’ll take you to his grave.”

She grabbed a white plastic pail already stocked with an odd mix of items. It contained a small American flag on a dowel rod, a thick brown sponge – the kind you use to wash your car, and what looked like a large peanut butter jar with a red lid filled with brown sand. “Follow me,” she said.

Valerie gave us some facts about the cemetery, but I wasn’t listening too carefully. We walked down one side of the rectangular, 67’ tall Memorial Building, the path lined with massive hedges of European beech backed by linden trees. I’d been to Arlington National Cemetery several times. This was different. Lorraine was personal. At the top of the wide limestone steps, lined with yew, I stopped. I held my breath. Below me eight sections, called plots, were arranged symmetrically around one large, central ellipse. Opposite the Memorial Building on a small knoll was the overlook – two stone pylons framed a large carved stone eagle facing to its left. Clear pathways circled the plots. Various trees and flowering shrubs added texture, shade,

and color to the grounds. All I saw were the rows and rows of perfect white marble Latin crosses and Stars of David in a sea of green. A deep breath filled my lungs. I thought, *I'm actually here.*

Valerie and Jim hadn't stopped and were down the stairs before I moved. Valerie led us into the central ellipse. She explained the plot – row – grave numbering system but I wasn't listening. This was, and always would be, hallowed ground. After almost 10 years of searching for someone who could tell me anything about my Uncle Nels's time in service, I would soon be standing at his final resting place. For years he had been a photo in a frame with a name but no story. No history. No one in the family ever talked about him. I began searching for anyone who knew him. I failed on that count, but I found the men of the 44th Bomb Group, who graciously shared their experiences of life during the war. We arrived at the grave site.

Plot C – Row 10 – Grave 79

Nels W Pedersen

1LT 506 Bomb Sq 44 Bomb Gp (H)

Illinois June 29 1944

Valerie took a bit of sand from the plastic jar and rubbed it into the letters on Nels's grave marker. With the dry sponge she cleaned off the excess sand. "This makes the engraving stand out more," she said. She planted the American flag in front of the cross. "It's yours to keep." She stood with me for a moment and then stepped back. She and Jim spoke quietly for a while. Their conversation didn't register in my brain. I stood transfixed before the simple perfection of white marble, shedding hot silent tears for a man I never met.

“Would you like me to play “Taps” for your uncle from the memorial?” Valerie asked.

“Yes. I’d like that.” I said.

Valerie left. Only by chance, the grounds keepers were somewhere else. Jim and I were alone in the cemetery. Soon, the recorded sound of a twenty-one-gun salute. Three rifle volleys in perfect unison. A pause. Then “Taps”. The early May morning was sunny and warm, yet I felt a chill as another tear slid down my cheek.

I took some photos of Nels’s grave marker with the flag. The photo of his crew I placed by the flag kept blowing over in the breeze. I wished I had brought the set of photos of Nels and his brothers William (my dad) and John. Neither my dad, John, nor their father had the chance to stand on this spot. It was an honor to represent them.

I wanted to honor the other men of the 44th that were buried there. Jim took our blue folder with the list of twenty-three names, grave locations, and a pencil. His job was to find each grave. Mine was to place the flag and photograph each one. We found the other graves in Plot C and made our way around in a clock-wise direction. C, A, D, F, J, the overlook, K, G, E, B. We visited all 23, but here I mention only a few. 1Lt Coleman Whitaker. 2Lt Robert Dunn. SSgt Anthony Damico. SSgt Reuben Stephanovic. 1Lt George Oliver. SSgt David Andello. TSgt Richard Williams. 1Lt William Loflin. Capt Gus Konstand.

I was unable to just walk from the grave of one man of the 44th to another. I silently read the name on each marker I passed. I marveled at the diversity of rank and unit assignments. Lloyd Ames, PFC, Infantry. Saul Rabinowitz, 2Lt, Armored Division. Erwin H Ramsey, PFC, Engineering Combat Battalion. Kenneth E Faller, TEC4, Stars and Stripes. Warren P Brown, TEC5, Signal Construction Battalion. Clyde M Lewis, PFC, Engineering Dump Truck Company. Brothers buried side-by-side. A Medal of Honor recipient. One of the 151 markers to the unknown. In saying the names of these men, buried far from home, I felt that their service, and sacrifice, were not forgotten.

At each grave for a man of the 44th, I placed the flag in front of his marble cross, supported myself on the cross of the man in front (always checking to see who he was, saying his name, and thanking him for the support), and took a photo. Two of the men on my list, SSgt Edward Thompson and 1Lt Arthur Toepel, were killed in the same flak-induced, mid-air collision that killed Nels. The markers for SSgt Edward Thompson and SSgt Edward G Monteleone, both with the 44th, still had remnants of sand in the etching. I couldn't hurry between markers. I stayed for a moment or two, alone, sitting silently with a comrade of Nels's and of the men I knew. I stood up, walked over to the cross (only a few steps), and removed the flag. I placed my hand on top of the cross and said a silent thank you.

Halfway through our search for graves, we stopped at the overlook. I could see the whole expanse of the cemetery, the 26' tall limestone carving of Saint Avold located over the Memorial Building's tall bronze entry doors, and some of the countryside to the west. The Walls of the Missing held the names of 444 men and flanked the Memorial. We paused and took in the

beauty and peace of the place. After the war, every family had the option to have their serviceman's remains returned home or interred in an overseas cemetery. I felt a debt of gratitude to the families that chose to leave their dead here. A sadness, that was both fresh and felt like a memory, washed through me.

*To those we owe the high resolve that the cause for which they died shall live
Through the grave and gate of death may they pass to their joyful resurrection.*

- *Inscription on the North Pylon of the overlook*

This is my cemetery. These are my boys. Boys I never met but feel I know. Thanks to the stories of the boys who came home.

Our list complete, we returned to Nels's grave. I sat on the blue folder so I didn't get grass stains on my khaki pants, and just looked at the marker. I planted the flag. I tried to talk to him. There was so much to say, so much I wanted to know, but silence was all I had. Nels was the reason for this pilgrimage, to visit his grave and honor his sacrifice, and where possible honor those with whom he served. If I saw nothing else in France, I would have been happy.

Before we left, I told Jim to go on ahead. Once he was out of sight, facing Nels's cross I stood at attention and rendered a slow hand salute. The same salute I'd rendered a dozen times before when I presented the flag to the next of kin at military funerals. I took the flag, touched the top of the cross, said a silent "thank you", and walked away.