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 Opinion

Commentary

# Hans Smith: Getting to know a great uncle in unimagined ways in Normandy

By Hans Smith

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The author, Hans Smith, takes part in a Memorial Day, circa 1977.

THOMAS LEIGH PHOTO

ST. LOUIS — As a kid, I heard occasional stories from my mother and her siblings about their uncle Herbie, who was my great-uncle.

Those stories always seemed somewhat unreal to me. While interesting and spoken with reverence, they never felt personal.

Herbert W. Small was one of five children born into the pre-Depression era in Sheffield, Mass. He had one brother, my grandfather James, and three sisters, all of whom I knew as a child and into adulthood.

I'm told Herbie was the first man from Sheffield to volunteer for service, joining the United States Army Air Force when he was 21 years old. His brother James also enlisted. James became a navigator/bombardier, while Herbert became a pilot. James flew over the Pacific in B-29s, and Herbert over Europe in B-17s.

James came home. Herbert did not.

I began to learn more about my great uncle when I mentioned to my family that an upcoming vacation would include a few days in Normandy, France. I knew from those old stories that Uncle Herbie's plane had been shot down, but I never knew where, when or even by whom exactly. Until now.



**ROCHEVILLE**

 1914-1918	 1918-1945	 1945-1948
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The memorial to the crew that Herbert W. Small was part of at Rochelle Village in France.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY HANS SMITH

On April 27, 1944 — just six weeks before the D-Day invasion — 1st Lt. Herbert W. Small's B-17 Flying Fortress was hit by German anti-aircraft fire and crashed near the small village of Rocheville in Normandy. Years after the war, the village dedicated a monument to Herbert Small and his crew: 10 men who never saw the end of the war, never came home to their families or sweethearts, never came home to become uncles.

He was on his 22nd bombing mission. Three more missions would have brought him home.

He was so close to living a different story. That story might have meant becoming a doctor. He was trained as an RN and planned on medical school after the war. His girlfriend moved to London to volunteer in a women's service to be close to him. Would they have married and had a family?

Our vacation plans included a visit to the American Cemetery in Normandy, the final resting place for 9,386 of our military who lost their lives in the region during World War II. When we first arrived at the cemetery, we were struck by its beauty and serenity. A few hundred yards off Omaha Beach, the one-time site of chaotic battle is now dominated by peace and tranquility.

We admired the beautifully manicured grounds, but noticed that visitors were required to stay on the walkways and not allowed among the graves. We were immediately disheartened, feeling like the visit would seem a letdown if we weren't able to see his grave.

We eventually found a cemetery guide and asked if it were possible to see an individual grave.

What happened next was truly amazing and humbling, and something I'll never forget.

The guide asked, "You are family?"

I replied, "Oui," and things started to happen.

A young man named Theo disappeared into a service area and returned with two small flags – American and French – and a small container of sand from Omaha Beach. Theo escorted us to the gravesite, where he proceeded to place the small flags, like those I waved as a boy at Sheffield's Memorial Day parades, on either side of the white marble cross.

He then instructed me to smear a handful of sand across the lettering on the marker, which I didn't understand at first. I soon realized that the sand fills in the engraving and makes the letters stand out from the white marble in photographs. It eventually washes out with the wind and rain and becomes part of the cemetery itself, which seems fitting.



Herbert W. Small's grave at the American Cemetery in Normandy, France.

PHOTO PROVIDED BY HANS SMITH

Once the sand was in place, we stood back to take pictures. As we did, "Taps" began to play from somewhere else in the cemetery. A 51-year-old man who is two generations removed from a great-uncle he never knew was driven to tears for reasons I only partially understand.

Upon reflection, I realize that I was emotional because the war had just gone from academic to personal. It was no longer fought by millions of anonymous soldiers; rather, it had a real connection to my family.

I cried because my unknown uncle had just become a real person to me who had volunteered to fight an enemy he did not know, on behalf of 125 million Americans he had never met, in defense of ideals that most people now take for granted.





# H. W. Small

Herbert W. Small is pictured in this Merced Army Flying School Yearbook photo.

MERCED ARMY FLYING SCHOOL YEARBOOK PHOTO

He came from Sheffield, the same small town where I grew up; he lived in a house that until recently belonged to our family; he traveled to a foreign land and fought and died far away from home.

He came from humble beginnings and made a difference in the effort to preserve our liberty, and he left literal marks on the world in the form of the monument to his crew and the grave that marks his final resting place.

I'm very glad to have known my grandfather and his three sisters, two of whom are still with us today, but I feel like I might have missed out on something special never having known my great uncle.

I recently saw a picture of him for the first time. He was in his uniform for his flight school yearbook.

To me, he looks very much like my grandfather and his siblings.

So maybe I did know him in a small way after all.

Hans Smith grew up in Sheffield. He now lives in St. Louis.

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