

EDITOR'S NOTE

In 1979, shortly before her death at the age of 78, my mother, Mary Gwinn Bowe, was getting her affairs in order by cleaning house. She handed me a loose-leaf and dog-eared type-written manuscript and said I might find it interesting. If I didn't, I was to throw it out.

She told me it was Jacques Riboud's account of his experience as a French officer in the horse-drawn artillery fighting against the Nazis and their tanks in the battle for France in 1940. Jacques Riboud, then 32, had married my mother's youngest sister, Nancy Gwinn, in the quieter year of 1933.

Following the Nazi victory in France at the beginning of World War II, Nancy had fled with her three young children by way of Spain to the refuge of her family's home in the Mount Washington section of Baltimore, Maryland. Later, after some time as a German prisoner of war, her husband was able to join them.

It was quickly agreed the two sisters would get together with their families for a reunion in Connecticut on Long Island Sound come the summer of 1941. And so they did. Though the war still raged in Europe at that time, with Hitler invading Russia in June, the United States was at peace. The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor was still a few months' away.

In this atmosphere of deepening conflict, it didn't take long for the extraordinary events in France to be recounted in detail. And it didn't take long for my mother and Jacques Riboud to get the extraordinary story down in writing so it wouldn't be lost in memory's haze.

The collaboration took place everyday above the beach on Long Island Sound, with my mother typing the oral narrative that flowed forth chronologically in English. My mother helped as much as she could with English syntax and grammar as they went along but getting

the tale down on paper had clearly taken precedence over producing polished verbiage.

As I read the yellowing manuscript nearly 40 years later, I was immediately astonished at its overall power and clarity. Although couched as a simple tale of a lost regiment in the horse-drawn artillery, Jacques Riboud's story clearly transcended this level. It did nothing less than explain the fall of France in 1940.

The tactical descriptions of small unit action also rose above their context. Together with Nancy Riboud's first person account of a family seeking refuge in the midst of German tanks, a perspective emerges of what the war was really like for civilians as well as soldiers. Finally the narrative was inspirational in its reflection of the indomitable French spirit.

Down was not out for France in 1940. And so the story stood, too, as a parable of the ultimate triumph over adversity for others, in different times and places.

Struck as I was by the story, I decided to edit it by weeding out the many awkward phrasings and grammatical constructions that remained. The edited version was then retyped and bound to serve as a more permanent family heirloom, able to symbolize the closeness over the generations of the American and French branches of our family.

The story had no name. I gave it one. I am also responsible, at this point, for whatever errors of spelling, translation or content distortions that remain.

William J. Bowe
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