



Tom Niland pays his respects among the 9,000 crosses in the American military cemetery in Normandy, where many of the U.S. soldiers killed during the invasion of France are buried. Niland was visiting the cemetery in 1998. "I didn't come for myself," said Niland, who survived the battle. "I came for them." Niland died in 2004. (Frank Ordoñez / The Post-Standard)

## NEVER FORGET D-DAY

By Sean Kirst  
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June 6 marks the 70th anniversary of the D-Day invasion in World War II.

In Syracuse, where so many men and women left for duty in that war, the number of D-Day survivors is dwindling.

To honor their service, photographer Mike Greenlar and I invite any survivors of Normandy to meet us at 11 a.m. Thursday, in the memorial hall at the Onondaga County War Memorial. Mike will take some portraits, and I'll gather the stories, and we'll put them together as a tribute for the anniversary. The county will make parking available for veterans on Madison Street, alongside the building, between Montgomery and State streets.

In working on this project, I've often thought of a young man from Syracuse named Albert Bruce Cassidy. I visited his grave 16 years ago, during a visit to Normandy with several members of the Niland family. What follows is a column, edited for space, that I wrote for *The Post-Standard* of Aug. 28, 1998. We hope it is a reminder of

the full measure of sacrifice — and why, on this anniversary, we will not forget D-Day.

### Home soil for a G.I. who lies in France

My 4-year-old held the empty plastic bottle. We pulled up by the yellow house at 123 Hall Ave. in Syracuse, where a young man, shirtless, was sitting on the upstairs porch. I stood there and called to him:

"I need some dirt from your yard."

He told me to hang on, and he came hurrying out the front door with a trowel and a plastic bowl. He dug up loose soil while I told him the story. "If you see the family," the young man said, "tell them that I'm sorry."

There were few to tell, unless you count Albert himself.

Fifty-five years ago, Albert Bruce Cassidy lived in that house. As a boy, he must have played in the front yard. He is buried beneath a white cross at the American military cemetery in Normandy. I first saw his name a few years ago, when a colleague — Dan McGuire — wrote an article mentioning the Central New Yorkers who died in the D-Day invasion.

Albert was an only child. It was said that his mother, Lily Cassidy, would take long walks each night after learning her son died. By exhausting herself, Lily found a way to sleep.

She lost Albert when he was just 19.

I took the soil to Normandy. I went there to meet Tommy Niland, a 78-year-old veteran of the 101st Airborne, a guy who made the journey to honor many friends, Preston and Robert Niland. Tommy's first cousins, are among 9,000 U.S. soldiers lying underneath white crosses. Tommy stood before their graves, then we took a walk.

We found the cross for Albert, deep in the graveyard.

The inscription says Albert died June 10, 1944. Jean Boucheron, of Florida, believes that date is four days late. Jean was Albert's first cousin, probably his best friend. They went to school together in



This is the grave site of Albert Bruce Cassidy, above, a Syracuse native buried in the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial. Cassidy's best friend believes the June 10 date is four days late.

the Valley. They used to spend slow summer mornings playing in the street.

A week rarely goes by when Jean doesn't think of Albert. He has a vivid memory of being with his cousin and two young girls as they rode bicycles on Midland Avenue. They were kids, maybe 14 or 15. If Albert had ever married, Jean is pretty sure he would have wound up as best man.

They went into the Army as teenagers, and they sometimes met in England before the invasion. The last time Jean saw Albert, he was loading Army trucks. Albert knew, already, he would take part in the full assault on France. Jean said Albert was an idealist, "all gung-ho," who believed in the Allied cause.

But Albert understood what waited for him on the beach. "I don't think I'll make it," Albert told his cousin. Jean tried to kid him out of that grim mood. Albert shrugged and went back to loading trucks.

Albert was a sergeant with the 299th Combat Engineers. His landing craft, as he predicted, was with the early forces to hit Omaha Beach. Afterward, Jean spoke with men who survived. They told him they saw Albert's body in the surf. They said he had no chance, that he died almost the instant he jumped out of his boat.

Albert was 19 and "very bright," according to Jean. In his Army photo, he looks

more like a high school kid. His parents chose to honor his remains with the white cross in Normandy.

Albert's father, Glenn, died in 1965. Lily died 24 years later. She was survived by a sister and some nieces and nephews — but no children. Jean remembers that Lily had the faith to keep on living, but he also believes the tales of how she walked herself to sleep.

She never made it to Normandy, he said. She never got the chance to stand before Albert's cross.

At the cemetery, we found the grave of the only child. Tommy Niland took the bottle. He quietly scattered the brown earth from Syracuse. Then we refilled the bottle with sand from Omaha Beach.

I brought it home to show my own kids why we went to Albert's house, why we brought some of his boyhood to his grave in Normandy. In America, we often talk about the "need to sacrifice" when we diet or trim credit cards or pay extra for gas.

Sacrifice? Albert understood. He still got on the boat.

Sean Kirst is a columnist for *The Post-Standard*, who later poured the sand from Normandy onto the front yard on Hall Avenue. Tom Niland Jr. died in 2004; Jean Boucheron, Albert's cousin, died in 2010. You may write to Kirst in care of *The Post-Standard*, 220 S. Warren St., Syracuse 13202.

1	2	3
1	2	3
1	2	3
1	2	3

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