

One-Man Marshall Plan

by Wally Olesen, 398-D

Wally Olesen, was surprised and pleased to hear from the family that he and his Company D buddies had liberated 60 years ago.

In October/November 1944, sixty years ago to the month, I was a nineteen-year-old private in the U.S. Seventh Army infantry in a small French farm town of Raon l'Etape in Lorraine, the Vosges Mountain area.

My platoon had established a machine-gun outpost in a farmhouse kitchen as the previous soldiers, the Wehrmacht, retreated to set up new defensive positions.

The town was in a shambles . . . many homes destroyed, burned down, dead cattle lying about, and all citizens evacuated, since Nazi artillery shells still rained upon us from time to time.

One family, M. and Mme. Gilbert Gerardin and their children were left in town to water and feed the remaining livestock. Goats, chickens, and rabbits in those homes that were still intact or partially so. The Gerardin family lived most of the time in the root cellar of the house . . . a cold and damp cellar with dirt walls and no light except candles. . . .

The next morning dawned clear and warm and for a short while the firing ceased as the Germans regrouped and we awaited new attack orders. During this brief lull, the family carefully emerged from the root cellar to give themselves and their children some sunshine and fresh air.

One of these little girls I remember was about 5 or 6 years old and I began to try out my high school French on the children.

My mother had sent a package, which I had just received, filled with the typical maternal gifts: clean underwear, scarf, socks, and lots of candy, since it was Halloween time. I regaled the children with tales of how in America, we children dressed up as ghosts, witches, and so on, and went door to door seeking candy treats. And then, for them as a treat, I got some Hershey bars, and all and gave them each some.

They were absolutely thrilled and tried to tell me so. They were only 12 or so years younger than I and we were all kids for a moment!

The next day we moved out to resume the war. As we left, their father took me by the arm and told me that this was the first chocolate the children had ever tasted! Following the German occupation of their town, and many others, in 1939–40, there was no chocolate to be had. There were tears in his eyes as he told me. I kept their names and addresses and when I returned to my education at Williams College, I continued to send the little family a package of goodies each year at Halloween. (A sort of one-man Marshall Plan.)

By 1948, the beginning of my senior year, I stopped sending things to concentrate on my graduation and entrance into a whole new world. From then on, there was no communications between us until this October 2004, sixty years later to the month.

This October 2004, as I lay in a hospital in San Antonio, TX, recovering from a bypass of a leg aneurysm Gayle came walking into my hospital room with a letter from France . . . from the adult son of one of the girls.

He enclosed photos of his mother today and his now-deceased grandfather, the farmer back in Raon l'Etape who had told me his children had never tasted chocolate.

The grandson still remembered me and had obtained my address from Williams College. I guess I had become a family legend. It is truly a remarkable story, one might read it in a magazine of a dramatic illustration of a sixty-year bonding between an American soldier and two French children and some chocolate.

[The grandson's letter follows]

Dear Mr Olesen,

My name is Olivier Guatelli and I am French. In November 1944, you were a soldier in the US Army that liberated my native city, Raon l'Etape in Lorraine.

You met my grandparents, Suzanne and Gilbert Gerardin, and after the war, till 1948, you sent to my family letters, packages full of food, clothes, and toys for children.

My mother, Danielle, who was a little girl in 1944, remembers you a lot. Thanks to Williams College, I found your address. Unfortunately, my grandparents died in 1983 and 2002. They always lived near Raon l'Etape, at La Cense de Koeur.

My mother Danielle, would be very happy to get news from you.

[Wally's response to the grandson]

Dear Olivier,

How thoughtful and kind of you to write. I broke into tears with joy and disbelief! After 60 years.

Let us continue to communicate from time to time. I have so many questions.

Do you have sisters or brothers? Do you have children? What do you do professionally?

All information about your family and that of your mother would be welcomed. A copy of my letter to her is enclosed. Incidentally, your English is far superior to my French!

I had a successful career in advertising with Xerox and Johnson & Johnson. I also am a Jazz musician for a hobby. The mother of my two children, Candace, died of cancer in 1985. I now have a wonderful woman, Gayle as my life partner. We have been together for 13 years.

I am sending copies of your letter to Williams College, to thank them for finding me for you, a copy to 100th Infantry Division veterans association, a few old Army friends, my two children and three grandchildren.

Thanks so much for contacting me. It is one of the high points of my life!

Votre soldat americaine.

[Letter to the "little girl"]

Ma chere Mme. Guatelli,

Quelle surprise! Your son has written me a letter after you and I met briefly 60 years ago to the month exactly. My heart swelled with joy, and tears came to my eyes; I was happy to learn you seem to have lived a full life and your photo shows you to be a beautiful woman. I appreciate the photo of your father, whom I also met that fateful day in 1944.

When we first all met in 1944 you were such a young child, perhaps 5 or 6 years old. Even today I remember a shy, pretty, frightened little girl. I had just celebrated my nineteenth birthday on October 16 and I was about 13 years older than you were.

I see that Olivier has e-mail, which makes it easier for us to communicate.

I will send you a copy of a report I wrote in 2001 about returning to Alsace and Lorraine as soon as it is printed. Our returning group of retired soldiers did not get to visit Raon l'Etape. A copy of my letter to Olivier is enclosed. Let's continue "in touch" with each other.

Bon chance!

Votre soldat americaine

Wally Olesen

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