

VETERANS, ACTIVE DUTY AND MILITARY FAMILIES

A Father's D-Day Stories Inspire Daughter's Lifelong Journey

80 years later, his war experiences still affect her life

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Left: Lieutenant Donald K. Johnson, 1944. Right: the author Diane Covington-Carter.
COURTESY DIANE COVINGTON-CARTER

I was born after World War II, a boomer, and my father's stories about his time in France during the war were as much a part of my childhood as the yellow Formica table we all crowded around for dinner each evening at 6 o'clock sharp.

My dad, Lt. Donald K. Johnson, was a Seabee, a civil engineer in the Naval Construction Battalion, whose mottos are 'We build, we fight' and 'Can Do!' The Seabees' mascot, a bumblebee, carries a drill and a gun.

Dad landed in the [D-Day invasion](#) and spent five months at the Navy camp on the cliffs above the American landing beach called Omaha.

He loved to tell stories about his time in France, including how his high school French made "*s'il vous plaît*" come out sounding like "silver plate." But he'd smile remembering the kindness and patience of the French at his attempts.

My favorite story was about the orphan boy Gilbert, whom Dad took under his wing. Gilbert lived next to the Navy camp with a caretaker, and Dad noticed the skinny little boy and invited him to have lunch in the officers' mess. That became a daily occurrence, and Dad and Gilbert became so close that Dad tried unsuccessfully to adopt Gilbert and bring him home.



Gilbert with an American soldier and another American soldier holding a little girl, during the liberation of Normandy. This photo was used as a banner during the 50th anniversary celebrations, 1994.

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Dad's stories influenced me in profound ways that I didn't realize then.

I studied French in high school and college, though I lived in California, where Spanish was the more practical language. I continued studying French throughout my adult life, following a passion I could not logically explain.

Before my father passed away in 1991, we spoke about his time in the war again and he mentioned Gilbert. "I wonder whatever happened to him," he said. He seemed so wistful, and that made an impression on me. I remembered then that Dad had traveled to Paris once, in 1972, and tried to find Gilbert but was unsuccessful.



Clockwise from left: Gilbert, Heather and Diane right after they found him, June 1994; restaurant scene during Gilbert's family's visit to California, 1997; Omaha Beach today.

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Finding Gilbert

In June 1994, I traveled to Normandy to accept a medal in Dad's honor as part of the celebrations for the 50th [anniversary of D-Day](#). I spent a day touring the landing beaches, visiting museums and learning that it was the largest land and sea invasion in the history of the world.

As I stood on the cliff overlooking Omaha Beach, the stiff breeze dried my tears as I remembered my father.

This is so real. All Dad's stories happened right here. And the orphan Gilbert, he must be real too. What if he is out there, somewhere, remembering Dad? And what if I could find him?

I wasn't even sure how to spell Gilbert's last name, but I put an ad in the local paper to try to find him. This was my chance to try to complete what my dad had not been able to. For my father, I had to try.

By a combination of miracles and providence, I connected with Gilbert on what would have been Dad's 80th birthday. Dad had celebrated his 30th birthday in France with Gilbert in 1944. Now Gilbert and I remembered him together, in Normandy again.

In our emotional reunion, I finally understood my passion for knowing French; no one in Gilbert's family spoke English.

Gilbert had told his wife, daughter and grandsons about the kind lieutenant who had loved him and had wanted to take him home to America. "Someday, someone will come," he had said.

When I told Gilbert that Dad had never forgotten him, he wept.



Left: Diane with her French family in Normandy, from left, in back, Cathy, Gilbert and Huguette's daughter, in front of her, Marion, partner to Benoît, grandson of Gilbert and Huguette, Lya, great granddaughter, Tim, great grandson, Huguette, Diane and Frakas, the golden retriever. Right: Diane with the newest member of her French family, Charlie, Benoît and Marion's baby.

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A new brother, at age 45

Gilbert became my French brother. I promised myself that I would never lose touch with Gilbert and his family again and I have kept that promise, visiting them often. In 1997, Gilbert and his family came to California for a grand fête with 40 members of my family here to greet them and to celebrate with them.

I continued to stay with Gilbert and his family on the 60th, 70th and [75th anniversaries of D-Day](#) in France, which I covered for newspapers and magazines. For the 60th and 70th, I was a guide and translator for Stephen Ambrose Historical Tours.

It was so moving to be with the veterans and the French people who wanted to thank them. We all wiped away tears during those encounters.

Gilbert passed away in 2008, and I traveled to Normandy for his funeral. The tricolor French flag draped his coffin, carried by an honor guard of his fellow veterans.

I sat with Gilbert's family in the front pew in the village church and listened to the tributes to his life. At one point in the service, the priest asked me to place a photo of my father and one of Gilbert, from 1944, together in one frame, on Gilbert's coffin.

Candlelight flickered on the faces in the photographs and music echoed off the walls of the small church as we all remembered Gilbert.

I realized that it was destiny that my father and Gilbert had loved each other, but also destiny that they had to separate all those years ago. Life turned out the way that it did for a reason.



The photo Diane placed on Gilbert's coffin during his funeral in Normandy, 2008.

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Remembering Gilbert

Not only did Gilbert become my brother, he incorporated me into his French family. His widow, Huguette, is like a sister to me, my French sister. I call her often and will be visiting her again this June. There are now four generations of my French family who know the story, and it lives on in Normandy as it does in America.

Most of the World War II veterans are gone now. But for the 80th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, June 6, 2024, we remember the members of the greatest generation who risked and gave their lives to preserve our freedom.

And the love story that began between my father and Gilbert 80 years ago lives on.

*[Diane Covington-Carter's](#) award-winning memoir, *Finding Gilbert, A Promise Fulfilled*, tells the story of finding her father's French orphan.*