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For Blaine senior, WWII study leads to Normandy trip

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Matti Martin, a senior at Blaine High School, thought long and hard about her eulogy for Virgil Tangborn, a Minnesota soldier who is buried at the Normandy American Cemetery in France.

Martin had never met Tangborn, who died while trying to rescue a fellow soldier in a blast during the invasion of Normandy in World War II. But she'd gotten to know him through her research, and she felt that he was a kindred spirit.

She and her middle school history teacher, Ron Hustvedt (a.k.a. Mr. H.), learned of Tangborn after they embarked on a National History Day project earlier this year through the Washington, D.C.-based Albert H. Small Normandy Institute. As a part of the program, which had a competitive application process, they traveled to Washington and to Normandy in mid-June.

Along the way, Martin and Hustvedt documented their experiences, as required, with a website they put together titled, "A true hero, PFC Virgil John Tangborn." But they didn't stop there: They recently launched a similar website dedicated to the 241 Minnesotans buried at the Normandy cemetery. On this site are snapshots the pair took of each soldier's gravesite. Visitors to the website can contribute to each soldier's page, Hustvedt said.

The idea is to "bring stories to the millennial generation," Martin said, "so it will be out there, to make sure that someone remembers."

They've gotten some attention for their efforts, giving speeches at a Fourth of July event in Elk River and to various local veteran groups, she said.

Getting to know Tangborn

During the two-week trip, the pair, along with 14 other student-teacher teams from around the country, immersed themselves in D-Day history, Hustvedt said.

In Washington, they visited the National World War II monument and the National Museum of American History. Their itinerary also included lectures by historians and hands-on research at the National Archives and Records Administration.

The following week they went to Normandy, making a special stop one day in the town of Périers, where Tangborn has



During the visit to Normandy, Ron Hustvedt and Matti Martin went to the town of Périers where Virgil Tangborn has been immortalized in a statue. Tangborn, who was a musician in the 90th Infantry Band, was drawn into the fighting as a medic. He is the figure at left.

Submitted photo,



Matti Martin at the Normandy American Cemetery. She and one of her teachers visited the historic site as part of a Washington-based program.

Submitted photo,

been immortalized in a commemorative statue.

Preparation began months beforehand, as they soaked in all kinds of readings, Hustvedt said. A key assignment was to study the life of one soldier from their home state, he said.

They were fortunate to track down Tangborn's younger brother, Wendell Tangborn, who is in his 80s. Besides giving colorful anecdotes about his brother, Wendell, who lives in Vashon, Wash., also supplied Virgil's diary entries, letters and photos.

Reading through these materials, Martin found she had a lot in common with Tangborn, who hailed from the small town of Nary, Minn. He was an avid reader, and she said she wished she could call him and discuss the books that he'd scribbled about in his diary.

A classical music lover, he used to listen regularly to opera on the radio on Saturdays. Wendell knew to keep quiet during those broadcasts, Martin said. Tangborn also played in the town's band. Despite his modest means, he dreamed of a career in film, she said.

He writes in his diary about how people should make themselves "a tool for the progression of mankind," she said.

'Empathy on a new level'

After he was drafted into the army in 1942, Tangborn, a French horn player, made it into the 90th Infantry Band, which was part of the 359th Division. Later, in the face of mounting casualties, the musicians had to take on other roles. Tangborn, who'd been trained as a medic, was helping the wounded when he died on June 14, 1944, at age 24.

He was awarded a Purple Heart and the Silver Star Medal posthumously.

As Martin thought through her eulogy, she had an epiphany: She didn't need to come up with an earth-shattering speech. She simply needed to say thank you, in her own words, to the soldier she'd come to admire.

"Virgil was not the type of hero to carry a gun. He wasn't the one to show up in tights and a cape and save the day," she remarked during the eulogy at the Normandy cemetery.

She continued with an "open letter" to Tangborn, speaking to him as she would a friend. The end was marked by a thud as a pinecone fell to the ground, as if on cue. A teacher picked it up and brought it to her, saying, "He knows you were saying thank you."

Not a typical day at the beach

During the trip, the group visited the beaches of Normandy, where so many soldiers died during the invasion.

It was rainy and cold when the students tried to run the length of the beach where the troops had fought. "We're probably in the best shape of our lives, but we were panting. Half of us couldn't get up the sand dunes, they were so slippery," she said.

That was without any obstacles or baggage or people dying around them. "I can't help but think how terrifying it must've been," she said.

So many years later, massive bunkers, bomb craters and still-intact guns characterize the beach. "The physical landscape of this place still hasn't healed," she said.

Martin, who aspires to a career in biomedical engineering, has already written about the trip in numerous college application essays. "I can't help but think this is one of those turning points that changes my life," she said, adding, it has

“taught me empathy on a new level.”

Keeping his memory alive

Hustvedt said the experience “emboldened my belief that the more we can put them into situations where they’re being a historian, the more they can understand how rich the stories of our past are and how tied together everything is.”

He plans to incorporate the trip into his history curriculum. For Martin’s part, “I was really impressed with how she wanted to tell the story of him as someone who didn’t necessarily want to do what he had to do,” he said.

In his journal, Tangborn reflected on global events, he said, and “he knew he would get pulled into it. It was prophetic in that he knew he wasn’t going to come out of it.”

For Wendell Tangborn, their project came as a pleasant surprise. “It’s very much an honor for my brother to have this done for him. I feel good about it.”

Tangborn, who was 17 — Martin’s age — when his brother died, was drafted into the army himself, in 1951. He’s been to Normandy a number of times. He created a website in his brother’s memory as well. “I’ve always thought that keeping his memory alive was important to me,” he said.

About Martin’s eulogy, “I can just barely watch it. It’s very moving. It’s wonderful that a young girl like that showed that compassion and maturity,” he said.

To learn more about the History Day project, check out rememberingvirgil.weebly.com or add your own stories to rememberingdday.weebly.com.

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