

Old Photo Album

On The Road with Western New York Heritage

By Douglas W. DeCroix



Historians are known for their penchant for taking the proverbial “busman’s holiday.” When it comes time for the family to travel – whether it be a vacation or just to visit relatives for the holidays, etc. – the scheming begins as to how to combine the trip with something of an historical nature. It could be as simple as a visit to a museum or historic site of some sort (after all, one can never have too many photos of random greasy flanges!), or perhaps a side junket to this or that archives to spend an hour (or maybe a day or so... *please!!*) researching a pet project for work or personal interest while one is “in the neighborhood.”

It may come as no surprise to hear that your historian-turned-editor is far from immune to these tendencies. That being said, I count myself very fortunate to have a family that is extremely tolerant of my plotting to pack as much history-related content as possible into any journey, great or small – and who are sometimes even eager co-conspirators! And so, when a trip to France was planned for this past July, I saw the opportunity for a unique follow-up piece for two articles that had appeared in our pages in 2019.

The Spring 2019 issue of *Western New York Heritage* included the story of Tonawanda’s Niland family, along with the tragic deaths of two brothers during the 1944 invasion of Normandy. Similarly, Stephen Kellogg had shared the story of his relative, Doris, during her time in France as a Red Cross volunteer during World War I in our Summer 2019 issue. The two articles, combined with the impending trip, provided a perfect way to mix work and pleasure, while getting the opportunity to experience far-away snippets of Western New York history, first-hand!

So, I hope you will indulge me in this unusual take on our Old Photo Album feature, and join me as we go “on the road” with *Western New York Heritage* to explore some of the places where Western New Yorkers made history – and to bring a “piece of Western New York” to two of those individuals, who still rest far from home.

STOP #1: Chantilly & Doris Kellogg

Known for its storied chateau and as the center of the French horseracing community, modern Chantilly is a bustling town a mere 24 miles from Paris, and thus in many ways a far cry from the village that was home to Buffalo's Doris Kellogg during her time as a volunteer with the American Red Cross in 1918. Nonetheless, persistent searching in the weeks leading up to my trip yielded dividends, as I was able to identify a couple extant locations that figured largely in Doris' story. Fortunately, my navigator was up to the task once we arrived.

In addition to her work at the *Cantine des deux Drapeaux*, located about four miles south of Chantilly at Orry-la-Ville, Doris Kellogg served as a nurse in the French hospitals at Chantilly. One of these was housed in a former library – *la bibliothèque Spoelberch de Lovenjoul*. The stately building still stands along the *Rue de Connétable*, looking very much as it did a century ago.



Chantilly is located approximately 24 miles north-northeast of Paris.



La bibliothèque Spoelberch de Lovenjoul (dark building at left center), ca. 1910.

PRIVATE COLLECTION



The same building as it appears today.

DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019.

STOP #2: Fritz Niland in Normandy

Though the *Cantine des deux Drapeaux* was four miles away, Doris lived in a house not far from the Chantilly railway station, where she would board the train each morning for the canteen at Orry. She and her American compatriots dubbed this home “The White House,” perhaps in reference to its American occupants, though more likely due to the house’s light color.

It took quite a bit of searching, with very little in the way of references to go on, but I managed to track down the house where Doris lived, along today’s *Avenue du Maréchal Joffre*. It was a curious feeling standing in front of the house, secure in the knowledge that I was probably the only one on the busy boulevard who knew it had once been occupied by a young lady from Buffalo.



Doris and her comrades lived in this house they dubbed “The White House” in Chantilly. It is seen here with an American flag flying from the upper window, ca. 1918.

FROM
DORIS KELLOGG,
*CANTEENING UNDER
TWO FLAGS*, 1920.



The town of Carentan is located on the eastern base of France’s Cotentin Peninsula.

When Fritz Niland boarded a C-47 Skytrain on June 5, 1944, he and the rest of the 3rd battalion of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, along with A through F companies of the 506th PIR, were assigned to land in Normandy at “Drop Zone C,” north of the strategic town of Carentan and near the small hamlet of Sainte Marie du Mont. Like many of his airborne comrades that night, Fritz landed far from his drop zone, but would make his way to the unit’s objective at Carentan, fighting alongside small groups of other misdropped parachutists along the way.

Rural Normandy has not changed dramatically in the past 75 years, and though towns like Carentan have grown substantially, there are still portions of the old town that the soldiers of the 101st would recognize today. Meanwhile, smaller locales like Sainte Marie du Mont remain largely as they were in 1944. This makes it relatively easy for a properly motivated historian, with a passion for the period and a long-term familiarity with its photographs, to track down the modern locations for many of the images taken during the time Fritz’s unit would have occupied these locations.



Today, the flag is gone, but the unique design of the house is immediately recognizable — once you find it!

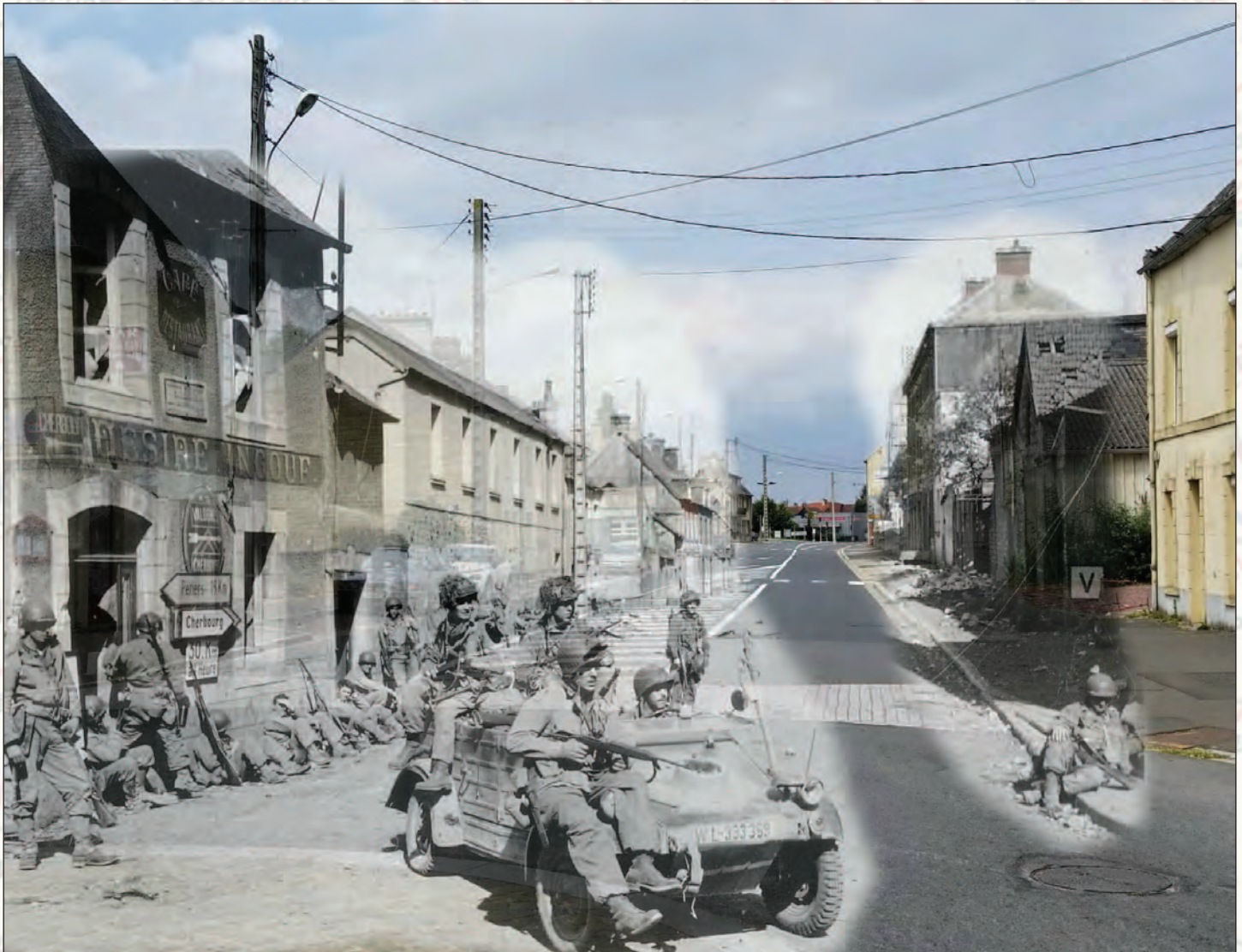
DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX
PHOTOGRAPH, 2019.



In this oft-published period image, soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division have commandeered a German *Kubelwagen* and are turning east onto the *Rue Holgate* in the Normandy town of Carentan, June 1944.
COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES



This photo shows the same intersection, 75 years later.
DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019



While several of the buildings are gone and others have changed in dimension, by placing portions of the period image over the one taken last July, an evocative result can be had, placing the modern location within the context of Fritz Niland's Normandy experience.

STOP #3: Preston Niland at Utah Beach and the Crisbecq Battery

Preston Niland's landing craft came ashore on Utah Beach in the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, as part of the 4th Infantry Division's assault on the westernmost of the D-Day beaches. As the division moved inland to link up with the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions, Preston's unit was sent to silence a heavy German gun battery located northwest of the small village of Saint-Marcouf. The initial assault on the Crisbecq Battery failed, and Preston was killed by a German sniper's bullet while attempting to aid a wounded comrade. The battery was eventually captured several days later.

Unlike Omaha Beach, with its imposing bluffs that were famous for the German defenses placed there, Utah Beach featured less-imposing dunes, dotted with what were, on the whole, much lighter defensive works. Remnants of these works can still be found if one knows where to look. Some are located on private property – and while the ubiquitous Normandy cows that roam among them probably wouldn't mind, we opted to confine our explorations to public lands, so as to avoid any unpleasant encounters with the local population – who might not be subscribers to *Western New York Heritage*.

One of the surprising aspects of this early morning adventure was the discovery that the beaches are now used as exercise areas for the region's harness racing horses. As we stood alone just after sunrise on the top of one of the dunes, near the ruins of a German pillbox, the "clip-clop" of hooves could be clearly heard above the sound of the surf as these beasts sped gracefully down the damp sand, where decades earlier men had run amid a hail of bullets.

Utah Beach was the westernmost of the five Allied landing areas during the invasion of Normandy.



Remnants of the German defenses can still be found among the dunes behind Utah Beach. This dilapidated German pillbox still sits silently, not far from where Preston Niland and the 4th Infantry Division landed on June 6, 1944.

DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019

Today, the sounds of war have been replaced at Utah Beach by the gentle "clip-clop" of horse hooves, as harness jockeys use the beach to exercise their equine friends in the early morning light.

DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019



Today the tiny village of Saint-Marcouf looks much as it did on D-Day, and the remains of the German battery nearby has been partially restored and is currently open for tours. The guns of this battery wreaked havoc with the Allied invasion fleet off Utah Beach, as well as with the soldiers emerging from the landing crafts.

In visiting the site this past summer, I was extremely surprised to find a newly erected interpretive column, memorializing none other than Preston Niland. Erected on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings, the memorial is no doubt, in part, an effort on the part of the region to capitalize on the Nilands' relation to the film *Saving Private Ryan*, but even so it was extremely satisfying to know that this Western New Yorker is being remembered decades later by the nation for whom he gave his life, and that all who visit the site will know at least some of the story.



One of the gun emplacements that made up the Crisbecq Battery, following its capture in June 1944. Note the section of camouflage hatching in the concrete, indicated by the red rectangle. COURTESY NATIONAL ARCHIVES



Not far from the Crisbecq gun emplacements is this newly erected memorial column, dedicated to Preston Niland.

DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019

The same gun emplacement, July 2019. The section of camouflage hatching from the previous photo has been scaled and overlaid onto this modern image. It is an exact match to the hatching that is still visible. DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019.

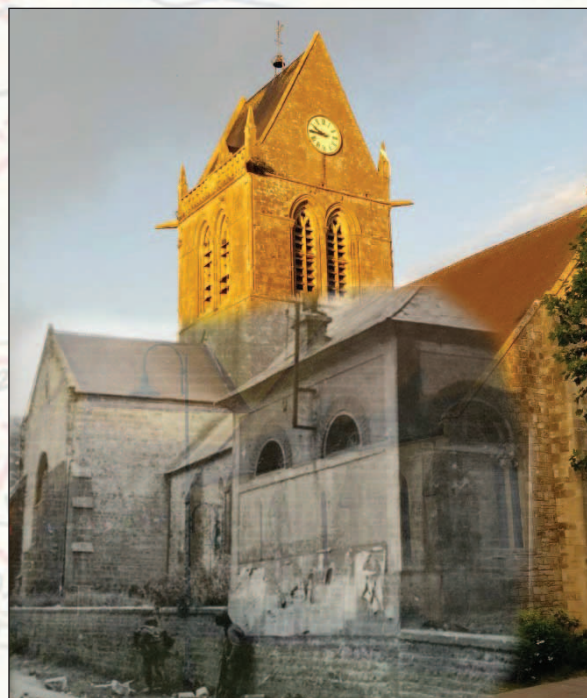
STOP #4: Robert Niland at Sainte-Mère-Eglise and Neuville-au-Plain

As a sergeant in the 82nd Airborne's 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, Robert Niland dropped into Normandy to the north of younger brother Fritz. The objective for the 505th was the town of Sainte-Mère-Eglise, and some of the paratroopers actually landed in the center of the village, around its 11th century church and neighboring homes.

The town was the scene of some intense fighting in the invasion's early hours, and in the days that followed, Sainte-Mère-Eglise became a busy place as it stood astride one of the main routes inland from Utah Beach. The modern town is still bustling, but tourists and visitors fighting for a bargain at one of the summer artisan markets held in the church square have replaced the more menacing combatants of a previous era.



Sainte-Mère-Eglise is located inland from Utah Beach and was one of the first towns liberated during the Normandy invasion.



The iconic church in the center of Sainte-Mère-Eglise in the light of a July evening, partially overlaid by a period photo, showing American soldiers along the street.
DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019



This bucolic Sainte-Mère-Eglise street, just to the north of the church, was once one of the main routes for American soldiers, tanks and vehicles making their way inland from Utah Beach.
DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019



Superimposing portions of a period photograph of the same location over the previous photo gives a better sense of the town's appearance when it was occupied by Robert Niland's 505th PIR.

In order to secure Sainte-Mère-Eglise from the expected German counterattack, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Vandervoort ordered Robert Niland's platoon of D Company, under the command of Lieutenant Turner Turnbull, to establish a defensive position near the village of Neuville-au-Plain, about a mile north of Sainte-Mère-Eglise. Though Turnbull and his men executed an outstanding small-unit action, extensive casualties forced the lieutenant to order a withdrawal as darkness was falling on June 6. One of a couple of men who volunteered to stay behind with the unit's wounded and medic,

Robert Niland was killed along a hedgerow west of the village center.

Referring to maps of the encounter, it is relatively easy to trace the ebb and flow of that battle, and to identify the general area where Robert was killed. Again, I was pleasantly surprised to find that an interpretive plaque had recently been erected near the perimeter wall of the village chateau, recounting the events of that fateful day. Included with the text (in two languages) is a photograph of Lieutenant Turnbull – and one of Robert Niland.



Next to the outer wall of the chateau at Neuville-au-Plain is a bilingual interpretive plaque, recounting the actions of Robert Niland and the rest of his platoon in holding off a German counterattack and allowing the 505th PIR to secure their hold on Sainte-Mère-Eglise a mile to the south. Robert's photo is visible in the lower left corner of the plaque.

DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019



Following the farm trail around to the left of the previous photo brings one to the hedgerow (at right) where Robert Niland received his fatal wound on the night of June 6, 1944.

DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019

STOP #5: The Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer



Colleville-sur-Mer is located on a bluff overlooking Omaha Beach.

Being able to visit, in person, the locales associated with events that I have studied for so many years certainly helped satisfy my historian's desire to "geek out" on such things, and it was also highly gratifying to be able to discover the locations where several Western New Yorkers had made such a contribution to history. But long before leaving on this trip, I knew I wanted to include a much more profound destination on our itinerary, and that I wanted – in my own small way – to make a gesture of appreciation to two of these individuals who never came home.

The Normandy American Cemetery, overlooking Omaha Beach at Colleville-sur-Mer, is often described as an awe-inspiring place – and I can assure you the reality of the place lives up to these descriptions. Thousands of identical white crosses stand, row upon row, in perfect alignment – even down to the sub-diagonals – amid pristinely manicured grounds.

Determined to pay our respects to Robert and Preston Niland in person, I arrived precisely at the cemetery's opening hour (in order to avoid the crowds) and, armed with a copy of the Spring issue of *Western New York Heritage* and two additional tokens, I strolled boldly onto the grounds – reasonably certain of my ability to find the adjacent graves based on their section and row numbers.



The Normandy American Cemetery, overlooking Omaha Beach, is as awe-inspiring as it is peaceful. The entire front section (everything visible before the columned edifice in the background) has been cordoned off to protect the grounds from the volume of traffic normally seen by this section. DOUGLAS W. DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019

It was not to be so easy, however. The chief obstacle that presented itself was the fact that the entire front portion of the cemetery, on both sides of the central walkway, had been cordoned off from public access – an attempt to preserve the grounds in this most-frequently visited section of the site. In addition, security detachments roved the grounds, both on foot and in golf carts, preventing any prolonged attempt to ignore the low-lying ropes.

And so back to the visitor center we went, hoping to somehow gain permission to access the area – or to at least discover the location of the graves with greater precision for viewing from beyond the rope boundary. A conversation in broken English with the French desk attendant did not begin on a promising note. Exceptions could be made to visit certain areas with a guide – but these were usually reserved for family members. Then she asked the name of the graves we wished to visit. I cringed in anticipation of her response to my answer, and pretty much got what I had expected – “Ugh,” she grunted, “... *especialy* them!”

By that point, I had pretty much resigned myself to failure, having come so close, but my wife (who speaks fluent French) was not ready to give up just yet. She emphasized, in the attendant’s native language, who I represented and explained about the recent article and our desire, not only to pay our respects as representatives of their home region, but to provide a follow-up for my readers. As a result, the attendant finally agreed to pass the question upstairs to a colleague, who would decide whether or not an exception was in order, and whether they even had the staff on hand to grant one.

Less than 15 minutes later, we were sitting in an elongated golf cart in the company of Maryvonne, the senior colleague who graciously offered to escort us to the Niland brothers. On the drive, I was able to acquaint her more thoroughly with who we were and why we were there, showing her my copy of the Spring issue in the process. While she was reasonably familiar with the stories of Robert and Preston, she was unaware of the two cousins who also fought in Europe as well as a number of other details, but listened to the information with great interest.

At the conclusion of our return trip to the visitor center, I presented Maryvonne with the copy of the Spring issue I had brought with me. She was quite moved by the gesture, and explained that she planned to place it in the cemetery’s permanent archives, as part of their accumulated information on the Nilands, where it could serve as a resource for docents and cemetery staff for years to come. Not a bad way to end an adventure.

In closing, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Maryvonne and the staff at the Normandy American Cemetery for their understanding and accommodation during our visit, as well as for their meticulous stewardship of this hallowed piece of American history. I would also like to give special thanks to my young navigator, whose persistent efforts and reasonably good humor under sometimes-trying circumstances kept me out of cow pastures and made possible the successful navigation of traffic circles too numerous to recall.

This was certainly not your usual busman’s holiday and I hope you have enjoyed exploring some of these sites from Western New York’s past in their more modern incarnations. 📖



The author, holding a copy of the Spring issue of *Western New York Heritage*, between the graves of Preston (left) and Robert (right) Niland. The “two additional tokens” referred to in the text were the two small stones of remembrance visible on the right arm of each of the grave markers. These were purposely harvested from Tonawanda’s Elmwood Park, across the street from the boys’ family home. The copy of the Spring issue has since become part of the cemetery’s permanent reference collection.

STEPHANIE DeCROIX PHOTOGRAPH, 2019