

Joe Landry (far right) is a WWII veteran and member of the Battle of the Bulge chapter, one of several veterans groups that honored Mathilde and Marcel Schmetz (couple in center, with framed portrait of themselves) during their recent visit to the United States. The portrait, presented to the Belgian couple as a gift, was painted by Shirley artist Kim Mellama from a photo. Mellama is locally known for her portraits of Shirley veterans.

# Grateful Belgians have not forgotten the U.S. liberators

By M.E. Jones  
Correspondent

SHIRLEY — Marcel and Mathilde Schmetz have welcomed American WWII veterans into their home in Thimister-Clermont, Belgium, for many years.

Recently, some of those veterans had the opportunity to thank their former hosts here in the United States.

Past American Legion Post Commander and WWII veteran Athanace "Joe" Landry, who fought in the Battle of the Bulge in the nearby Ardennes, has been a guest in the Schmetz home.

WWII veterans  
honor their  
kindnesses and  
dedication

"They did everything for us, even laundry," he said in a recent interview.

But the extent of the Belgian couple's gratitude to U.S. Army veterans who liberated their country from Nazi occupation goes beyond free accommodations and amenities. They have been like extended family to the old soldiers, from conducting tours of wartime battle

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# Grateful to Belgians

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sites in Belgium to corresponding with them at home. "Dear Son," Mathilde's letters begin; responses to her typically start, "Dear Mother," Landry said.

Thank you, too.

When Mr. and Mrs.

Schmetz visited the United States last month, some of the veterans they have hosted showed their appreciation.

During their stay, the Schmetzes were presented with a distinguished achievement award by the Major Lamar Souter Chapter of the Central Massachusetts Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge, of which Landry is a member.

Several events were held for the Schmetzes, Landry said, including a country club banquet attended by 85 people, a smaller, informal gathering at the home of a veteran's son, and a luncheon on July 29 at the American Legion in Shirley.

They were also presented with a large framed portrait of themselves that Shirley artist Kim Mellema painted and another citation from the U.S. Army historian, Landry said. And there's one more citation in the works: from the secretary of the Army.

Landry accompanied the couple to Boston, where they later boarded a flight for

De Marcken's father was "the only known American in the Belgian underground" during WWII, Landry said. There's more to that story, and the other veteran has a few of his own, including one that recounts how his mother hid a flag of the United States of America in their home when he was a child, an offense punishable by death during Nazi occupation. The gist of Landry's story was that de Marcken's father had been captured by the Germans and was to be executed but escaped when the train he was on was bombed.

In his sketch for the citation, de Marcken called Mr. and Mrs. Schmetz "two of the most grateful Belgians" and said they had given "special support" to American WWII veterans and still do. They've added two bedrooms and a bath to their home, exclusively reserved for visiting U.S. veterans who call them "the Belgian M&M's," he said.

Marcel and Mathilde Schmetz "devoted their lives" to this cause, de Marcken said.

When Landry and other U.S. WWII veterans return to Belgium, the Schmetzes volunteer as tour guides, helping them retrace their steps through former battle fields of Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, providing free transportation

Schmetzes renovated their barn into a large reception and dining hall where they have welcomed American soldiers injured in Iraq and Afghanistan who are "in transit to the United States" after being treated at the American Hospital of Landstuhl, Germany, which de Marken said is a "very large military hospital." Free meals and guided tours of the museum are offered during the soldiers' stay, and the same warm welcome is extended to "all American veterans and their families," he said.

Mo Shields, whose wife Ann is a nurse at the hospital, provides entertainment for the recovering soldiers, de Marcken said. The Shields, who are friends of the Schmetzes, often take small groups of soldiers from the hospital to spend "R&R" time with Mathilde and Marcel, he said. To make their visitors comfortable, camp cots are set up in the reception hall, which has a half bath.

The Schmetzes also drive their guests to sites of solemn remembrance: The American military cemeteries of Ardennes, Henri Chapelle in Belgium, Margraten in the Netherlands and Hamm in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

"This very grateful couple always participate in all U.S. military ceremonies at these four cemeteries," de Marcken said.

home. While there, they took the Duck Boat tour, he said. A popular tourist attraction, the "duck boats" are recreated amphibious military vehicles, circa WWII.

Asked how he came to know the Schmetzes, Landry said he saw a notice in a veterans magazine: A man from Paxton was looking for "someone in my outfit," he said. (776th AAA, anti-aircraft artillery.)

He responded and the two met. "I told him I'd like to go back to Belgium," he said. The man put him in touch with Marcel and Mathilde Schmetz. "That's how I first met them," Landry said. "He'd known them for years."

#### **Shirley connection**

On a recent Monday night, Shirley selectmen signed the "Certificate of Achievement" the local Legion presented to the Schmetzes for "distinguished achievement" and "devoting their lives (to) helping members of the U.S. Armed Forces."

Landry sent the document with a letter inviting the selectmen to the Legion luncheon and backup data prepared by American veteran Christian de Marcken, a native of Belgium.

and food as well as lodging throughout their stay.

The Schmetzes also created a museum on their property. Called the "Remember 39-45 Museum," all items on display that they didn't find themselves were donated by veterans.

Landry explained that the property, a farm that previously belonged to Marcel Schmetz's father, was the site of a U.S. Army First Division encampment during WWII. Those soldiers went to fight at Ardennes, called "Battle of the Bulge." The soldiers left belongings behind, Landry said, and no one came back for them. Schmetz's father stored the items in the barn. Years later, Mathilde Schmetz persuaded her husband to create a museum, starting with those artifacts.

By design, the museum's collection consists of the soldiers' abandoned possessions, displays Marcel made and items donated by veterans, but no purchases. Landry said the couple will not buy an artifact, no matter how low the price or how much they want it.

The Belgian couple's gratitude to American veterans extends to those currently serving. Recently the

Landry has pictures of one ceremony he attended, showing rows of snow-white crosses on manicured green grass. Each cross bears the name of a soldier, with dates of death and battle, but the embossed inscriptions only appear when sand is rubbed over them, he said. When it washes off, the crosses are pristine white again.

Mathilde Schmetz spoke at the ceremony Landry attended and a group of school children sang "God Bless America," he said, noting that English is taught in Belgian classrooms.

Landry said gratitude is a cultural norm in Belgium, where children would stop to say "thank you" to American WWII veterans sitting at an outdoor café.

Such gestures highlight the legacy of freedom those soldiers and their comrades fought for, and the profound and lasting impact of their actions on the lives of Belgian citizens like Mr. and Mrs. Schmetz, who have shown kindness and respect to American veterans in return.

What can be said of this extraordinary gift that keeps on giving? The deeds speak for themselves.