French connection

During World War II, some French-speaking Louisiana servicemen found themselves involved in secret missions with the French resistance behind German lines.
As children in the 1920s, Robert LeBlanc of Abbeville and Roy Armentor of New Iberia shared a trait with many of their contemporaries: They spoke French before learning English.

"My grandmother and grandfather couldn't speak English, and my mother was sick when I was young," LeBlanc said. "I knew how to speak French real well."

For LeBlanc, Armentor and numerous other Acadiana men, it came in handy. It helped the Allies win World War II.

Long before the climactic D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944, American military planners anticipated the need for French-speaking soldiers to operate behind enemy lines in France, Belgium, north Africa and Asia. Naturally, they looked to south Louisiana men as a source of bilingual operatives.

Armentor, who was inducted into the Army in 1943, was sent to Camp Butner, N.C., with several other Acadiana men.

"There was a notice on the bulletin board about hazardous duty, who wants to do it, jump out of a plane and all that stuff," he said. "We went to the center and we were interviewed. We were French-speaking — all of us were. That's how we got in."

What they got into were operations run by the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner to today's Central Intelligence Agency. They went through training to prepare them to operate behind enemy lines and coordinate operations with resistance troops like the French Maquis.

Their activities, of course, were secret, and even after the war their exploits were little known. Jason Theriot, a New Iberia native seeking a master's degree in U.S. history at the University of Houston, is trying to correct that.

Theriot, 29, began interviewing Acadiana veterans of World War II in 2001 and has self-published two books of their stories, with a third scheduled to be finished in September. In the process, he discovered the experiences of Armentor, who was sent to France in advance of the amphibious invasion that took place on Aug. 15, 1944. They remained behind German lines for weeks until the advancing Americans overtook them.

"I got hurt on the jump," Armentor said. "We had what was supposed to be a high jump, and we jumped in the mountains, and we had a low jump — about 500 feet, maybe — and I landed in the rocks. It kind of messed me up in the back. The medics fixed me up and I stayed with them."

"We did different kinds of missions. We were trying to stop the Germans from retreating, going back through Spain. We'd stop the columns, harass them, blow up some stuff — bridges and things like that. We did fairly well."

When reunited with U.S. forces, Armentor was sent to Marseilles for medical treatment while his comrades were sent to Grenoble.

LeBlanc had received his lieutenant's commission from LSU in 1942 and, because of his French fluency, originally had been trained to serve as a censor for the invasion of French colonies in north Africa. When French cooperation proved that unnecessary, he was asked to return to infantry.

While at Fort Benning, Ga., he was recruited again for his language skills.

"One day I was called to post headquarters for an interview," LeBlanc said. "They kept talking about the French Underground."

"Would you volunteer for this? Would you volunteer for that? Basically, I said, 'I'm at the Army's mercy and you can do with me whatever you want to do.' They said, 'Well, would you be willing to volunteer?' I said, 'What am I volunteering for?' They wouldn't tell me."

He agreed anyway and underwent Jedburgh training. However, instead of being assigned to one of those units, LeBlanc joined the U.S. 3rd Army as a liaison officer between those forces and the French Underground. The 3rd Army, commanded by Gen. George Patton, swept across France after the Allies broke out of the Normandy beachhead on June 6, 1944."

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Robert LeBlanc of Abbeville often went behind enemy lines as the U.S. 3rd Army moved across France after the D-Day invasion.

July 25, 1944.

"The primary mission we had was to secure bridges so the armor could go, and the other was to protect the right flank, and the third was to provide security guards for the convoys and the pipelines that were being constructed to the rear," LeBlanc said. "Most of the activities I worked with was with the French Underground and providing all of these missions with Patton's Army."

LeBlanc coordinated activities with the Jedburghs and operational units that had parachuted in, and often went behind enemy lines accompanied by Underground members.

"Once we broke out in Normandy, it was easy to go through the lines and go to the rear," he said. "Up until the breakout in Normandy, you had fixed front lines. But once Patton broke out, the situation was so fluid, you had a mixture of Germans and Americans all over the Brittany peninsula."

As a liaison officer, LeBlanc had direct communications to the OSS office in London, which would give specific missions to the Underground. LeBlanc also would order supplies — often guns, ammunition, explosives, medical supplies and food — to be delivered by nighttime air drops. LeBlanc would return to American lines or allow U.S. forces to overtake his position.

"We'd call for a drop on a field, and a plane would come over and you'd blink a signal with a flashlight, a code, and both sides knew the code, and they'd drop these canisters of supplies to the field," he said. "We'd grab the canisters and get the hell off the field."

This continued from one side of France to the city of Nancy, near the German border. Afterward, the French-speaking OSS operatives were placed by German-speaking soldiers.

Although the Cajun French the Louisiana soldiers spoke differed from the more formal version taught in school and used in Paris, it served them well in the countryside.

"The Brittany area is where the Acadian people originated from," Theriot said. "It's pretty neat whenever I interviewed these men who were in that Brittany-Cherbourg area who ran into some of the French locals, and they speak some of the same kind of patois. It's so fascinating, because it's the ancient French which my forefathers brought to this country that hasn't really been changed much in 250, 300 years."

LeBlanc said one difference is in the term used for "immediately." Parisians say "maintenant." LeBlanc grew up saying "auster." "I used this word 'auster' one time — it wasn't in Paris; it was out in the country — the French laughed and wanted to know where I had gotten that word," he said. "An old lady sitting there, she said, 'I know where he got that word, because that was what we used when I was a kid.'"

Although he grew up in an era when south Louisiana youngsters no longer had French as a first language, Theriot found himself drawn to this older generation after reading some of historian Stephen Ambrose's compilations of their war stories. He decided to create his own veterans oral history project.

Theriot's research uncovered an alphabetized 1945 list of about 1,200 Iberia Parish World War II veterans. He asked his grandfather, Hewitt Theriot, of New Iberia, to check the list to see if he knew of any who might still be alive.

"When I came back the following weekend, he said, 'Jason, I've got at least 50 veterans who we can call today to go and interview. I only got up to the B's,'" Theriot said. "That's how we started, I said, 'Let's start with the first 100 that we have and see how far this gets us.' At that point I realized there was no way I was going to be able to write one book. I was going to have to divide it into the three main campaigns."

He titled the volumes "To Honor Our Veterans." The first two books gave a chronological account of the Europe and Mediterranean military campaigns through the soldiers' experiences, and the European campaign will be the subject of the third edition. Theriot said he interviewed about 150 veterans.

Most of their experiences are no different from the circumstances faced by soldiers, sailors and airmen in other parts of the country. Not so those whose background prepared them to venture behind German lines.

"It's a fascinating story how these special soldiers... their experiences in the war were separate from just about everybody else's, and they were able to contribute a whole lot more because of the way they were brought up as French-speaking bilingualists," Theriot said.