

WWII families reunite

Local soldier part of
group that helped
liberate France

By PHILIP PETRUNAK
philipp@dailyanmerican.com

The two families that inspired the book "Jason's Helmet: The true story of a helmet's journey home from the battlefield," reunited Friday during a ceremony at the Georgian Place Shopping & Office Village in Somerset.

"Jason's Helmet," tells the story of a Frenchman's recovery of an American soldier's helmet during World War II.

The details of Somerset County 1st Lt. Jason H. Barron's death remained a mystery to his family for 65 years. In 2009 the Barron's received an unlikely call that answered their questions.

The Somerset family showed their gratitude Friday by honoring the Bignon family — who returned Jason's helmet.

"We were so grateful for everything they did in bringing back the helmet," said Barron's niece, Linda Barron Heinrich. "(The Bignon's) have become family and they said Jason has a family in France."

Heinrich authored the book that depicts the two families united by the heroism of Jason Barron and five other American soldiers killed in action.

(See WWII, A2)

WWII

(Continued from A1)

The men died liberating the French town — Louge-sur-Maire, France, near the city of Fromentel — where the Bignon's lived.

Barron died in France on Aug. 17, 1944, alongside his fellow soldiers. The men took cover behind a tank, before being killed. Barron died from a piece of shrapnel that ricocheted off nearby trees. The shrapnel entered through one side of his helmet and exited the other. The six men were killed 330 yards from a farmhouse owned by the Bignon family.

Roger Bignon, his wife Genevieve, and his family received recognition from the Barron family and state Rep. Carl Walker Metzgar during the ceremony Friday before being greeted by dozens of Somerset County residents.

"I am not the hero (for returning the helmet)," Bignon, 76, said in French while his daughter-in-law Vallerie translated. "Those men were the heroes. We thought it would be impossible to find Jason's family. It was a miracle."

Bignon was 9 years old when the soldiers were discovered dead near his families' farm. After U.S.



Staff photo by Philip Petrunak

Roger Bignon and his family were honored Friday by family members of 1st Lt. Jason H. Barron and Sgt. Levy A. Guidry Jr. who were killed while liberating France. Pictured in back are Joan Guidry Eymard, Lucile Leroyer and Vallerie Bignon. In front are Roger Bignon, Genevieve Bignon and Linda Barron Heinrich.

forces recovered the remains of the soldiers, a Frenchman named Roger Pillu discovered a helmet left behind. The helmet was marked as belonging to Barron. Pillu, who died in 2010, passed the helmet along to Bignon.

Barron's helmet was a symbol of the sacrifice made by Americans to free the French, Heinrich said.

"A lot of people don't realize what freedom means. But Roger and his family does," Joan

Guidry Eymard, of New Orleans, La., said. Eymard is the sister of Sgt. Levy A. Guidry Jr., who died alongside Barron. "Genevieve (Roger Bignon's wife) said she remembers spending nights on the floor of their home while carpet bombs rang out over their heads, not knowing what would happen. They are so appreciative for what our soldiers did."

Eymard and the Barron's traveled to Jason's final resting place in

2009 and were honored by the people of Louge-sur-Maire. Heinrich said her father Emerson Barron, Jason's only living brother, was treated like royalty during their visit. The Bignon family gathered more than 150 residents of the village to welcome the American families.

"I knew that I had to write the story and tell people here what these people in France were doing to honor these soldiers," Heinrich said of the book. "I had to let my fellow Americans know that (French) people are very grateful to us."

The area where the six soldiers were killed is deemed "Purple Heart Corner" because of all the lives that were lost there. After Barron died, he was awarded the Silver Star, the third-highest military honor, as well as the Purple Heart.

It was also announced that he was made commanding officer and promoted to the rank of Captain six days before his death. The other soldiers' names were: Pvt. David M. Williams, Pfc. Michael E. Koepl, Pfc. Jessie C. Price and Pfc. Arthur A. Hudson.

Anyone interested in learning more can visit jasonshelmet.com