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Press release : 2016 : 06 : 03 : USFSP Graduate Student Travels to Normandy to Honor WWII Soldier

University of South Florida St. Petersburg. Office of University Advancement.

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USFSP GRADUATE STUDENT TRAVELS TO NORMANDY TO HONOR WWII SOLDIER

As part of a [National History Day](#) competition, USF St. Petersburg graduate student Deborah Pettingill and local high school junior Konner Ross have been selected to honor a fallen World War II hero at the Normandy American Cemetery in France this month. The pair will travel to Normandy by way of Washington, D.C. to celebrate the life of Florida soldier Pvt. Leo K. Chalcraft.

They began studying the life of Chalcraft, a St. Petersburg native who was drafted in March 1944 at age 19 and was killed on Christmas Eve that year off the coast of Cherbourg, France. He was aboard the S.S. Leopoldville, a Belgian troop ship traveling from England to provide infantry reinforcements for what later became known as the infamous Battle of the Bulge. He died before reaching their destination.

Pettingill, 50, a graduate student in the Humanities and Cultural Studies program and USF alumna, served as a teacher to Ross, 16, last year at Largo High School and is her History Honor Society advisor. Pettingill also is involved with the National History Day competition, a program that requires participants to select a soldier from their state who was buried or memorialized at the American Cemetery in Normandy.



From left: Deborah Pettingill and Konner Ross

When she told Ross about the project, they both became excited and decided to complete the lengthy application together. She meets regularly with Ross to go over the extensive required readings and to assist her in the research, teaching her how to use microfilm and helping with the genealogy of Chalcraft's family.

"I am fortunate enough that when I told my friends of this project, one of them passed the information on to a friend of his, Marty Morgan, who is a WWII historian," said Pettingill. "He helped us to identify the soldiers from Florida, and then went further and helped us with what counties they were from as we wanted to find someone close to home."

Pettingill and her student searched for information about his family and discovered that he had two brothers. One brother, Richard Chalcraft, had passed away in 2014. After much searching, they were able to locate Albert Chalcraft, Leo's younger brother. He shared with them artifacts from his brother's final days, including a wallet, a Western Union notification, and other personal affects.

"What both of us have learned from the required assignments has been very insightful as it is a chance to study the war more deeply," Pettingill said. "The most exciting part of this experience has been the more personal side: learning about his life and then meeting his family."

Pettingill and Ross will join with 14 teams in Washington, D.C. to finish their research about Chalcraft with assistance from the National Archives, historians, and college professors.

While in Normandy, Ross will deliver a graveside eulogy that she has written. Later this summer, she will create a website about Chalcraft's life. Pettingill also will give at least two presentations about Chalcraft and the National History Day project.

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