

Mark McKay and Jason Lewis embarked on a very unique journey earlier this year to pay tribute to one of Indiana's World War II veterans through the National History Day organization's summer institute.

Every year, NHD selects 15 teacher/student teams from across the country to spend half a year doing research on the D-Day invasion and other aspects of World War II, eventually choosing a specific veteran to focus on. All this prep-work leads up to a trip to Washington D.C. for a few days, where they perform more intensive research, followed by a week abroad exploring the real-life battlegrounds of World War II.

"I applied for the program in December and got accepted in January," said McKay, a Social Studies teacher at Salem High School. "So then I had to choose a student to go with me." Interested students were required to write an essay for McKay, who ultimately picked Lewis to join him for this special honor a month later. "It felt longer than a month while I was waiting," recalls Lewis, a junior at the high school.

They spent the months leading up to their trip pouring over history books and hearing lectures given by WW II historians. The duo spend many of their lunch breaks in McKay's classroom, knee-deep in discussion over the latest facts they'd learned during their ongoing studies. Their research eventually led them to choose Major Courtney B. Neilson as the veteran they would primarily focus on. Lewis explained "We chose him because he was the highest ranking soldier we could find...but we learned a ton about him!" As part of the program, they took all of that information they learned to put together a website about Major Neilson.

One of the most interesting things they learned about the Bedford native was that his family roots stretched far past Hoosier soil, leading to unexpected places on the other side of the globe. "We learned that his family came from South Africa," said McKay, "that was an interesting connection to make."

On June 16, McKay and Lewis set off for Washington D.C. where they met up with the other 14 teams who participated in the 2012 summer institute. Their time at our nation's capital was educational, but Lewis and McKay agree that the real experience didn't begin until they reached France five days later.

The group traveled to Normandy and Omaha Beach, among other iconic sites of the second World War. They were especially taken by the culture and history to be found at Bayeux, the first city that was liberated in the Battle of Normandy. They were particularly excited to see the Bayeux Tapestry with their own eyes. The Tapestry, actually an embroidered cloth likely made in the 1070s AD, depicts the Norman conquest of England.

McKay says one of his favorite memories was the day they visited the American Cemetery in Normandy where many fallen WWII veterans are buried. Each of the students visited the grave of their chosen veteran and read a prepared eulogy in front of the group. "Jason did a eulogy for Courtney, it was one of the highlights of the trip for me."

When asked what he took away from their research and time in France, Jason said it was an incredible feeling "just walking in the places they fought." The experience also taught him "never to take for granted anything we have, and what a wonderful job our men and women in the

service to for us.”

What most impacted McKay was the friendliness, hospitality and above all the gratitude of the French citizens they encountered. “People are very much aware of the Liberators, and are still appreciative of it.” It reminded him of the important role this American-French connection has played in our national history, going back all the way to Revolutionary times. “Going over there and seeing everything makes it 3D,” he said.

For more information on the National History Day organization and information on applying to be part of their Summer Institute 2013 group, visit www.nhd.org/normandyinstitute.htm. You can also view the website Jason created in honor of Major Courtney B. Neilson at <http://13190742.nhd.weebly.com>.