

Swiss-born man to rest in Arlington cemetery for spy work in WWII



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Armed with a Colt .45 and fluency in four languages, Rene Joyeuse spent five months undercover near German-occupied Paris for an American spy agency during World War II .

Before and after the Normandy invasion of June 1944, the Swiss-born Joyeuse supplied vital intelligence and helped rescue more than 200 downed Allied airmen through an escape network.



(Dominique Soulier/The Sussex-Plan) - Rene Joyeuse in an official military portrait, taken in 1944.

Joyeuse received the Distinguished Service Cross, the military's highest award for valor after the Medal of Honor. Gen. Dwight D.

Eisenhower, then supreme Allied commander, personally pinned it on him. But the honor Joyeuse most wanted — burial at Arlington National Cemetery, the most hallowed ground of his adopted country — was initially denied to him after his death last June, at 92, in Upstate New York.

He did not qualify, his family was told, because his attachment to the Office of Strategic Services, the CIA's wartime predecessor, did not meet the cemetery's requirement of active U.S. military service. With up to 30 funerals a day at the nation's burial ground, the rules and culture are strict and can be broken only with a waiver from the U.S. president or the secretary of the Army.

Only 62 foreign nationals who perished while working with the American military have been buried at Arlington since the cemetery was established in 1864, said retired cemetery historian Tom Sherlock. That does not include several exceptional cases, including enemy soldiers who died in U.S. captivity.

“It seemed almost completely wrong that people who fought against Rene Joyeuse are buried there, and he couldn’t get in,” said military and espionage historian Patrick K. O’Donnell, who helped the family make its case to influential members of the armed forces establishment.

After months of appeals from the family, Secretary of the Army John McHugh granted the extremely rare waiver — in large part because of the intervention from then-CIA Director David H. Petraeus and Navy Adm. William H. McRaven, who helped plan the Navy SEAL raid that killed Osama bin Laden.

Joyeuse, who became a surgeon and medical teacher and researcher in the United States, was cremated and will be inurned Friday at Arlington.

O’Donnell said Petraeus was a crucial player in persuading McHugh to concede the waiver. “The situation seems very unique and the rationale quite exceptional,” Petraeus wrote by hand to McHugh in his official letter of support. He signed off, “Many thanks — Dave.”

Remi Joyeuse and his older brother, Marc-Jerome, said they were baffled by the initial decision to deny their father a burial spot and felt an imperative to challenge the ruling on his behalf.

“One of my earliest memories was looking at my father’s Distinguished Service Cross when I was 3, and he explained then, ‘That is the medal that will allow me to be buried at Arlington cemetery,’ ” said Remi, a business consultant in Knoxville, Tenn.

“He considered America his country, his home,” Remi added. “But he also gave up a lot to come to this country — he left his family over in Europe.”

Joyeuse was born Rene Veuve in Zurich in 1920, one of eight children of Franco-Italian laborers. He grew up in the Alsace-Lorraine region of France and, hoping for a better life for himself, pursued degrees from two French universities. He was studying Romance languages in the United States when he left in 1943 to serve in London with Charles de Gaulle’s Free French forces.

He became one of the 120 Frenchmen recruited to the OSS operation known as Sussex. Parachuted into strategic areas of France, they would blend in to the local population and funnel intelligence back to Allied forces in anticipation of the D-Day landings.

When selecting his OSS alias, he suggested “Joyeuse” — French for joyful — as a wry wordplay on the popular operetta “The Merry Widow.” His real surname means widow.

In his 2004 OSS history, “Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs,” O’Donnell described Joyeuse as exceptional among the Sussex participants because of his “deceptiveness and sheer audacity.”

His first safehouse northeast of Paris bumped against the back yard of a chateau being used by German forces. “I wanted to be right next to them so my signal would be mixed up with theirs and they couldn’t triangulate my position with direction-finding trucks,” he told O’Donnell. “I remember seeing their trucks going around but they thought it was their own signal.”

He recruited dozens of subagents, and information he transmitted back to London enabled the Allies to monitor German troop movements and bomb important German war-production factories.

When the Germans were tipped off to his whereabouts, Joyeuse made a harrowing escape from his safehouse. Machine-gun fire raked his right foot. Two of his bodyguards were executed. He spent 10 days in hiding before he was behind friendly lines.

After the war, Joyeuse kept his nom de guerre and conducted intelligence work for the French in Indochina. He was appalled by the primitive techniques used to treat severely wounded soldiers in the field and enrolled at the University of Paris medical school. He spent much of his surgical career in the United States, where he became a citizen in 1975.

In granting Joyeuse a waiver, the secretary of the Army considered the “totality” of service, said spokesman Maj. Chris Kasker. That included his wartime record as well as his work in veterans hospitals from New Jersey to Hawaii.

Joyeuse, a resident of Saranac Lake, N.Y., retired at 75 as a director of medical services in the New York state prison system. He died June 12 of Alzheimer’s disease, a melancholy fate for a man whose career was defined by wartime cunning and peacetime intellect.

“It was said that an ideal OSS candidate was a PhD who could win a bar fight,” said Charles Pinck, president of the OSS Society. “That’s a perfect description of Dr. Rene Joyeuse.”