



Illustration by Tom Mossar

French Resistance:

A University professor fought for her country's survival in World War II

By STAN ELLIS
Daily Collegian Staff Writer

Jeanne Le Blanc is a French professor at the University. Since coming here in 1963, she has taught thousands of students the intricacies of her native tongue.

Most class periods it's business as usual, but often at least once during the term Le Blanc's students refuse to open their books.

They don't want to hear about the French language. They want to hear about French history — Le Blanc, a diminutive woman in her late fifties, witnessed first hand a tragic time in France's, and the world's, history — World War II.

But she not only watched it, she participated in it. Le Blanc was a member of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI), an organization of French countrymen dedicated to freeing France from its Nazi invaders.

"I felt like a private first class," she says with a light French accent. "The important role for girls and the elderly was as liaisons, carrying messages. We were less suspicious than young men."

"Girls did not do any sabotaging, like cutting tracks or blowing bridges. That was man's work."

But carrying messages could be a dangerous business — Le Blanc herself was shot carrying a message the day before her home town, Versailles, was freed from German occupation.

"It was the day before the liberation of Versailles, August 23, 1944. The Allies were right outside of our town, and there was shelling back and forth over our heads — you know, a constant boom . . . boom . . . boom," she said, moving her hands in arcs from one chair arm to the other.

Le Blanc said the Germans had been ordered to shoot at anybody, military or civilian.

"It was my last message of the day, I heard shooting close by and I took refuge in a Red Cross building," she said.

"Across the street from where I was hiding, there were barracks where Germans were shooting from, only I didn't realize it."

"There was a lull in the shooting, so I thought I could get out. A janitor and I walked to the front door, and they saw us from across the street and shot at us."

"I felt something sharp in my right side and I fell. We were always told that if we were shot at to fall down, like we were dead."

Le Blanc said the janitor, an elderly man, did not heed the advice and tried to run.

"They opened fire on him. He died in a hospital about two days later."

Between 200 and 300 civilians were killed in Versailles that day, Le Blanc said. She considers herself very lucky to be alive; the extent of her injury was only a flesh wound in a "rather embarrassing place."

"I walked with a white flag, with the wounded, and hobbled home," she said. "I didn't want my parents to worry."

The next day her hometown was freed by the Allies.

"The shelling had gone all night, and my family and I were in the basement," Le Blanc said. "At about two in the morning, there was complete silence."

"My mother stood up and said, 'I am sure we are liberated.' I can't come close to telling you what it felt like when she said that."

Her mother went upstairs and saw a scene approaching joyous chaos. Everybody was out in the streets shouting, "The Germans have left! Versailles will be liberated!"

The liberation came that day, August

24, 1944, and the citizens crowded the streets jumping and kissing the Allied soldiers according to Le Blanc.

"We got real cigarettes for a change, and chewing gum. The Allies brought food; even the K-rations were great."

Le Blanc said she and her mother made an American flag that had all the stripes but only twelve stars.

"We only had material for twelve stars, and we couldn't even make a British flag. I hope your British readers aren't offended by that."

But before the joy of the liberation, there was much sorrow. According to Le Blanc, she became aware that something terrible was going to happen as early as 1936.

"The important role for girls and the elderly was as liaisons carrying messages. We were less suspicious than young men."

"My parents were very much aware that relations with Germany were disastrous," she said. "They made a determined effort to bring German and French young people together. We had German students stay with us every summer."

"We had good relations until some of the young Germans became members of the Nazi party. Then things changed."

When Le Blanc saw the Jews pouring into France from Germany, she knew the Nazis were attempting the "destruction of a race."

In March of 1938, Austria fell into German hands, and Le Blanc said it was a day of mourning throughout Western Europe.

"Once that happened, we could see no hope," she said.

The Munich Pact followed: British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain signed the pact to appease Hitler and allowed German occupation of Sudetenland in a last-ditch effort to prevent a full-scale war. It didn't work.

"The Munich Agreement tried to maintain peace, but really it sold our souls," Le Blanc said. "It was considered in France the sell-out of an innocent country."

In September, 1939, violating the agreement Germany invaded Poland, and France declared war on Germany.

But for eight months nothing happened, Le Blanc said.

"My dad fixed the basement up because we thought there would be bombing the day after war was declared, but it was quiet."

The calm did not last, though.

On June 14, 1940, Paris fell into Nazi hands, and the Nazi occupation of France was nearly complete, Le Blanc said.

At this time, she said, the French Resistance started to take shape.

"As a student," she said, "I first knew of the role I might be during the war. It was brought to my attention by fellow students."

Le Blanc said the early days of the Resistance were devoted to circulating news from London, since all the French newspapers had to print Nazi propaganda, and to keeping the morale of the French people from dying.

"What we did seems like so little, but we had no papers or radio in France that would tell the truth," she said. "We would get up at two in the morning to hear the radio from London because it was jammed during the day. Then we would transcribe it."

Le Blanc said she helped type and distribute the news from London. She

would have been arrested had she been caught.

She also served as a messenger between groups printing false papers for Jews so they could cross the border into southern France which was unoccupied.

Nothing they did until the middle of 1941 even vaguely resembled military activity, Le Blanc said.

But in the summer of 1941, the Nazis attacked Soviet Russia and the numbers of French sympathetic to and active in the Resistance increased significantly.

"The working force in France was sympathetic to Russia at the time because of their socialist ideas," Le Blanc said. "Up until then they had not been interested. Only the intellectuals in France had been sympathetic to the Resistance. But many joined after the attack on Russia."

"They gave new body and force to the Resistance," she said. "We became a paramilitary force. We were more active, doing sabotaging and the like."

Another major military event occurred in 1941, Le Blanc said, that was the turning point of the war — Pearl Harbor.

"We knew the Allies would win after the United States entered the war," she said. "It's a terrible thing to say, especially to Americans, but there was rejoicing in Europe that day. We had been waiting for the United States to enter for a long time."

While all this was going on internationally, Le Blanc and her mother became more involved with the Resistance in France. She said her mother did not hesitate to express her views on English culture in her classes. She always tried to do anything she could to help the oppressed, Le Blanc said.

"One day agents of the Gestapo came to my mother's school to arrest two young girls in grade school," Le Blanc recalled. The Germans needed the addresses of the girls' parents because they wanted to arrest them.

"My mother taught in the high school section, but when she saw the agents she tried to get all the teachers in the school to stand up to them. She said, 'If we all stick together they won't take the children.'"

"My mother and two teachers were the only ones willing to stick up for the girls, so they were arrested," she said. Both the other teachers were sent to concentration camp. "Only one returned."

These were dangerous times in the Resistance after the events of 1941, Le Blanc said, much more so than in the early days.

Le Blanc remembered the story of a friend who collected weapons to distribute to the members of the FFI.

"Now that was really dangerous work," Le Blanc said, "a lot more dangerous than what I was doing. Collecting and carrying those weapons was a great danger to one's life."

Unfortunately, Le Blanc's friend was caught, taken out into the yard of his home and shot.

"After that happened," she said, "I had to go and warn some of the other members of the group. I am almost positive the Nazis knew what I was doing and I was watched."

Le Blanc said she was traveling from Paris, where she went to school, to her home in Versailles.

"I remember getting off the train, walking up the street, and disappearing in a side street. Whoever was following me lost me there."

"After a few minutes," she said, "I went to the house where these people were staying and told them to leave."

They got out, and a couple of days later, their house was searched. I also stayed away from home for a couple of months because it wasn't safe for my family if I was at home."

But the closest call came about two years later, in the winter of 1943.

Le Blanc said her mother was always telling of the virtues of the cultures that comprised the Allied forces while teaching at her high school.

"She was known as somebody not in sympathy with the Germans," Le Blanc said, "and she was finally caught."

Le Blanc said the Nazis found her mother's name in a notebook of someone who had been arrested.

"That was a stupid move in the first place," Le Blanc said, voice rising a little. "You never wrote anything down. It was too dangerous if you were caught."

Her mother was summoned to the principal's office, and the Gestapo agents started to ask her questions, Le Blanc said. After the interrogation, the agents said they were going to have to go to their home and search it.

"We had many papers that were criminal there, so my mother had to figure a quick way of warning my father and myself," she said.

Le Blanc said her mother agreed, but that she had to go get her coat. Fortunately, the agents didn't go with her, and she went to her cousin, who also taught in the school, and asked her to warn her husband and her daughter (Le Blanc).

"My dad and I went to work and burned a lot of things in the furnace," Le Blanc said. "We were just finished and looking like nothing had happened when the Gestapo's agents arrived with my mother."

Le Blanc said her mother delayed the agents at the school long enough to allow her cousin to warn them, plus giving Le Blanc and her father a good half hour to destroy the papers.

"When the agents came they threw everything in the house on the floor," she

said. "It looked like a hurricane had hit the place."

Everything seemed all right until Le Blanc glanced at the radio.

"The radio was not turned on, but it was tuned to the BBC (British Broadcasting Company) from London," she said. "If we had been caught with the radio tuned to that station, we would have been arrested."

Although it was tense during the search, the agents never noticed the radio.

Le Blanc said her mother was taken away by the agents. When she left, they had no idea if they would ever see her again. But she called from the high school the next day, informing her family that she had been released.

"We were living in constant fear of being caught. If the occupation had lasted much longer, I'm sure I wouldn't be here today."

"She was going to teach that day, but the principal told her to go home and get some sleep," Le Blanc said, laughing.

Le Blanc and her mother spent the rest of the Nazi occupation relaying messages and hiding young men who refused to work in the factories making weapons for the Germans.

"They could be arrested anywhere," she said. "The young men were caught in places like subways and asked why they weren't working, making German guns."

The final period of the Nazi occupation was the most dangerous time of all, according to Le Blanc.

"We were living in constant fear of being caught. If the occupation had lasted much longer, I'm sure I wouldn't be here today."

But it did end. On August 25, 1944, the day after the liberation of Versailles, Paris was freed from Nazi hands, and France was free.

"Our house in Versailles became known as the American consulate after the war," Le Blanc said. "Americans were there all the time because my family and I were bi-lingual. I had a good time again. It was great."

In 1946, Le Blanc received a scholarship from the American Association of University Women (AAUW), which she said she is more proud of than all her efforts in the war.

"There were six scholarships for women from occupied countries who were good students and who had been active in a resistance movement," she said.

She came to the United States and attended Columbia University. After her stay here, she returned home to France, but then came back and made the United States her permanent home.

The proverbial happy ending seems to apply to Le Blanc's life. She married Alfred Le Blanc, who is also a French professor at the University, and she has been teaching French for fifteen years at the University with him.

But all is not well in Le Blanc's world. "I see too many things happening that I do not like. The Nazis seem to be gaining strength again. That thing in Illinois with the Jews was terrible."

"I realize this country is founded on everyone having a right to say what they want, but it is a shame to think the Jews who have suffered so much, had to suffer more at the hands of those people in the American Nazi party."

The American Nazi party staged a demonstration and parade in Skokie, Illinois, last year calling for such things as the destruction of the Jewish race. Skokie has a large Jewish community in the town.

"I am telling this story not to brag, but to let everyone in this community know what went on during the war. We can't let it happen again."



Photo by Randy Bennett

Jeanne Le Blanc, a University French professor, was a messenger and member of the French Forces of the Interior, which fought against the German Army in occupied France in World War II.