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STARS AND STRIPES

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Grandson's search yields medal for long-ignored deeds

By Doug Dooling, Special to Stars and Stripes

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I don't know if I should start this story at the beginning or the end, so I'll start in the middle.

My grandfather — my mother's father — was buried on June 13, 1930. The family story is that he died because of the chronic effects of being gassed in the trenches of France in World War I.

His name was Stephen Raymond Smith, and he was just 31 when he died. My mother was 7. When I quizzed her about the funeral, all she can remember is the local contingent from the American Legion Post playing "Taps," and her Aunt Vera trying to throw herself in her brother's grave. To this day, my mother cannot stand the playing of "Taps."

She does not know what happened to her Aunt Vera or any other member of her father's family. She did not know where her father was born, nor did she know his birthday. She did remember her father had only one hand, but could not tell me whether he was born that way or if he had lost it in an accident.

After he died, my widowed grandmother disciplined her children (my mother and her brothers, 6 and 11 years old) not to speak of their father, especially after my grandmother began dating and eventually married her new husband in November 1932. Their stepfather was very good to their mother and the three children. He provided for them well through the Depression and the war years. My grandmother and he



Photo courtesy of Douglas Dooling

In this 1923 photograph, Stephen Smith is holding his daughter, Douglas Dooling's mother, while his son, Richard "Dickie" Smith, stands beside him. Richard grew up to become a colonel in World War II, and received a Silver Star for bravery as a bomber pilot in the Pacific.

were married for more than 51 years. As time went on, the memory of my mother's real father grew dimmer and faded away.

In January 1998, I started to get interested in genealogy and family history. I quickly realized genealogy is the frame of the family, and family history/folklore is the fabric of a family. Around Easter of 1998, I asked my mother where her father was buried. She was not sure. She thought maybe West Laurel Hill Cemetery in Bala Cynwyd, Pa. I made some phone calls and found out he was buried in Westminster Cemetery, also in Bala Cynwyd.

My mother, sister and I visited the family plot. It was the first time for me — and for Mother. (My grandmother did a good job making her children forget the memory of their father; she died and was cremated in 1990.)

Stephen Smith's stone grave marker was the military type found in Arlington National Cemetery. His marker was extremely weathered and some inscriptions were beyond recognition. My sister and I thought it would be a nice gesture to have his grave marker replaced.

To do this, I would have to find his military records. I was unsuccessful because I did not know his Army serial number, per the requirements of the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Mo.

By December 1998, I traced a family connection to an arrival in Philadelphia in 1682, while other searches led to dead ends. My link to Stephen R. Smith's lineage yielded nothing. I was able to trace Stephen Smith's birth to Windber, a small coal-mining town in western Pennsylvania. He was born in 1898. According to family folklore, Stephen's father was a Polish immigrant who changed his name when he arrived. The family does not know what his name was before it was Smith.

I really needed his military records to find out more so that his new stone grave marker would have more than just his name and life span on it.

Then I had an idea. I knew he had a military grave marker. This meant the U.S. government paid for some of the funeral expense. The first thing I did was contact Westminster Cemetery to find out if it had any of Stephen Smith's military records. It did not. But I found out that his funeral was handled by the Oliver Bair Funeral Home, which still exists. I thought: What are the chances of a funeral home still having "customer" records almost 70 years after providing the funeral?

I was right; they did not have his records. Funeral records must be kept for tax records for only seven years, just like any other business.

But they had not destroyed them, either.

The funeral home sent all its old records to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Funeral homes are not required by any law to keep these burial records for more than a year. I was very lucky. I wrote to the HSP and in two weeks I had my grandfather's funeral records, complete with a claim number for the Department of Army. With that claim number, I was able to recontact NPRC in St. Louis. NPRC said most — 85 percent — of the records of veterans of World War I, including my grandfather's, were destroyed in a fire in 1974. However, since he had an additional claim folder, due to his 1930 military funeral, a copy of his records were found in that claim folder in Washington, D.C. If he had not had a military funeral, all his records would have been destroyed.

Two weeks later, I had a copy of my grandfather's military records. Doors to the past were beginning to open.

In 1916, Stephen Smith, at age 17, enlisted in the U.S. Army out of Marion, Ohio. He was part of the 166th Infantry Regiment, which was part of the 42nd Infantry Division — the "Rainbow Division," which stretched "like a rainbow from one end of America to the other."

When America entered World War I, Smith's regiment was sent to the front. For the duration of the war, it was never out of firing range of the enemy. He saw action in the battles of Champagne, the Second Battle of the Marne, St. Mihiel and the Argonne. It was at Argonne, "while in action with the enemy," that he was wounded when a flare gun he was firing exploded in his hand. The hand has to be amputated in the field.

The wound occurred on Nov. 10, 1918 — the last day of fighting. Armistice Day was Nov. 11, 1918. (We now call it Veterans Day).

At this point, I thought it would be fitting if I applied for a Purple Heart Medal for Stephen Smith. On March 4, 1999, I wrote to Total Army Personnel Command (APC) in Alexandria, Va., to get the medal for him, posthumously. I thought I would get the medal quickly because I submitted a copy of his military records and his honorable discharge that described his wound. I would present this medal to my mother and tell her that she finally had something to remember her father by.

The personnel command responded on Nov. 1, saying that my grandfather was not eligible for a Purple Heart because his wound resulted when a flare gun accidentally blew up while he was firing it. Their denial was based on the phrase "accidentally discharged": You cannot receive a Purple Heart because of an accident. Another setback.

But his records said the wound occurred while "in action with the enemy." So, in order for him to be eligible for the Purple Heart, I needed to prove fighting was going on while he discharged his flare gun. Flare guns were used for communicating troop and enemy activity in WWI.

I scurried to the Internet to see if some WWI buff out there might know about troop activity and battle engagements. I sent several e-mails to groups I never knew existed, asking them about the closing battles of WWI and the troop activity of the 166th Infantry Regiment, 42nd Infantry Division. No one responded to these e-mails, but someone was reading them.

On Dec. 15, I received an early and unexpected Christmas present. A package arrived from the U.S. Army Center of Military History at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C. It contained mounds of evidence as to why my grandfather should receive a Purple Heart, proving his unit was in action at the relevant time. Now, armed with new evidence, on Dec. 28, I wrote back to the APC in Alexandria and asked it to reconsider the previous denial.

It appeared that perseverance and truth paid off.

On March 17, 2000, I received a phone call from APC officials. They changed their minds. They reconsidered, and saw the merit of my grandfather receiving the Purple Heart Medal for the loss of a hand in battle in the closing days of World War I.

On May 4, my grandfather's Purple Heart arrived in the mail — almost 82 years after he was wounded.

On May 8, I presented this medal to my mother. She was pleased for what I did, for remembering her father. She told me of how, for many years, family discussions steered away from her father and that she did not remember much about him. For many years, her mother had made it clear that it was inappropriate to speak about her dead father.

I guess years of forgetting about someone takes its toll.

In a gracious tone, my mother said it was a very nice gesture. Then she handed the medal back to me, and said: "You keep it."

Douglas Dooling comes from a long line of military veterans, extending to the American Revolution. He is a contracting officer with the U.S. General Services Administration and lives with his family in Philadelphia.

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