

➤ Of the more than 7,000 Americans killed at St. Mihiel, 4,153 are buried here at Thiaucourt, while 284 were declared missing.

Photo by Warrick Page/ABM.

Finding CARL

By Noretta Willig

**In the American Cemetery
at Thiaucourt, France,
stands a doughboy,
larger than life.**



Dressed in his summer tunic, bloused pants, and leggings, his thumbs in his belt, he looks out over the rows of white crosses. Strong, handsome, and resolute, he looks so young. The inscription, in French, above his head translates: HE SLEEPS FAR FROM HIS FAMILY IN THE GENTLE LAND OF FRANCE. On the pedestal, the motto continues in English: BLESSED ARE THEY THAT HAVE THE HOME LONGING FOR THEY SHALL GO HOME. Truly, truly they will.

➤ Returned from their futile search to find Carl in Europe, Henry and Anna placed this marker over what would have been Carl's grave. All they knew of him was that he rested "Somewhere in France."

All photos by the author unless noted.



✓ This picture of Carl Willig, age 18, became his family's final view of him. Then, through three generations, he became an ancestral memory.



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**AND HER MIGHT
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~President Woodrow Wilson

Carl Willig died on September 16, 1918, at the Battle of St. Mihiel Salient. “Salient” is a cartographer’s term for a bulge in the line, in this case a deliberate outcropping in the famous Hindenburg Line, the German offensive track and the Allied defensive barrier that dominated the war in France. The German-held salient interrupted the rail connections between industrial Eastern France and the capital city of Paris. The triangular area was well-fortified and dominated by the high ground near the village of Montsec. For the first four years of the war across France, soldiers on both sides dug in to trenches, bombarded each other relentlessly, advanced a few yards, retreated a few yards, dug in and began again. Nothing gained; nothing lost.

In President Woodrow Wilson’s address to Congress on April 2, 1917, he called to arms only about 100,000 existing troops and the nation saying, “America is privileged to spill

her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness.” To fulfill the president’s objective, the United States Army, within a year, numbered 1.5 million soldiers, enlisted and later conscripted, ready or not.

As the newly appointed force leader, General John J. Pershing received a clear directive from his Commander-in-Chief: the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) must win a major victory in Europe with a “separate and distinct component of the combined forces.” Such solo U.S. success would establish America as a world power and, perhaps more importantly for the President, secure for him a prominent influence in the peace talks to follow.

The battle chosen by Pershing to accomplish the order was to close the 270-square-mile salient at St. Mihiel. The French and British commands would, not without argument, stand aside, let the AEF



▲ The battle to close the 270-square-mile St. Mihiel Salient was America’s first independent action of the war and its first victorious battle fought on European soil.

The motto over the doughboy’s head gives rest to those who lie here. The words below him promise their journey home.

Photo by Warrick Page/ABM.



The Willig family smile together, c. 1911: Henry, Anna, older son Carl, and younger son Walter, who became the author's father.



When four years of diligent effort by the Army failed to recover their son, Henry and Anna traveled to France, determined to find Carl themselves.

troops regroup, and accord to General Pershing full authority. Everything was on the line for Pershing, the AEF, and America.

While Pershing himself established the strategic design of the battle, then-Colonel George C. Marshal planned and organized the attack. No longer the trench warfare tactic to fight, then pause, then fight again, this encounter was set to move, move, move.

The weather was as hostile as the enemy. Four long days and nights of rain continued into the opening day, September 12.

Combat began at 1 a.m. with Colonel William (Billy) Mitchell leading the first air assault in history. Using a force of 1,481 planes, his mission was to observe and report to ground commanders the enemy positions, to bomb enemy artillery installations, and to take the German air force out of the sky. Flying his legendary SPAD xiii, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker earned his "ace" citation in the battle.

At dawn, Lieutenant Colonel George S. Patton, Jr., on foot, led his tank brigades into the field, adapting to circumstances and adjusting his tactics in ways that would make him the most successful tank commander in history. Douglas MacArthur, already a Brigadier General, directed his famous "Rainbow" Division into the fight. Only a few hours into the fray, these two men met, comrades in arms, rivals in rank, artillery striking around them. Each later presented his version of the meeting, but still, no one knows for sure which of them actually did, as accused, duck from danger.

Under the leadership of these future heroes, St. Mihiel, on the evening of September 16, 1918, was declared the first victory of the U.S. Army on European soil. The salient was closed.

The prominent military figures of the twentieth century were all there. So was Carl Willig.

Carl was 19, enlisted, the older son of a German immigrant and a Private, 5th

Carl, shown here at about 14, ➤ would soon start work at the National Tube Works, then at 18, he enlisted and went off to a place called "over there." Everyone's world soon changed.



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Then, carefully identifying a spot, he points and says, "Here is the farmhouse. Here is where we found Carl. You will see."

Quickly we are in the car again, mesmerized by the unscarred beauty of the landscape. Suddenly we stop on an empty road surrounded by open fields and distant woods. Elisabeth is quickly out of the car with a map spread on the hood. Again, she shows me the progress of the battle. "You see," she says, "by September 15, the doughboys had advanced to this road." I verify, "You mean this road? The one we are on now?"

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Raised in McKeesport, **Noretta Willig** graduated from Ohio University and the University of Pittsburgh. After working in publications, she taught literature at an area high school. Since retiring, she has traveled in all 50 states and many foreign countries, including to the battlefields of France. Visit Carlsstory.com for more information.



▲ Carl Willig, lost and almost forgotten, is "Home at Last." He rests on a quiet hill above a vacant steel mill near his father, mother, and brother who mourned him all their lives.



As we travel back a muddy road, with the farmhouse on our left, we approach a wood pile. There, where the tree line turns slightly to the left, is where Carl died, and where 88 years later he was found.

Finishing his shift, Carl dragged himself on his broken leg up the hill to the back door. He knew his father would be waiting for him, ready to enforce the rule to “come straight home from work.” Realizing that he was almost an hour late, Carl went to the kitchen window and tapped softly on the glass. His father was at the kitchen table. He did not move. Carl rapped louder. Henry was motionless. Carl struggled to the door; it was locked. He knocked on the door; no answer. Finally, Carl pounded on the door until Henry opened it.

Carl rushed in, lifted his father off his feet, pushed him across the room, and set him on the kitchen table. “Now, you listen to me, old man,” my dad, snarling, repeated Carl’s words. “Don’t you ever do anything like that to me again.”

Then, my dad would sit back in his chair and with a wistful sigh, he concluded the story, “Carl was tough, wiry and tough.”

Was he really “wiry and tough”?

We will never know. Everyone who knew him is gone. My grandparents, my dad, my great aunts who told me so much about the family. Also, my mother and my brothers. They are all gone. And Carl was almost forgotten.

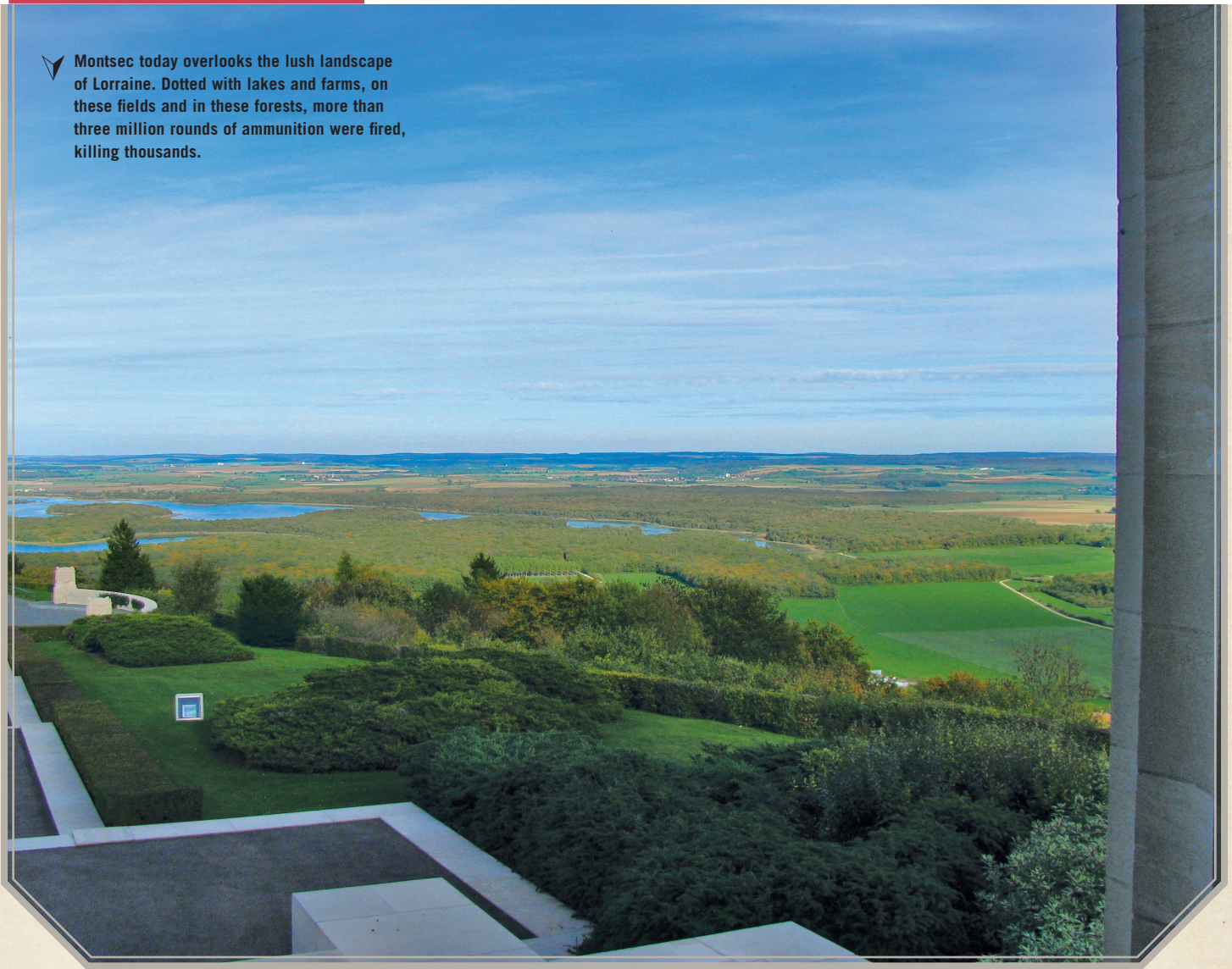
Then in November 2008, my phone rang. A genealogist from Oregon working for the U.S. Army, through a series of questions, identified me as Carl’s next of kin. “You are the person they are looking for,” she said. But why? “I don’t know any more,” she concluded, “probably they found something. The Army will call.”

The mission of JPAC, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (in 2015, merged into the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency), was to account for Americans listed as Prisoners of War or Missing in Action. In each case, after arriving at a satisfactory conclusion, they contact the Army. The Army employs genealogists who then track down the next of kin.

My phone call lasted less than a minute, and the Army did not call for almost four months. During that time, I went on the hunt for all I could find about Carl. The primary resource was Aunt Elsie’s trunk. Elsie was my dad’s aunt and shortly after his death, she went in to a nursing home and gave the trunk to my brother, Ken. When my brother died, the trunk, which I don’t think had ever been investigated, was about to be thrown away. I took it and put it in my basement. I, too, never looked at its contents.

Now, with new curiosity, I open the trunk probably for the first time in more than 30 years. Generations of photographs spilled over each other. Everyone from my grandmother’s uncle, the Evangelical Congregational Lutheran minister, who spoke only German, to my grandparents, my dad, my brothers, and me—we are all there. And, of course, Carl, in his uniform, ready to go off to war. On the photo’s ornate frame is an original red paper poppy, probably from the first Armistice Day.

▼ Montsec today overlooks the lush landscape of Lorraine. Dotted with lakes and farms, on these fields and in these forests, more than three million rounds of ammunition were fired, killing thousands.



A family portrait dates to about 1908 or 1909. Everyone—my grandparents, my dad, and Carl—smiles happily. Another picture shows my dad and Carl at a younger age, each holding a large watermelon rind. Clearly these were happy times.

A portrait of young Carl looking dignified in a suit marks some personal achievement for him, perhaps his grade school graduation. He looks to be about 13 or 14. Four or five years later, Carl enlisted to be a soldier and everything changed—for all of us.

After Carl was killed and lost, my grandfather and grandmother began a

relentless letter-writing campaign. I discover a stream of correspondence with the Graves Registration Service, the Adjutant General of the Army, and other officials of the government, everyone they could think of. Henry demanded, “as the Father of the Boy, who was killed, fighting in action for his Country,” that his remains be returned. He reminded the authorities that “the bodies of the men who went down with the *Maine* in Havana Harbour were resurrected.” He insisted that “all of my son’s records are to be assembled in one place and distributed to every concerned party.” He pleaded: “I have

suffered a great loss, and will not and cannot afford to suffer greater.”

My grandmother stated simply that “to think he will never come home sure does make it so hard.” She signed her appeal “From Carl’s heartbroken Mother.”

Together, they met with a member of the 66th Congress, the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs.

All replies were polite, assuring them that everyone was doing everything possible but cautioning that with the passage of time, the chance of finding their son diminished. Struck by the possibility that Carl would never be

found, they decided to go to Europe to look for him themselves.

In the spring of 1922, they left New York and docked at Cherbourg. Arriving in France less than four years after the end of devastating trench warfare, they travelled the battlefields and walked through the rows of white crosses marking the graves of the fallen. I don't know what they hoped to find—something that someone had overlooked, a clue, anything. Nor can I imagine how arduous the search must have been. During their six months abroad, they, like everyone else, found nothing.

When they returned, perhaps to convince or remind themselves, they bought a marker and had it placed in the family plot at McKeesport-Versailles Cemetery. It conceded that Carl's remains were "resting somewhere in France." Carl was gone. Lost to them forever.

Ten years after Carl's death, Henry died in 1928, a broken man. My grandmother wore the black of mourning until her death in 1944.

As I look at Carl's picture in his doughboy hat, I wonder if his eyes were the soft gray they appear in the photograph. We will never know. Everyone who ever looked in those eyes is gone. They are all gone.

But I am still here, the next of kin.

In March 2009, Army representatives come to my home. A young officer in Marine dress blues and an older woman retired from active service, both representing the U.S. Army Human Resources Command, Past Conflict Reparations Branch in Washington, D.C., present to me what they found.

From a thick black book, they reveal the documentation of the case, noting

how the scholars of JPAC in Hawaii researched the findings for two years. Their presentation is systematic, progressing page by page, document by document—for four hours.

First, they tell me about an organization in France called Thanks, GIs. Twice, in World

those Americans who gave their lives to liberate them.

As they point to a picture of the President of Thanks, GIs, Elisabeth Gozzo, and Roger Schneider, the story begins.

In September 2006, Roger entered woods near an old farm house looking for relics. Suddenly, he happened to trip. It was a bone; an animal bone, he thought. Looking more closely, he realized these were human remains. He put what he uncovered in a plastic bag and reburied it, so no one would disturb the site until he made his report.

Roger happened to be a member of Thanks, GIs, so he informed Elisabeth of his finding. She, following procedure, notified the local police, who, in turn, called the Army. A team of JPAC archeologists happened to be in the area and, though scheduled to return to Hawaii in a few days, they came to excavate the site.

What they found astonished everybody — the remains of possibly three soldiers and many artifacts from World War I. They took their findings with them on the 7,500-mile journey to Hawaii.

At the Forensic Lab in Honolulu, they separated and confirmed there were, in fact, three individuals. They meticulously tested and described each part, down to the last fragment and then the real search began. Who were

these people?

Historians researched every missing soldier who could have been at that precise location, exact day, and specific time. They came to know that there were five distinct possibilities of who they might be. Every option needed to be investigated and accounted for. Their study concluded that one of the five had been found just after the war

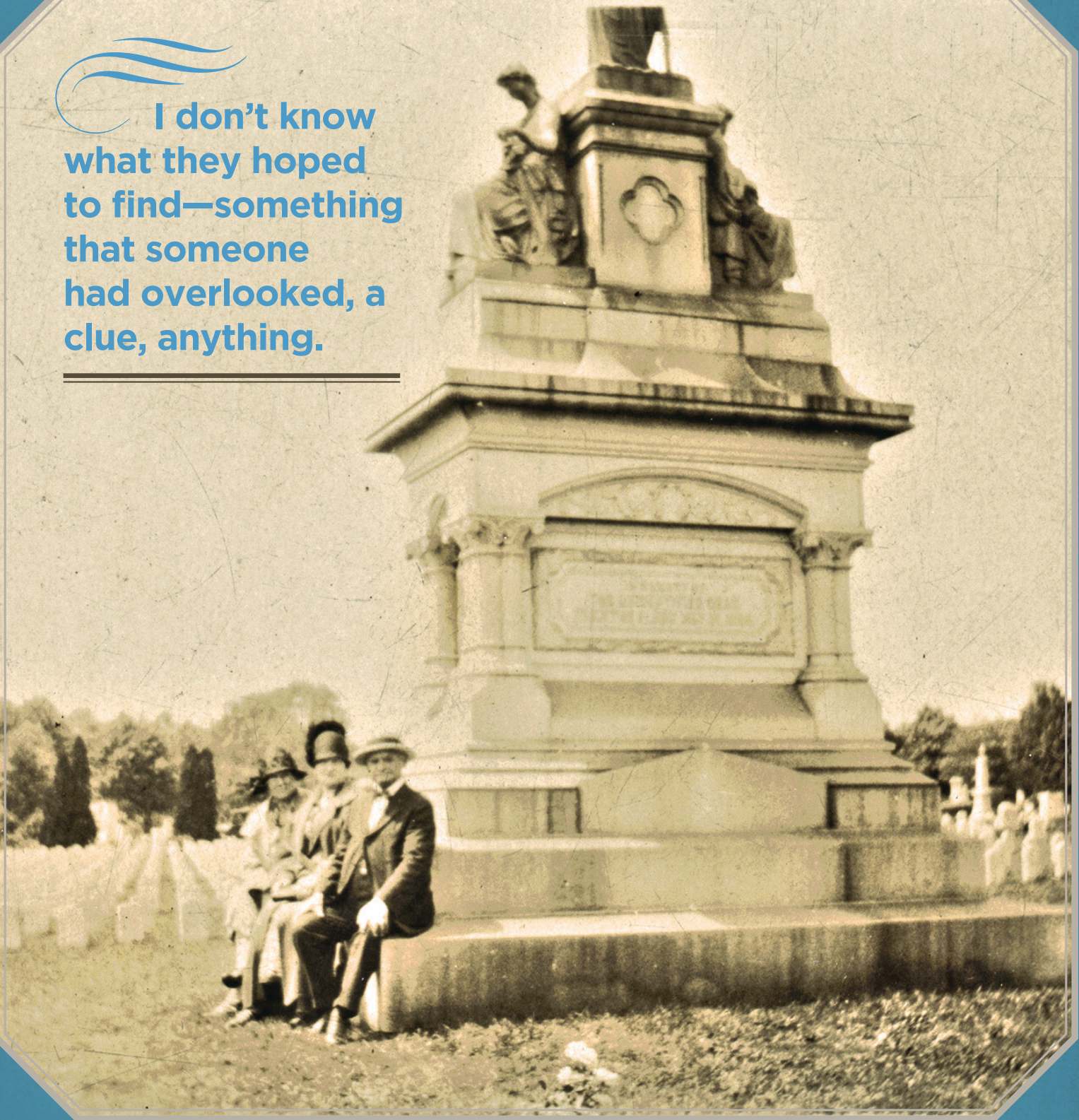


▲ The bronze bas-relief shows the progress of the battle over five hectic days. Near the line that marks the Army's final objective and the American victory, an old farmhouse stands out. Philippe points to a wooded area behind the open fields and says, "Here is where we found Carl."

War I and again in World War II, the same 5th Division of the Army, known as the Red Diamonds, rescued and freed the people of German-occupied Lorraine. Today the members of Thanks, GIs are relic hunters, as well as reenactors, who pay homage to the American military on every holiday, American or French. Their most momentous mission, though, is to recover the lost remains of



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During the summer of 1922, Anna and Henry walked among the thousands of white crosses in the cemeteries of France to find their boy. He was not there.



Roger Schneider, himself a French underground fighter in World War II and a member of Thanks, GIs, tells the story of how he tripped in the woods, accidentally discovering Carl's remains, almost 90 years after Carl died on the last day of the battle.

and returned to the U.S. Another of the five belonged to a different company, not at that location. Finally, they know these three are Costello, Weikel, and Willig. But they do not know who is who.

They identify that one of them had a broken leg. But they, unfortunately, never heard my dad's story, so the investigation continues.

They collect and search the personnel files of the three men. One of them enlisted, so only he had a dental exam before his service began. Those dental records match parts of a jaw bone that was discovered. The record shows a gold crown at #31, and, yes, there is the gold crown at #31.

This soldier is Carl Willig. Roger just happened to trip over an exposed bone and he happened to be a member of Thanks, GIs, an organization dedicated to recovery. If an Army anthropology unit had not happened to be nearby, the discovery would have been buried in graves marked "Unknown." One soldier happened to have enlisted and only enlisted men had dental records. That soldier's father

happened to insist that his dental records be included in his file. In the part of the jaw that happened to remain, there happened to be a gold crown.

Through this series of coincidences — or as the result of fate, I — as Carl's next of kin, sign the paper accepting the findings that this is Carl.

By the only indestructible part of him, Carl was found and 90 years after his death he is coming home.

Accompanied by his personal honor guard who boarded the plane with him in Hawaii and remained with him until his burial, Carl is met at Pittsburgh International Airport by members of the 316th Sustainment Command stationed in Pittsburgh. His flag-draped casket is transferred temporarily to a funeral home, his burial at Versailles Cemetery in McKeesport set for the next day.

June 19, 2009, dawned with a torrential rainstorm, but as we prepare to leave the funeral home the rain suddenly stops. The cortege makes its way toward the places Carl once knew. Crossing the Lyle Boulevard

Bridge, we pass below his family's home. To our left, is the now-vacant steel mill that, perhaps, he thought he knew too well. Finally, we enter under the impressive stone arch of the cemetery entrance.

Full military honor for the sacrifice of the fallen is impressive indeed. The air is filled with the whine and wail of the bagpiper playing "Going Home" and "Amazing Grace." "Taps" echoes over the hill. The pastor eloquently praises Carl's family, his short life, and his service. The rifle volley produces the three commemorative shells, representing duty, honor, and country, that are folded into the flag.

The officer in charge gives Carl his final salute. May he now rest in peace with his parents and with my dad, whom Carl, in a letter, called "My Dearest Brother." Finally, together.

The story might have ended there, but it does not. My family, so scarred by their loss, continues to fascinate me as never before. The U.S. Army, spurned and avoided by my dad, impresses me in so many ways — their manner and civility, care and dedication. These men



At the conclusion of the graveside service, Captain Eric Gass gives Carl the final slow-motion salute.

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High on the hill that had been the German stronghold stands the magnificent monument to the Battle of St. Mihiel. Its white granite gleams against the sky.

and women mark every day of their lives with service and honor.

And Thanks, GIs. Like my grandparents before me, I go to France to meet them.

When Elisabeth meets my train, I recognize her immediately, not so much from her photograph but by her intensity and energy. Her friend, Philippe, drives us and gives the initial tour. It is like riding through Lorraine with Maurice Chevalier. Later, I meet Elisabeth’s husband, Alain, who helps me with translation when I am introduced to several other members of the organization.

My most poignant meeting is with Roger, who found Carl. A big man with dancing blue eyes and the hands of a man who worked all his life, Roger tells us the story of his memorable day in the woods. Though he speaks in rapid French, I know exactly what he is saying from his expression and gestures. When I showed him Carl’s picture, Roger touches it gently and softly says, again and again, “Jeune [young]. Si jeune. Si jeune.” Now he knows what he found.

Elisabeth’s itinerary later includes a visit to the Montsec American Monument. Driving through the countryside, with its silver-blue lakes and open stretches of farm lands, some lush green and others already plowed to rich brown, is in itself a travelogue. We drive through the little village of Montsec and twist our way up to the hilltop monument commemorating the Battle of St. Mihiel, its white granite gleaming in the sunlight.

Looking out over the scene below, it is impossible to imagine this tranquil place was once raging with the storm of war, the biplanes swooping overhead, mortars exploding everywhere, and the doughboys clamoring through the barbed wire.

In the center of the rotunda, a bronze relief map shows the site of the five-day battle, every village, lake, and tree. Philippe calls our attention to it saying, “Look here. You can see exactly how it was.” With sweeping gestures, he describes the progress of the battle beginning September 12, advancing through September 13, 14, 15, and, finally at the top of

the map, marking its conclusion on September 16. "You see. Very big. Fast moving."

Then, carefully identifying a spot, he points and says, "Here is the farmhouse. Here is where we found Carl. You will see."

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