

Finding the Forgotten Soldier

By David Sykes

The following article was first published in the Heppner Gazette-Times Nov. 8, 2008. It was then reprinted in "The Liberator" the official newsletter of the 14th Armored Division and then on several WWII web sites and blogs. We are reprinting it here in honor of Memorial Day and all those who have died for their country.

Following is a story of remembrance. It is also a story about my uncle, Guy Beverly Sykes, a soldier killed in war. Guy, my father's younger brother, was killed in WWII. Until recently this was virtually all I knew about him. Following is not only a story about my efforts to learn more about this forgotten soldier, but also a story of how he fought and died for his country and for our freedoms. I write this not to glorify my uncle, as there are many who have also fought and died, but more so that his, and all veterans' sacrifices, will be remembered.

I was born five years after the end of World War II. I am a baby boomer. Growing up it seemed as if most of the adults I knew had served in the war. My mother and her sister served in the Women's Army Corps together, another uncle served in the army, another in the navy and my father also in the navy fighting the Japanese in the South Pacific.

I remember visiting my cousin's home and there was army gear, helmets, canteens and gas masks all over the garage. We had fun dressing up. At my home, in the back yard, was a large rubber raft my sister and I would fill with water and use as a swimming pool. Later I learned it was similar to what my dad's Underwater Demolition Team had used on two island invasions. The remains and memories of war were everywhere.

We had many family gatherings when I was young, and everyone was there, all the veterans; everyone except my uncle Guy Sykes. Growing up I had heard stories about Guy. I heard how he liked to camp at Yosemite Park, and how his family all went to Mexico and got lost. But I never heard anything about his army service, or his death. For whatever reason, neither my father nor my grandparents ever talked about him. All I knew was that he was killed in a tank somewhere in Europe "during the war."

Over the years I became curious. I asked my father and mother more about him before they died and was told nothing new. Several years ago, I began checking books at the bookstore and library with names of war dead, hoping



PFC Guy Sykes KIA Jan 12, 1945

to maybe see him listed there. I found nothing. A couple of years ago I began using the Internet, and then one day out of nowhere after lots of searches I found something. There it was, on a single Internet page, dedicated to an American cemetery in France, was his name in big block letters. I stared almost in disbelief. That page told me more than I had ever known about my uncle. It told me he is buried at the Lorraine American Cemetery near St. Avold, France. I was fascinated. His body had never been brought home. The page told me he had been a private first class serving with the 14th Armored Division, 48th Tank Battalion. And it told me he had died Jan 12, 1945, a date I had never heard before. This was more information than I ever had, and at that point I began to fill in the blanks about a man I knew nothing about but was connected to by name and blood.

I was determined to find out more, and I dug deeper. I looked up information on the 14th Armored Division and learned they fought bravely against the German's counter offensive called Operation Nordwind in France during the winter of 1944-45. I also learned they were nicknamed the "Liberators" because of the 200,000 allied troops they later liberated from German prisoner of war camps. The division also liberated a Jewish death camp after entering Germany. I found



out there was a book written on the history of the 14th Armored Division. It is out of print, but with the Internet I am still searching. Then one day last month I came across an Internet site that virtually broke the dam. It was the home page for the association of the 14th Armored Division, and there was a name and an email address on the web site. The name was Jim Lankford, National Historian and editor for the "Liberator," the web site and official newsletter of the 14th Armored. I quickly wrote Jim an email asking for any information he could give me about my unknown uncle. I didn't want to get my hopes up. Then I received the following email: "David. As luck would have it I caught Darrell Todd at home when I telephoned. Darrell was a tank commander in C Company, and remembers your uncle Guy. He is more than happy to talk with you, and can probably put you in touch with others in his unit that might remember Guy.

Just so you will know, Darrell became a tank 'ACE' by destroying five German tanks during the war, two or three of them at Hatten-Rittershoffen. Best Regards, Jim."

Thinking there was someone still alive who knew my uncle was exciting and fascinating to me. It somehow seemed almost too good to be true. Again, not wanting to get my hopes up, I waited to hear from Darrell. Then one day not long after on a Saturday morning the call came. Darrell Todd from California was on the phone. Yes, he said he did indeed know my uncle. He told me Guy was a hard worker and a quiet and dependable man. He said he and Guy were in the same tank company. There were five Sherman tanks in C Company and Darrell was the commander of tank number 1 and Guy was the loader in tank number 3.

This was amazing information. He went on to say that my uncle was killed in the battle of Hatten-Rittershoffen, a large tank battle near two small towns in northern France. The battle raged from Jan 9-21 and was one of the largest tank battles of WWII. It was overshadowed and did not receive as much publicity as the Battle of the Bulge, which was going on at the same time. I listened as this man I had never met told me more about my soldier uncle than I had ever heard before. Darrell said Guy's tank was hit January 11, 1945 in the turret by a shell from a German Tiger tank, and that out of the five crewmen, Guy and two others were killed (Guy died the next day on Jan. 12). Darrell told me that because of the high casualties, my uncle, a private first class, had been promoted from a loader to tank commander, and actually had a lieutenant as driver working under him when he was killed. The story was fascinating. I was mesmerized as I sat in my home in Heppner, Oregon, while this 83-year-old-man whom I did not know talked of our shared history from half a world away over 60 years ago.

He spoke of the bitter cold of that winter of 1944-45, and the hardships they had all endured. Darrell told me how his tank knocked out three German tanks in one day, and two more later on. He spoke of how his tank was eventually hit



Lorraine American Cemetery and Memorial near St. Avold, France where 10,489 Americans from WWII are buried.

and one of his crewmen went out the top and was killed by German machine gun fire, and he and another man went out the bottom escape hatch and crawled to safety in a potato furrow. This was the kind of combat my uncle was experiencing in France. Later in the spring Darrell said his tank was hit again. He was injured and airlifted out of France. While on the plane he heard that the war had ended. He said when he left, he had believed the Allies were losing because of the heavy casualties and fierce fighting Company C was going through. We talked some more on that Saturday morning and then said our goodbyes. I thanked him for all he had given me, and he said he would send some photos and other information he had. Later I received a packet with a picture of the whole company along with some other personal recollections.

It was done. I felt a solid connection to my uncle, and the pieces of his young life had finally begun to fall into place. After that I took out and read some papers I had. I read Guy's letters to his mother and father written in December 1944. He wrote how cold it was, and that, just like lots of the other guys, he had caught a cold. He complained about his hands being cut up from loading the shells. He was 22 years old when he died the next month. Then there was the most heart wrenching of all, a letter from my grandfather to his other son, my father Earl Sykes, telling him of his brother's death. "We know you will take it as we do, one of the worst tragedies that can befall a family like our own. The only thing worse would be something that would bring shame or dishonor to any of us. We are hopeful that it will not leave you in a bitter frame of mind. It is a difficult thing to bear, let alone try to understand.

Since it has happened there is no retreat from it and we still have to go on," Earl Sykes, Sr., wrote to his son.

Although I will never know this uncle, after research and talking about him I can now think clearly about the end of his young life, and someday I want to travel to that cemetery in France, where Guy Beverly Sykes and 10,488 other Americans are buried, and stand at Section E, Row 46, Grave 29. I just want to say hello, and goodbye, to the soldier and uncle I never knew.

Endnote: Since I first wrote this article in 2008 there have been some changes of course. Darrell Todd, the tank Ace who served with my uncle in Company C, and who I came to know, died. I called and talked to his widow and told her how much he meant to me. I sent flowers with a note to the family. I also found a book about the battle my uncle was killed in. It was written by a German tank commander who participated in what the Germans called Operation Nordwind. Nordwind was billed as "The last great operation by the Waffen-SS Panzer divisions in the west."

I also found many more letters written between my uncle and his parents during the war. One stood out as particularly difficult for me to read. It was several pages long and written by my grandfather to his son. My grandfather wrote how much his son was missed, and how happy they would be when the war was over and the whole family was home together again. However, the letter was unopened. I then noticed it was mailed several weeks after my uncle's death. The letter was written and mailed before the parents were notified their son was dead.

David Sykes

Summer art packs to be distributed



Heppner Elementary School's art teacher, Jamie Mullins, has put together 190 art packages in backpack bags to be distributed to the schools' kindergarten through sixth-grade stu-

dents on Thursday, May 21. The bags will be delivered on the HES bus routes or can be picked up at the school.

The funds for the art packs were provided by



Left: Supplies for art packs are arranged on the table. Above: Completed art packs are ready to be distributed.

a grant from the Morrow County Coalition. The grant has been used for the past two years for Mullins to teach art classes at HES but due to Covid-19 she was unable to do that. Instead the funds were used this year to purchase backpacks, art supplies and art projects for the students to use at home.

Happy Birthday

Father Thankachan Joseph

May 22

We are so happy you are here!

We appreciate all you do!

The Heppner Gazette-Times will be closed Monday, May 25 in observance of Memorial Day.

Have a safe weekend.

Happy Memorial Day from all of us at Sykes Publishing and the Heppner Gazette-Times

The deadline for news and advertising for the May 27 issue is Friday, May 22 at 5:00pm.

Have a news story or photo for the Gazette? e-mail editor@rapidserve.net call 541-676-9228 or stop by the office on Willow St., Heppner Today