

Marine Iraq Vet Secures Corrected Headstone for Great-Uncle Killed in WWI



Courtesy Garrett Anderson

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The century-old wrong done to a Marine private fatally wounded on the last day of battle in World War I will finally be made right this coming Veterans Day at Arlington National Cemetery, thanks to another Marine who worked to correct the record on his behalf.

Arlington officials have approved a small ceremony on Nov. 11 at the grave of Marine Pvt. Joseph Otto Turley in Section 18, site 1345, to mark the installation of a new headstone with his correct date of death: Nov. 12, 1918.

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For Garrett Anderson, Turley's great-nephew and a Marine veteran of Fallujah, it's the culmination of an undertaking that required him to delve into U.S. and family history to unearth the true story of his uncle's service.

The new tombstone with the correct date "means we didn't forget," said Anderson, who was a Lance Corporal with the 1st Battalion, Third [Marines](#), at the second battle of Fallujah in November 2004 in Iraq. "It's part of the human experience -- to bring home our dead with dignity."

The ceremony will be the culmination of years of research by Anderson and his father, Dennis Anderson, a former editor and reporter for United Press International and the Associated Press, that began with the revelations found in an old trunk that was the keepsake of a great aunt.

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A historical mixup

Turley was buried at Arlington under a headstone bearing the wrong date due to a tragic bureaucratic mix-up amid the chaos of a war coming to an end.

Turley, 24, died in a field hospital the day after the Nov. 11, 1918 armistice that marked the end of four years of fighting.

In 1921, when Turley's remains were disinterred from a cemetery in France and brought to Arlington, his tombstone listed the date of death as Nov. 2, 1918. Nov. 2 was when another of the three Turley brothers who fought as Marines on the Western Front was wounded by machine gun fire, but survived. Amid the thousands of casualties in the final Meuse-Argonne offensive, Turley's full story was lost to history for nearly a century.

Fighting After the Armistice

They became Marines in World War I, but first they were the "Singing Turley Brothers," farm boys from Auburn in the Green River Valley of Washington State who sang in saloons for tips.

There was Joseph, known as "Otto," Tom, the oldest; and Jess, the youngest. All three volunteered and were shipped off for training at Mare Island in California, the first U.S. naval base on the Pacific Coast.

All three found themselves fighting in the biggest and deadliest series of battles ever fought by Americans, the 47-day Meuse-Argonne campaign that was part of the overall offensive to break the Hindenburg line that resulted in the armistice of "the eleventh hour, of the 11th day, of the 11th month" of 1918.

But the war ended in confusion, with some American units continuing the fight up to and past the 11th hour Paris time. In all, an estimated 26,277 Americans and about 28,000 Germans were killed in the Meuse-Argonne, according to allied accounts.

Otto suffered his fatal wound from machine gun fire, most likely in the early morning hours of Nov. 11, Garrett Anderson said. He died the next day in a field hospital.

According to later accounts and Congressional hearings, the order from French Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the overall commander of allied forces, that hostilities were to cease at 11 a.m. on Nov. 11, came to American generals around daybreak.

The U.S. commanders scrambled to get the word to all units that they were to "mark the line," or hold in place, but they were only partially successful. The word never got to Pvt. Joseph Otto Turley, a machine gunner with the 5th Marines.

As best as the Andersons can determine from their research, Turley was with a unit that had been told to cross a river. The bridge was blown, and they were using a footbridge, when the Germans opened up from concealed positions. He fell, mortally wounded.

Tom and Jess Turley became truck drivers after the war and lived across the street from one another for the rest of their lives, Garrett Anderson said, "but the 'Singing Turley Brothers' never sang again."

"Murder, not war"

The toll of dead and wounded for all sides on the last day of WWI may never be known.

Historian Joseph E. Persico, in his book "Eleventh Month, Eleventh Day, Eleventh Hour: Armistice Day, 1918," has estimated that there were about 11,000 total U.S., French, British and German casualties on the last day before the guns fell silent -- more than at the D-Day landings of World War II.

The armistice itself was not agreed upon until 5 a.m. on the morning of Nov. 11, and the signatures of the negotiators took about another 20 minutes.

At a 1920 hearing of the House Select Committee on Expenditures in the War Department, several generals were pressed for an accounting of American casualties on the last day and whether those lives were needlessly sacrificed.

Testimony provided by the World War I Centennial Commission showed that the hearing was marked by several heated exchanges between Rep. Royal Johnson, R-South Dakota, the Committee's chairman, and [Army](#) Lt. Gen. Hunter Liggett, who had commanded the American First Army, consisting of four corps on the front lines.

Johnson had voted against the declaration of war against Germany, but he took leave of Congress when it passed and enlisted as an Army private.

The former congressman would receive battlefield promotions to lieutenant, be wounded in combat, and ultimately earn the Distinguished Service Cross and the French Croix de Guerre. He later sponsored legislation that led to the formation of the American Legion.

"It is impossible to give accurate figures on the casualties which were suffered after the receipt of the order that the armistice was effective at 11 a.m., Nov.

11," Liggett testified.

However, Gen. Fox Conner, the Army's chief of staff, gave preliminary figures showing that a total of at least 268 Americans were killed on the last day and another 3,912 had been wounded or gassed.

Liggett suggested that the fighting that continued on Nov. 11 was likely the result of conflicting orders. At the time, the Germans were reeling, and he said that Foch, the overall commander-in-chief, had issued an order to all of his subordinate commands on Nov. 9 that "you will press the enemy vigorously with all the initiative you have along the entire line."

On Nov. 10, Liggett said he received an additional directive for "carrying out very drastic orders sent down by the commander-in-chief, Marshal Foch."

Liggett said he couldn't recall precisely when he received the countermanding order that the armistice would go into effect at 11 a.m. on Nov. 11, but said, "my best belief is between six and seven o'clock in the morning, and nearer seven than six."

It was then that "we were confronted by probably the biggest problem we had been confronted with during the entire war," Liggett said. "It was a situation that could not have been much worse and within four hours we were required to get down to the front line, the men with rifles in their hands, and get them to stop fighting."

Johnson then confronted Liggett, possibly paraphrasing a line attributed to President Abraham Lincoln on the battle of Cold Harbor near the end of the Civil War -- "That was not war, but murder."

Johnson told Liggett he had been on the front lines on Nov. 11 and spoke with several officers from major to lieutenant who had been wounded in the last day's fighting.

"Without exception, they construed the orders which forced them to make an attack after the armistice as murder, not war," Johnson said.

Liggett snapped back: "I do not know what their feeling was."

Mission to unearth history

As a boy, Garrett Anderson had heard stories about the Turley brothers from his great aunt, Averill Raymond -- how Otto had died on Nov. 12, 1918, and how Tom had been wounded on Nov. 2 and would later sometimes strip off his shirt to show his scars.

"The purpose of her story was to dissuade me from serving as I had expressed interest in being a soldier when I grew up," he said.

When Raymond died in 2006, she left behind a trunk containing letters sent home by the Turley brothers and photos of the three.

Anderson and his father pored through them. When Anderson left the [Marine Corps](#) in 2007, they set out on a quest to learn more.

"I was a combat Marine before I knew I had combat Marines in my background," he said. "All their letters showed that they were really motivated, they went there [to France] with that boot camp mentality. They really believed in what they were doing."

The family had been devastated by the loss of Otto and the wounding of Tom, he said.

"When it came down to the end of the war, one brother had been sent home badly wounded. The other brother made it through some of the bloodiest fighting in the history of the world only to be cut down on the last day," he said.

Anderson and his father went to the battlefields in France and did more research, and then came the shock when they went to visit Otto's gravesite at Arlington and saw that the date of death was wrong.

As best they could tell, Anderson and his father were the first Turley relatives to visit the grave. Times were hard in 1921 when Otto's remains were disinterred from France and reburied at Arlington. Anderson speculated that the relatives probably couldn't afford to make the trip and so, for the better part of a century, the wrong date remained.

"From best we can see, nobody ever went out to the tombstone from his direct family -- me and my Dad are pretty sure we're the first ones to go out and see it," Anderson said.

They immediately saw that the date on the headstone was incorrect, but at first they thought that their Great-Aunt Averill may have been mistaken. More research and eventual confirmation from the Marine Corps, however, convinced

them that she was right all along.

Dennis Anderson contacted Arlington with the documentation earlier this year, and officials quickly agreed to the new tombstone.

At the Nov. 11 ceremony this year, the U.S. Military District of Washington has agreed to provide a bugler from the U.S. Army Band to play "Taps" at the graveside. The band is known as "Pershing's Own" for Gen. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in WWI.

"When we see that corrected] tombstone, it's going to mean the world to me," Anderson said. "I just hope I can hold back the tears."

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