

Reunited, finally and forever

It took a German mine to separate the Pieper twins. It took a salvage firm, a laboratory, the U.S. Navy, a Normandy cemetery, a Nebraska student and 74 years to reunite them.

**By Gene H. Hughes,
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One week before Thanksgiving 2017, MaryAnn (Pieper) Lawrence of Fair Oaks, Calif., received a phone call that was not only an answer to a 74-year-old prayer, it gave the holiday an extra-special meaning and changed the family and its history forever.

The call, from the Navy Casualty Office in Millington, Tenn., informed her that her brother Julius “Henry” Pieper, missing in action since June 19, 1944, had been positively identified by means of meticulous DNA testing.

“Mom was overcome with joy and when she became speechless I completed the call for her,” said her daughter, Susan. “After all these years could this really be happening? Unbeknownst to me, mom had been earnestly praying that Henry’s body would be recovered. Her prayers were answered!”

The story of MaryAnn’s twin brothers, Henry and Ludwig “Louie” Pieper, rarely apart, began upon their induction — at the age of 17 — into the Navy in February of 1943.

Initially, the Creston, Neb., twins were separated due to the military policy not to allow family members to serve together. The policy was never strictly enforced until a Japanese torpedo from submarine I-26 sunk the Atlanta-class cruiser USS Juneau in December of the previous year, taking the lives of the five Sullivan brothers.

But regulations weren’t going to stand in the way of the Pieper twins.

“My grandfather wrote a letter to the Navy requesting that the twins serve together,” Susan said. “They had strong feelings about serving together. They felt that since they came into this life together, they had the right to serve together and if it came to it, die together.”



Radiomen Second Class Julius ‘Henry’ (left) and his twin brother, Radioman 2nd Class Ludwig “Louie” Pieper, were both killed when their ship, Landing Ship Tank (LST) 523, struck an underwater mine off the coast of France on June 19, 1944. Louie’s remains were found immediately, but Henry’s remains weren’t identified until November 2017. The twins, rarely apart prior to their deaths, were recently reunited after 74 years, when Henry was buried next to Louie at Normandy American Cemetery.

Their request was granted, and the twins were reunited as Radiomen 2nd Class aboard Landing Ship Transport (LST) 523. But just after the Normandy Invasion on D-Day, the twins would be separated once again — this time for nearly three quarters of a century.

On June 19, 1944 (one month after the twins’ 19th birthday), while ferrying Army engineers across the English Channel, LST-523 struck an uncleared underwater German mine off Omaha Beach, after making two successful round trips.

Louie was on deck when the explosion occurred, and his remains were quickly recovered, identified and buried at the Normandy American Cemetery, Colleville-sur-Mer, France. Henry, however, was in the radio room and went down with the ship. Because his remains were presumed lost, he was listed as lost.

A memorial service was held at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Creston, Neb., on July 30, 1944. The twins were cited for bravery and posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and the World War II Victory Medal. In 1945, American Legion Post No. 306 in Creston, Neb., was named in their honor.

In 1961, a French salvage company recovered the ship and remains, but since DNA identification was not yet possible, no further identification took place. The remains were taken to the Ardennes American Cemetery in Belgium and buried along with other "unknowns," memorialized on the site's Tablets of the Missing.

The years passed. The Pieper Family told stories of the shared sacrifice of Louie and Henry, honoring their service and mourning their loss as families before and since have done. But the saddest part of the story was knowing that after being together for so long, the twins would be forever apart.

"For my grandparents and my mother and her siblings, the hardest part of their death was that the twins were separated," Susan said. "One of the main reasons my grandparents had Louie buried at Normandy was the comfort in knowing that the twins were near each other. The thought to bring one son home without the other was too hard to imagine."

But the separation wouldn't last forever. In 2014, Vanessa Taylor, a high school sophomore from Ainsworth, Neb., wrote an article about the twins as a National History Day Institute project.

"As part of the institute (program) we were supposed to select a silent hero from our state who had died in World War II and was buried in the Normandy American Cemetery," she said. We were given the list of Nebraska soldiers buried there and I happened to notice there were



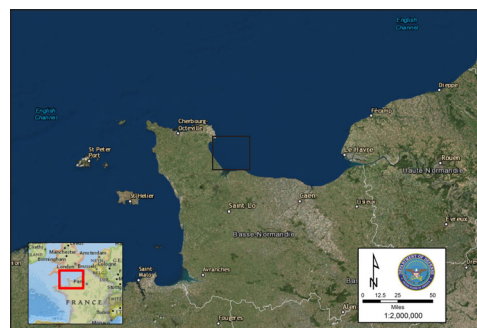
NORMANDY, France —Radioman 2nd Class Julius "Henry" Pieper's niece, Susan Lawrence, places her hand on Pieper's casket during his funeral service. Below, a DOD map showing the location where LST-523 was sunk

(U.S. Navy photos of burial/Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Alora R. Blossch)

two with the same last name — Pieper."

"I wondered if it was just a coincidence, but after looking into them a little further I noticed they had the same birthday and hometown. I realized they must be twins and thought it would be a good angle to use for the project."

Taylor's commitment to the twins included watching videos, a lot of reading and speaking over the phone with MaryAnn, the twins' only living sibling. "That was when I really began to feel connected to this story," Taylor said. "The twins became more than just a



research project – they really felt real, like I could have actually met them."

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“My mother was so happy when Vanessa contacted her about doing an article on the twins, especially for it to be a young high school student from Nebraska — their home state — to want to acknowledge them,” Susan said. “My mother was overjoyed with Vanessa’s article ... to know that her brothers had not been forgotten brought my mother much happiness.”

Taylor also visited the Pieper’s home town and contacted Josh Fennell, a historian for the Department of Defense. It was during this interview that she was informed of the sets of remains recovered in the 1960s. He thought it was a distinct possibility that one of those sets of remains belonged to Henry.

In 2015, Taylor traveled to both the Normandy and Belgian cemeteries, where she delivered a eulogy honoring Louie and Henry at each location.

Through intensive testing and analysis of the recovered remains, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) laboratory at Offutt Air Force Base, Omaha, Neb., positively identified some as those of Henry Pieper.

Once identification had been made, Lt. Cmdr. Christopher Norris of the Navy



Landing Ship Tank (LST) land invasion supplies on Omaha Beach, shortly after the D-Day assault. Prior to its sinking, LST 523 took part in these operations.

Casualty Office in Millington, Tenn., took up duties as liaison between the service and the family.

“Once the DPAA makes an identification they call us and we call the family to tell them their loved one has been identified, and to set up a visit,” he said. “We’ll present them the forensic evidence and take care of the disposition paperwork on where they want to take the remains.”

Susan said she was touched by the thoroughness of the Navy’s visit with MaryAnn, the remaining survivor of the six Pieper children.

“It was touching to know that the Navy

held such a high regard for the funeral service of someone who had been missing for more than 73 years,” she said.

“In the months ahead, I would come to know more of the extent to which such honor and respect is given to those who have fallen in the line of service!”

Knowing her parents would have wanted the twins to be buried next to each other, MaryAnn asked that Henry be buried next to his brother in Normandy. After several months of correspondence with DPAA and the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), Louie’s casket was moved to a new gravesite in April 2018 so that Henry could be buried next to him.

Sadly, MaryAnn’s failing health meant she would not be able to attend the burial. But when she passed away on May 5, age 88, she knew her prayers had been answered

“My mom had the pleasure of knowing about all the arrangements and efforts by the Navy and ABMC to grant her request for Henry’s burial next to their brother Louie. As my mom said when she first heard the news, she received the greatest blessing that Thanksgiving, knowing that her brother Henry was no longer missing!”

Following the Navy visit, the Navy’s Mortuary Affairs Office arranged for transportation of Henry’s remains from Omaha, Neb., to his final resting place in Normandy, with Norris acting as escort. The flight landed in Paris, where Henry was transferred to a hearse



The U.S. Naval Hospital Naples honor guard carries the remains of Radioman 2nd Class Julius “Henry” Pieper during his funeral service at Normandy American Cemetery. Insert, Musician 2nd Class Kristen Gale of the U.S. 6th Fleet Band plays “Taps”



Linda Pieper Sutor, a niece of the Pieper twins, places a bronze rosette by Henry's name on the Wall of the Missing at the Normandy American Cemetery, to signify he is no longer missing.

by a Marine Corps honor detail from the U.S. Embassy in Paris, and then driven to Normandy.

Casualty Office personnel worked until the last minute, finalizing the multiple details required to bring its mission to completion. Norris said the process was more challenging due to the burial taking place overseas and requiring additional paperwork. Then there was the matter of family travel arrangements.

According to Norris, the Navy pays for the Person Authorized to Direct Disposition (PADD), plus two additional blood-relation family members. For the Pieper family, ABMC provided matching funds to bring three additional family members to the burial ceremony.

"It was complicated, behind the scenes, but once we got over there, it went really smooth," he said. "The family took a tour of the cemetery and got to meet the granddaughter of the woman who owned the land in 1944, who now gives tours."

According to Susan, the tour emphasized where the twins had been on D-Day, as well as the location where

their ship hit the mine. She said the family was awestruck by the beauty and meticulous detail of the cemetery.

"Each building, each monument has a special meaning as to its placement and design, she said. "Over 9,000 graves; lives given and sacrificed for freedom. Each cross, each Star of David, made of Italian marble and as one reads the names on these headstones they are facing the monument of The Spirit of American Youth. There was no detail left undone."

The burial took place on June 19, 74 years to the day the twins, age 19, lost their lives. Attending were Susan and her brother, Dean, MaryAnn's oldest brother Fred's children Linda Pieper Sutor, Fred, Jr. and Louis. The Navy honored its own with Sailors who had traveled all the way from Naples, Italy, for the ceremony. An honor guard from the U.S. Naval Hospital carried Henry to his final resting place, a rifle detail rendered the traditional salute and a lone trumpeter of the U.S. 6th Fleet Band played "Taps." Words were spoken by a Navy Chaplain as well as Rear Adm. Shawn Duane, vice commander, U.S. 6th Fleet.

"It was an amazing experience," Norris said. "The really cool part of the story for me was that they were able to disinter Ludwig and move him to the end of the row to where he and Julius could be side by side. I told my wife that I've done almost 20 years of naval service, and coming into this job, now I feel like I'm serving."



The Pieper twins' niece, Susan Lawrence, stands with her brother, Dean, by the headstones marking the twins' final resting places in the Normandy American Cemetery.

Courtesy photo/
Susan Lawrence

Following the funeral, Linda Pieper Sutor placed a bronze rosette by Henry's name on the Wall of the Missing, indicating he is no longer missing.

"Overall, things went well," said ABMC Chief of External Affairs Tim Nosal, who acted as a liaison with Norris, the family and the media. "For me personally, this was the most significant event that I have worked over the course of my career. It really struck home with me and I'm proud to have been part of it."

The funeral was also attended by members of the media, both civilian and military. The tale of the twins' reunification struck a chord on a global scale, as the story was picked up by media outlets in Japan, China, India, the Middle East, Russia, France, Germany, South America, Australia, New Zealand and all across the United States.

"I am so grateful to have been a part of this project, knowing that this little bit of research I did may have played a part in bringing them together again," said Taylor, now a college student. "I know that being together is all they ever wanted, and for their family to be able to have closure in that is really special."

"As the chaplain and the admiral gave tribute to Henry, I wished that my mom and grandparents could have been there," Susan said. "But they already had the best seats looking down from Heaven! As I fought back tears of pride and for hope for future generations, I saw my uncle finally laid to rest next to his brother... the journey was complete."