

WWII dog tag finds its way home

FAMILY CONNECTION AT MEADE LEAD TO ITS RETURN

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Installation Safety Officer Kirk Fechter hands over SSG Wallace Adkins' dog tag to his grandson Michael Adkins, Jr.

Staff Sgt. Wallace Adkins of Harts, W. Va., enlisted in the Army on Aug. 5, 1943.

During his two years in the European theater, Adkins was awarded a Purple Heart and two Bronze Stars. Adkins returned to West Virginia and ultimately passed away in 1971.

Fast forward to 2013: A French soldier — a member of a local association dedicated to the preservation of the Maginot Line — was doing some cleanup work near the town of Oberroedern in northeast France, when he spied a thin strip of rusted metal in the ground.

The strip of metal read: Wallace J. Adkins, 35771738, Harts, WVA.

It was the dog tag of an American Soldier. The French soldier turned the dog tag over to the secretary of the preservation society (l'Association des amis de la ligne Maginot d'Oberroedern), Jean-Luc Fechter.

Fechter is a cousin of Fort Meade's Installation Safety Office Director Kirk Fechter. The cousins knew of each other mostly because of Kirk Fechter's interest in genealogy.

"I grew up not knowing my roots," he said. "I put a thing on the internet some years ago and an American cousin says she has information for me and that information was a genealogy of 300 of ancestors and relatives in the Fechter family."

One of the relatives on that list was Jean-Luc Fechter.

“Jean-Luc’s a member of an organization that captures the history of the Maginot Line in the town he lives in, Oberroedern — the same town my great-grandfather lived and left from with three brothers in the 1880’s and went to Buffalo,” Kirk Fechter said.

News of the Discovery

In the summer of 2013, Jean-Luc Fechter contacted his American cousin with news of the discovery.

Kirk Fechter recalled that email with a smile.

“He writes me and says, ‘Kirk, with all your connections in the Army, can you find this guy?’ ”

Kirk’s initial research over the following year proved to be fruitless.

“Well, I made my own efforts and wasn’t successful,” he said. “However, for a time, I had some Air Force intel working here [at the Installation Safety Office], helping us out with some things, and when they went to work, they were able to find the name of a grandson of Wallace Adkins.”

Kirk then enlisted the aid of an historian in Adkins’ hometown — Harts, W. Va., — and was ultimately able to locate the grandson, Michael Adkins Jr.

On May 14, Kirk made the trek to Scarbro, W. Va., to return the dog tag to Adkins and the rest of Adkins’ family. Adkins, who never met his grandfather and is also a self-proclaimed genealogy buff, was speechless.

“I couldn’t believe it,” Adkins said. “I do genealogy, I study it a lot. When they called me and told me they had this, it meant a lot, a whole lot. I don’t even know how to put it into words. It’s a great feeling. It’s awesome.

For Fechter, it was a similar experience.

“I had emotions of joy,” he said. “I got joy from watching him, seeing the whole family react.”

Unexpectedly, Fechter also got the opportunity to meet the son of Wallace Adkins — Mike Adkins Sr.

“The son of the Soldier was there as an added bonus,” Fechter said. “He came in from North Carolina.”

Mike Adkins Sr. was overcome with emotion as well.

“It’s just hard to comprehend something like that,” he said. “It’s hard to understand how it happened. It was numbing, absolutely numbing. It was good.”

And what will the family do with the dog tag?

“I’d like to see it put with his American flag,” Mike Adkins Sr. said. “I’ve had it since 1971. But, that’s up to him. It’s all about my son.”

Reflecting on all that happened, Fechter said he is grateful to have learned genealogy.

“You know it’s interesting because we had an event where I handed over the dog tag to someone, but there were a lot of intricacies, a lot of things happened during this process,” he said. “I would say the biggest thing that happened is learning about genealogy.”

Michael Adkins Jr. and the rest of the family would have to agree.



SSG

Wallace Adkins’ dog tag was found in the Alsace-Lorraine region of France near the Maginot Line. Adkins’ was awarded a Purple Heart and 2 Bronze Stars during action in the European theater from 1943-44.