

Out of Oblivion

I am an amateur historian, especially regarding the Second World War and in my area where heavy fighting took place at the end of 1944. I am passionate about military research, and I emphasize that I do not party to any associations of French or American.

It all started in 1999 in the Forêt de Parroy (Parroy Forest) near the town of Lunéville, Meurthe et Moselle, France. I was walking and discovered very strange black marks on the ground. I returned often to this place, and for some months, I retrieved a multitude of objects from military personnel. I treasured these items at home, but in December 1999 a tornado destroyed most of the forest. It took me more than two years before rediscovering the exact location of my finds in the forest allowing me to resume my research work, because I was sure that men had perished there.

Finally in 2003 the earth furrowed by the rain, I saw a shining object on the ground. I was eager to pick it up and discovered it was the wrist plate with the number of Corporal Clayton Judge Hellums. I notified the US military which answered immediately and was put into contact with the Superintendent in the Epinal, Vosges department. After three months of waiting and several reminders, I was informed he could not respond to my request because it was missing and it was probably more for family. For him the matter ended there.

I sat on this story alone while continuing to monitor the site to ensure that nobody inadvertently destroyed it with excavations or the like. I monitored this for three years. Then I decided to publish my find and research on the City of Lunéville newspaper. Three weeks after the publication of the article, an association supported by a Belgian member of the 90th Division was contacted by my side. I contacted a French woman living in the United States (Illinois) that had been able to trace the Hellums' family for me, and it is from there that the story could begin in earnest. The Hellums family came to France in 2006 to gather at the scene where their dear brother died in defense of Liberty. This was a special moment at the deepest level.

Following the discovery of the registration plate, I took the oath at the site in the forest to find families for these soldiers so they could "go home" and this is commitment. To trace the families of Donald Owens and Lawrence Harris family, I spoke with a Canadian friend, Jean Faure, who lives in the Province of Quebec, near Montreal. After a few months, he was able to find the family of Private Donald Owens, but required almost two years to locate and contact a member of the Harris family.

Meanwhile I pursued this story with my friend Philippe Sugg, also an amateur historian and Chief Warrant Officer in the French Army and rare are the men like him. We joined forces and merged our knowledge in the field.

The M 10 tank crew was part of the 773rd Tank Destroyer Battalion"" five men on board, Judge Clayton Hellums Corporal, Private Donald D. OWENS, Private Lawrence N HARRIS, Sergeant Ernest RABE and Tech / 4 PEABODY Everet.

Parroy Forest covers an area of 21.5 square miles. The fighting began September 29, 1944 and the tanks were required to support the hardest point of fighting, that is to say, to a place called "The Upper" and Made Bossupre road. On Oct. 9, 1944, the M10 tank was shot at close range by a German Panzer tank that was posted about 300 feet away. The Panzer was hidden behind a forest house before noon, we believe. The tank came out of the undergrowth advancing towards the forest house, when the enemy tank opened fire.

Clayton Hellums, Donald Owens, and Lawrence Harris had no chance. They died as they were burned

and disintegrated when the tank exploded due to the presence of ammunition and fuel inside. The tank could not be approached because it burned for 24 hours, making it impossible to identify the wreck after the war. However the other two occupants, Ernest Everet Rabe and Peabody, were ejected from the tank during impact according to reports and survived their serious injuries. We do not really know what happened to these two men.

Later the wreck of the tank was cut into scrap pieces and transported out of the forest. Three men were to remain missing forever and without any clues to find them. It took one day when I was attracted by a black color on the forest floor, with my curiosity compelling me to continue my research for months and just a little tenacity to achieve the final results.

Since May 2006, JPAC officials in Hawaii have come to see me, on the one hand to thank me and to develop a search on the site as well as apologize for refusing help to me by the Superintendent's retirement. So in May 2006 during the second mission of the JPAC my greatest joy was the finding of the registration plate of the private Donald D Owens, who was at least 10 feet from where I found Corporal Clayton Hellums and about 4 inches below ground

In September 2006, I worked for three weeks with a research unit of JPAC, and I asked my friend Philippe involved, it was the first time they accepted two full-time French, many clues were found in late September the mission was partially finished.

When the Hellums family visited in 2006, the authorities of JPAC allowed me to come to the site to meet them. It was an emotional moment. A few months later I was contacted to monitor the site to prevent unwanted visitors and damage. I did this every day for a year feeling strongly that I had wanted to give this much to these men who paid with their lives for our freedom.

In mid-August 2007 a new JPAC team arrived with 12 men and we worked together very hard for six weeks. We set up with a friend of mine and two farmers as well as two shuttle tankers with tractors to sift land, 178 cubic feet per day. Everything was centralized at a laboratory in Hawaii for study and control (DNA) because the authorities still classified these three soldiers as missing. This analysis was long, but I hope that Clayton Owens and Harris returned to their country, even if it is only in small measure. Unfortunately we never found the registration plate for Lawrence N HARRIS. We had the pleasure to be decorated with the insignia of the JPAC for services rendered by their Director.

Every 9 October, we lay flowers at this place and we salute these soldiers in our way. This is basically a part of history. I am just an amateur historian who works in the field, the major indices are at the scene of the battle that day. Luck was with me but with coincidences that I find hard to explain. I bless the day I found this plate number, because without this unexpected discovery these soldiers would still be missing, and no family could mourn. Other factors, have led to comparisons with remains deposited in the American Military Cemetery, Neuville-en Condroz Belgium. Without it the remains of three soldiers would never have returned home. But be certain that Judge Clayton Hellums, Donald D Owens, and Lawrence N HARRIS remain forever at the bottom of our heart.

Great friends, my gratitude for their sacrifice in the liberation of our country.

Gérard Louis