

Korean War POW finally buried after 60 years

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BY JOHN O'CONNOR, The Associated Press | Posted: Monday, May 30, 2011 12:00 am | Loading...

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Seth Perlman Members of Illinois' Army Color Guard fold the flag that covered Artie Hodapp's casket during funeral services in Freeport, Ill., Wednesday, May 25, 2011. More than half a century after he died in Korea, the bones of the young soldier, Artie Hodapp, are returned after being matched with relatives' DNA. (AP Photo/Seth Perlman)

FREEPORT (AP) - For 60 years, Artie Hodapp's family agonized over a heart-rending mystery: Where had the young man, known for his rollicking sense of humor, come to rest after dying in the Korean War?

They couldn't know that the answer was among 17 boxes of remains that the North Koreans turned over nearly two decades ago. Nor could they know that the DNA the Army collected from his surviving siblings several years ago would finally help solve the riddle.

Hodapp's long journey home came to an end this week at a Catholic cemetery in northern Illinois, where he was buried with full military honors beneath a grave marker his sister bought despite not knowing where he was.

"We waited all this while," said Frances Meyers, 88, remembering her parents and siblings who died without knowing Hodapp's fate. "The rest are all

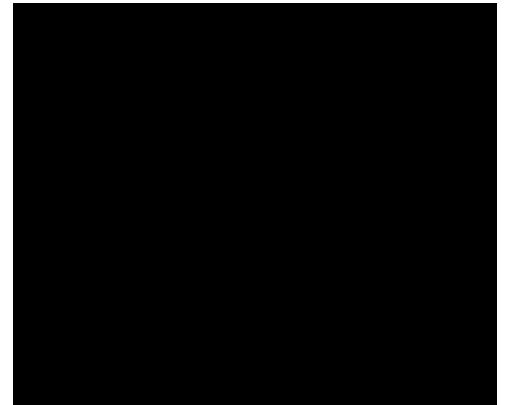
gone, but I've got to feel good about it for them too, the rest of the family. Everybody wanted him back but there was nothing we could do about it."

Six decades later, Hodapp is no longer a forgotten soldier of the so-called Forgotten War, but an example of the U.S. Defense Department's stubborn efforts to account for young men lost in long-ago battles. Through a review of Army reports and the memories of a fellow POW tracked down in New Jersey, The Associated Press was able to reconstruct the conditions under which the young man - called a "spitfire" and the "life of the party" - starved to death in a prisoner of war camp.

The story of Arthur Leon Aloysius Hodapp comes partly from a soldier held in the same camp, who described the pasty cattle feed given to prisoners, the agonizing dysentery and the "give-up-itis" to which some men succumbed. Other clues surfaced in a cousin's chance meeting with a former POW in Minnesota who had Hodapp's name and date of death scratched in his boot. Finally, U.S. military scientists were finally able to link his siblings' DNA to Hodapp's dental records.

Army officials announced the identification just shy of 60 years after Hodapp's April 23, 1951 capture by Chinese Communists in heavy fighting 40 miles north of Seoul. He died July 3, 1951, in or near the POW camp, which his family didn't know until the war ended two years later.

Hodapp is one of just 162 missing soldiers from the Korean War who has been identified since the 1950s. He is one of the about 90 service members identified each year by the U.S. military from among tens of thousands still missing from World War II, Korea and Vietnam - including 7,995 from Korea.



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"We don't want any of our guys lost over there forever," said Clyde Fruth, founder and commander of Freeport's chapter of the Korean War Veterans Association, who chokes up when talking about Hodapp because of his own Korean combat experience. "All the guys over there, they all say that if they die, they don't want to be left over there."

Born in 1928, Artie Hodapp was an altar boy who earned a solid "B" average at St. Joseph's Catholic grade school, never tardy in eight years and absent for only a half-day of classes in all of 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, according to his report cards. But he had a mischievous side.

"He was a hearty laugher and would find humor in almost anything," said Charlie Cremer, a classmate of Hodapp's who also served in Korea.

Meyers said her brother "teased me unbearably," recalling him advising tellers at the bank where she worked that she had "sticky fingers," or claiming he saw her on the town with this boy or that.

After three older brothers served in World War II, Artie Hodapp enlisted in February 1946, serving two years in Germany. When he returned, he joined the reserves. On July 2, 1950, when Frances and Edmund Meyers were celebrating their first wedding anniversary, Hodapp showed up with a gift and a farewell - he would be in Korea by October.

In April 1951, Hodapp's 5th Regimental Combat Team, attached to the 24th Infantry Division, was part of a front fighting off the "Spring Offensive," a push to capture Seoul by Chinese Communists who had invaded to aid North Korea. Hodapp did not return.

By August 1953, Army documents reviewed by the AP indicate, five soldiers had confirmed that Hodapp had died at Mining Camp No. 1. It was a temporary camp also known as "Death Valley," according to Lewis H. Carlson's oral history, "Remembered Prisoners of a Forgotten War."

Harry Borie, a medic, was captured in the same battle as Hodapp and was held initially at the Mining Camp. Now 81 and retired after careers in the Army and pharmaceutical sales, Borie doesn't remember Hodapp. But Army documents suggest he knew him at the time. A report of an Army interview with another former prisoner, reviewed by the AP, said he learned about Hodapp's death from Borie.

POWs at the Mining Camp were packed side by side on dirt floors in 10-by-12 huts, Borie said from his home in Williamstown, N.J. Dysentery, beri beri and other diseases ravaged the men. What little food they did get was sorghum that cooked into paste; some just let themselves die.

"We used to call it 'give-up-itis'," said Borie. "They just would say, 'I don't want to take it anymore,' and just give up."

Another former POW the Army interviewed, Keith Stenson, who died in 1981, said Hodapp expired en route to another camp, listing as cause of death, "Too weak from starvation - could not eat."

One of Hodapp's cousins, who had lived near Stenton, recalled meeting a man at a neighborhood party who had known him. Joan Tacl couldn't remember Stenson's name but she said the man retrieved a boot from his house and under the insole, he had scratched Hodapp's name and date of death - a secret record of a comrade's fate.

"He said Artie had lost a lot of weight because he wouldn't smoke marijuana to choke down the food," Tacl said. The drug grew wild near the camps and many prisoners smoked it, historian Carlson said.

"We weren't raised that way, and he would have just thought, that's not right," Meyers said.

The Army declared Hodapp's remains "nonrecoverable" in 1956 and efforts to retrieve American remains were stymied through decades of the Cold War. But between 1990 and 1994, North Korea handed over 208 boxes of remains. Hodapp's were among 17 boxes transferred on July 12, 1993.

"It's incredibly laborious, and sadly it doesn't happen as fast as it does on these TV shows," Defense spokesman Larry Greer said.


Last year, Congress ordered the Defense Department to identify 200 sets of remains a year - more than double the current number - by 2014.

Greer calls it a promise "that we will leave no man behind."

Ultimately, Artie Hodapp wasn't.



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