



F19 Researching a World War I Battle Death: Forensics and Genealogy Come Together

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The educational goals of this presentation are to illustrate the vital supporting role forensic sciences can play in researching a World War I military death and confirming identification of a World War I casualty.

Two years ago, a dental patient approached an Academy member to evaluate some dental charts dated 1921. The purpose of this presentation is to describe the route the patient took to obtain those dental charts and the role the Academy member played in helping him understand the forensic dental process in his genealogical research is the purpose of this presentation.

Two years prior to that time, the patient had begun researching the life of his grandfather, 1Lt. Louis Carmel Brown. 1Lt. Brown, a platoon commander in Company D, the 7th (combat) Engineer regiment, 5th Division, American Expeditionary Force (AEF), was killed in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of the U.S. Army against German troops in October 1918. There are no living military veterans of his unit or relatives/friends who knew his grandfather, so the patient began following traditional genealogy search methods: military service records, unit histories, etc.

His first step was to submit a request (Form 180) to the National Personnel Record Center in St. Louis for a copy of his grandfather's military service record. He was informed by the National Personnel Record Center that in all likelihood his grandfather's military service record was destroyed in a major fire at the facility in the 1973. He was advised to research as much as he could into specific areas of his grandfather's life and re-submit his request. With the information then supplied, the National Personnel Record Center could "re-create" some of the service record.

The focus of this presentation is the use of forensic tools in researching World War I military service, medical treatment, and burial procedures.

Military Service: The research began at the "beginning" of Mr. Brown's World War I service. In 1917, Mr. Brown was the water department engineer for the city of Toledo, OH. Late in that year he was recalled or volunteered for active duty. This research included: Ohio military draft records, Toledo Blade articles, and discussions with the historian of the Army Corps of Engineers. The following sequence was discovered: training in the Engineering Reserve Officers Training Corps (EROTC) at Ft. Lee, VA; transfer to the 1st Battalion, 601st Engineers (Sappers) at Fort Laurel, MD; transportation of unit to France in June 1918. On August 27, 1918, 1LT. Brown reported to Company D, 7th Engineers, 5th Division, an active front unit.

The next research steps included: contacting the 5th Division Society (a veterans organization), the 7th Engineers Veterans Association, and back to the historian of the Army Corps of Engineers. These discussions produced the fact that both the 5th Division and the 7th Engineers wrote unit history books after the war. Copies of these rare books were found and purchased through Internet searches. These books gave much information on the actions of the units and the battle conditions in those actions. They also revealed the day, time, and action when 1Lt. Brown was wounded. Further research was made into the units' records in the National Archives and it revealed more detail of the day's actions, of 1Lt. Brown's wound(s), and unit burial policies.

In 1986, during a trip to France, a family member found 1Lt. Brown's grave in the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery (maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission or ABMC) outside Montfaucon, France. A search of ABMC archived records found an eyewitness report to 1Lt. Brown's wounding, condition of wound, type of wound, and his subsequent journey through the medical process: Field Hospital 17 and Mobile Hospital 1, where he died four days later. The search also provided details of the body's disinterment in 1921 from the hospital's gravesite to the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery. These details include: condition of remains, uniform markings, and dental charts (including pre-mortem and postmortem dental attributes) for identification.

Forensic analysis: The unit casualty reports of 1Lt. Brown's wound(s) do not match the eyewitness account or the subsequent condition of 1Lt. Brown as he was dying. A military forensic pathologist was asked to evaluate the details. In addition, forensic odontology analysis of the disinterment dental charts appears to buttress one of the wound scenarios.

The presentation ends with a brief discussion of how today's battlefield casualty identification and disposition of remains processes are different.

Conclusion: What started out as a genealogy project turned into a study of U.S. Army military procedures for battlefield casualties in World War I and the role of the forensic odontology charting system.

Combat Engineers, Disinterment, Meuse-Argonne