

Photos contributed

The headstone of Army Pvt. Willie C. Hewett at Silent Grove Cemetery in Supply

The World War I story of Army Pvt. Willie Hewett

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SPECIAL TO THE BEACON

William "Willie" Cross Hewett was born and raised in Brunswick County. A partial family tree can be found in FamilySearch. Willie had a half-brother who also served: Pvt. Claudie Hall McCall. Willie's World War I Draft Registration Card shows that he was single and farming his own farm in Supply.

He was ordered to report to duty Sept. 19, 1917, and was accepted for duty Oct. 3. Pvt. Hewett was originally assigned to HQ, 322nd Infantry, 81st Division. Many from the 81st Division were moved to supplement the 30th Division and this included Pvt. Hewett. On Oct. 16, he was re-assigned to Company C, 120th Infantry, 30th "Old Hickory" Division. He eventually began training at Camp Sevier, S.C., as reported in previous posts.

Previous posts described the heroic battle at the Hindenburg Line, which was the turning point of the war. The battle was from Sept. 29 to Oct. 1, 1918. Willie died of wounds Oct. 25, 1918. He was 23. It is not known if he was wounded during the Hindenburg Line assault or the days after.

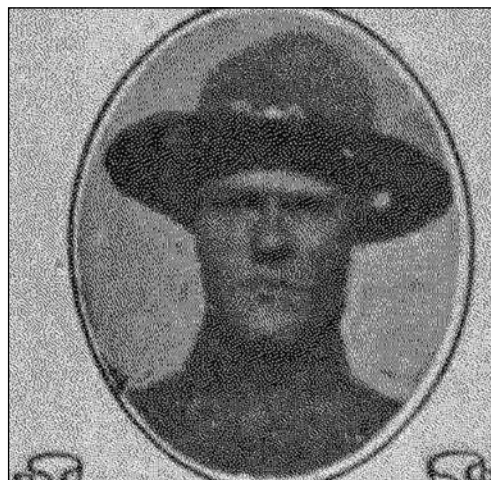
His North Carolina World War I Service Card shows only engagements up to and including the Hindenburg defensive, which could indicate he was wounded during those dates. But the service cards are not completely accurate and few actually include names of engagements. It is unfortunate that there is no information available to clarify when he was wounded. Given that his half-brother served in the same infantry, hopefully he was able to give Willie some comfort before his death.

On June 19, 1921, the steamship Wheaton left Belgium, returning his remains along with thousands of others. This steamship made three trips, returning a total of almost 13,000 bodies.

At the end of the First World War, 75,640 United States dead were buried in Europe. This included all services: Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Ambulance Services, YMCA and others.

In January 1920, a plan was advanced by Congress to bring all the American dead home. This was projected to cost some \$8 million. Immediately, a movement was mounted by parents of the dead to allow them to rest in peace. The plan was scaled down to returning 45,000 and this was reduced further as time went on.

To further the pain of the survivors, there were reports of funeral directors and funeral homes profiteering from this movement. This misconduct affirmed many families not to have their



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dead returned. Measures were put into place to assure the remains would go only to the funeral directors of the families' choice.

The steamship Mercury arrived in the United States in April 1920 with 353 bodies, all but 80 who had been buried in France. Once the movement began in earnest, some 2,000 bodies reportedly arrived per week. In September 1920, 6,281 bodies arrived in one transport.

When steamship Wheaton arrived at Hoboken, N.J., May 18, 1921, with 5,212 bodies (2,800 received from Cherbourg and 1,000 more from Antwerp), the total number of dead was brought to 23,000. Wheaton made two other trips in 1921, carrying some 7,600 dead. Cantigny brought 2,804 more in two trips in fall 1921. This serves to explain the relatively "few" American graves in Europe, considering the sacrifices made.

The number of dead repatriated was about 33,400 from all services or some 44 percent of the total buried in Europe.

William Cross Hewett was laid to rest in Silent Grove Cemetery in Supply.

If you would like to help us honor Hewett or another Brunswick County World I veteran, go to caswellriflerange.com or email fcaswellriflerange@gmail.com.

A monument will be placed at the site of the rifle range in Caswell Beach Veterans' Day 2018 in honor of the men and women from Brunswick County who served their country. A book is to be published during 2019 containing all 725 names, as well as a historical overview of the 1918 World War I Rifle Range Target Pit Storage Room.

Norma Eckard of Caswell Beach is president of Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range Inc.