

Veterans Day – What does it really mean?

November 7, 2019 by Donna De Vico, Sales & Marketing Director, Zero Surge Inc.

It seems like people try to jump on the bandwagon when it comes to Veterans Day. Stores run sales and offer discounts on everything, from furniture to shoes. Like other holidays, we can get caught up in the commercial aspect of the day without really thinking about its true meaning.

According to the US Dept. of Defense, there are some misconceptions about Veterans Day, one of which is how to spell it. There is no apostrophe in Veterans Day – it is not a day that belongs to “one” or “multiple” veterans. It’s a day for honoring all veterans who have served the country in war or peace and have been honorably discharged. Another misconception is that it is the same as Memorial Day which is intended to honor those who have died while serving. Veterans Day honors both the living and dead and is largely intended to thank living veterans for their sacrifices.

So, what are some ways to thank and honor veterans? Here are some ideas:

- Fly the American flag on Veterans Day
- Attend a Veterans Day event in your community
- Donate to a charity that supports veterans
- Give a veteran you know a gift card to a local restaurant
- Volunteer at a VA hospital (check to see if they have any special Veterans Day events)
- If you have family members who are veterans, thank them for their service
- If you’re a business with employment opportunities, hire veterans in need of a job

Following is just one story of the sacrifice a veteran made for our country. It is the story of my great-uncle, Harry Vandercar (whom I never had the privilege to meet).

No Greater Love

by Ret. Colonel Bob Leicht

10 November 1944, two kilometers west of the village of Hurtgen, Germany.

“As the vanguard of the 4th Infantry Division, the 12th Infantry was committed to relieve the 109th Infantry of the 28th Infantry Division, which had been mauled after a week’s fighting in the Hurtgen Forest as it attempted to pierce the Siegfried Line, the fortifications along Germany’s western border. The 1st Battalion of the 12th Infantry was to reduce an enemy salient in the line, but after a slight advance, it ran into minefields, booby-traps, concertina wire, automatic weapons from the front, left, and right, as well as heavy mortar and artillery fire.”¹

In C Company, Sergeant Russell ‘Pete’ Holcomb was knocked off his feet by machine-gun fire, tearing through his right arm and into his chest. A medic rendered first aid and Staff Sergeant Harry Vandercar helped carry him off the line to a road where stretcher barriers could evacuate him.

Within minutes artillery shells began falling around them. Knowing Pete Holcomb was helpless, Harry Vandercar threw himself atop him, shielding him with his own body. Two rounds nearest them were duds, but a third detonated, throwing Vandercar about 30 feet away, killing him. Severely wounded again by the same round, Holcomb was eventually evacuated and never returned to the unit, and as the only survivor of that action, he was unable to report the circumstances of Vandercar's death to C Company. Likewise, as the only person present, he would provide details about how Vandercar was killed to his mother in 1947, information his (Harry's) widow and children would not learn until nearly 50 years later.

Given the nature of the battle, Vandercar was listed as MIA on 12 November and finally declared Killed in Action a year later. His body was eventually recovered, identified, and interred in a temporary U.S. cemetery in Germany, and subsequently moved to the Lorraine American Cemetery in St Avold, France. His remains were repatriated in 1949 and interred in Jersey City, New Jersey at the request of his mother and sisters.

A 28-year-old railroad car inspector from Jersey City, Harry R. Vandercar had joined the Army National Guard in 1938, serving in the 113th Infantry Regiment. When the unit was federalized in 1941, it was assigned to the Eastern Defense Command, protecting the northeast and mid-Atlantic coast from potential enemy action. As the threat to our coasts diminished, soldiers were made available as individual replacements for the theaters of war. Sergeants Vandercar and Holcomb met upon entering Normandy two weeks after D-Day when they were assigned to C Company of the 12th, becoming fast friends. They fought through France, Belgium, and into Germany until the action described above. Evacuated from the theater after his wounding, Holcomb would spend 15 months in hospitals until his discharge in 1946.

Meanwhile in New Jersey, Vandercar's wife Ida and her infant daughters received the bad news. Ida would subsequently marry a good man named Dovey Ziegler who would raise the girls as his own, along with step-brothers, Roy and Kenny, who would come along later. Although they had no personal memory of him, Elaine and Lois grew up knowing that their father died in his Nation's service.

As mentioned earlier, in 1947 Pete Holcomb wrote Harry's mother to let her know that he had been with Harry at the time of his death, but it wasn't until 1995 that the letter containing the circumstances surfaced and the now-grown daughters learned that someone had been with her father on that fateful day. That knowledge started a dogged search by older daughter Elaine Vandercar Broderick to find Pete Holcomb, ultimately locating him in Alabama. In 1996 Ida and Dovey Ziegler visited the Holcombs, and Ida learned the details of Harry's death from the man whose life he had saved at the cost of his own. With the help of a local VFW Post, Ida initiated a request for the awards and decorations to which Harry was entitled and petitioned her Congressman to ask the Army if his sacrifice warranted a more significant recognition. The Congressional inquiry went to the Department of the Army, but unfortunately Ida died in 1999 before the Army responded in the negative.

Jump forward two decades and because of an intense interest in learning more about their biological father, younger daughter Lois Vandercar Ciccone traveled to western Germany with her daughter in April, 2018 to visit the now peaceful lands on which Harry Vandercar, Pete Holcomb, and the 12th Infantry had fought so many decades before. Their guide was a most knowledgeable WW II historian and retired German Army soldier named Volker Lossner who took them to that battlefield west of Hurtgen, undoubtedly an emotional journey for Lois. That trip led to a question: Could Harry Vandercar's remains be transferred to Arlington National Cemetery to repose among his brothers and sisters in arms? Lossner later contacted several U.S. Army veterans from New Jersey and asked if they could assist the Vandercar daughters in that quest, a task they were happy to take on. And in May 2019, the family received news they had been hoping for; Staff Sergeant Vandercar's burial had been approved.

At 1 p.m. on October 11, 2019, S/Sgt Harry R. Vandercar of the 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division completed his 75-year journey when his remains were interred at Arlington National Cemetery. His urn was brought to the gravesite, where an Army Chaplain offered remarks and a prayer, after which a 21 gun salute and playing of Taps preceded the folding of a U.S. Flag over his urn; it was presented to S/Sgt Vandercar's eldest daughter, Ms. Elaine Vandercar Broderick of Waldwick, NJ. A second folded flag was presented to his younger daughter, Lois Vandercar Ciccone of Lavallette, NJ. Elaine and Lois's brother, U.S. Army veteran Kenneth Ziegler was also in attendance. At the conclusion of the service, an Arlington Lady offered the condolences of the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army.

Numerous family members, friends, and Army veterans were in attendance. Three people who assisted the family in having S/Sgt Vandercar's remains re-located to Arlington also attended; the German Army officer mentioned above, Captain Volker Lossner, who today lives on the Hurtgen battlefield on which Vandercar fell, and is an expert on the fighting; U.S. Army veteran Tom McArdle of Summit, NJ, another expert in small unit actions in the European Theater; and (myself), retired U.S. Army Colonel Bob Leicht of Delaware. Lastly, four members of a living history group from Pennsylvania named the 'Furious Fourth' attended in period uniforms to represent that earlier generation of soldiers, and to bridge the gap between 1944 and 2019.

So, Harry Vandercar's voyage is at an end, and he will now rest in peace for all time in the company of heroes.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13)

¹Actions of the 12th Infantry Nov 7-21 44

Account Written for his Personal File by Colonel James S. Lockett, Inf (C. O. 12th Infantry, June 15 to November 21, 1944)

<https://history.amedd.army.mil/booksdocs/wwii/HuertgenForest/12thIRLockettHF.htm>

In closing, thank you to all our veterans. We, at Zero Surge, salute you!