In 1865, the nation was swash in death. Four years of civil war had caused, in the final devastating enumeration, well over half a million American fatalities. Bodies remained unburi ed on dozens of battlefields, sometimes years after the combatants had moved on. The sheer scale of death, poacking the nation with killing fields from Pennsylvania to Louisiana, had forced unprepared national, state, and local governments to bury untold thousands in unmarked or mass graves. That didn’t sit at all with U.S. Army Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs.

Meigs was master of one of the world’s greatest bureaucratic machines, the United States Army, and he perhaps wielded more power with the stroke of a pen than field commanders like Grant or Sherman. Orders from Meigs supplied over two million men under arms before the close of the war. Now that the conflict was over, with hitherto unprecedented federal power under his command, Meigs felt compelled to undertake a project staggering in both scope and intent: the identification and reinterment of over 300,000 unidentified Union soldiers killed at Bull Run. The scourge of war still haunts us. Only two years after the evacuation of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, and this year marks the 20th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. About 2,500 American troops remain in the latter country, along with 500 in Syria, of over 170,000 active military personnel deployed abroad. The U.S. military currently maintains about 1.3 million active-duty troops.

But Meigs was not a man to be trifled with. A Southern-born but staunchly Unionist graduate of West Point, Meigs was also a logistical savant and engineer of no mean ability. He navigated the turbulent halls of Congress to complete the construction of the new Capitol dome during the war; oversaw infrastructure projects around Washington DC, ran the entire Union Army’s enormous supply chain; and by war’s end, had created from whole cloth the country’s first “national cemetery” by burying 16,000 Union dead on Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s confiscated estate in Arlington, Virginia.

Montgomery Meigs knew firsthand the loss and grief wracking nearly every American household. His own son, John Rodgers Meigs, had been fresh out of West Point when the war began. John’s experience with the Union Army included campaigns in West Virginia and the Battle of Troop Mountain. But young Meigs lost his life in a close-quarters firefight with Confederate scouts in October 1864. His father, desolate, moved John’s body to Arlington after the war. A few years later, the creation of a national cemetery in Grafton—home to a Union hospital and railroad depot—established a similarly hallowed place in West Virginia.

The connection they feel to the 155 national cemeteries in their care runs deep. It is also the bedrock undergirding the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project (WVNCP), through which the Council for the past two years has stroven to buttress—with scholarly research, historical context, and enduring narratives—the dignity and respect every veteran deserves.

When the Grafton High School students in Richard Fazowski and Becky Bartlett’s classes began the WVNCP each October, they start with almost nothing.

Groups of students in two and three select their service member from a spreadsheet with the veterans’ names, birth and death dates and locations, branches of service, ranks, grave locations, and a short sentence describing something about their service history. This information is collected for them in advance by the Council’s program officer and a team of West Virginia University (WVU) graduate researchers working ahead of the students, determining which veterans interned in the Grafton and West Virginia National Cemeteries possess enough public information for the students to write a complete biography.

From this minuscule set of clues the students widen their research radius over the next six months. Ancestry, Foldx, online newspaper databases, and obituaries usually comprise the initial wave of resources they consult: military texts, memoirs, and other contextualizing books begin to make an appearance as draft cards and muster rolls reveal units, bases, and other postings that need more elaboration.

For this second year of the project, the Council was able to vastly increase the resources available to the students. Basic guides to the major military branches, suggestions for online and print references, and sample biographies were available at the very start. A series of ten short YouTube video tutorials covering different aspects of research and writing followed soon after. Field trips to the West Virginia and Regional History Center at WVU, Pittsburgh’s Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall, and the University of Pittsburgh’s Archives and Special Collections have provided in-person opportunities to encounter artifacts and primary source documents.

WVNCP resources now spill over to the Taylor County Public Library, where over 70 (and counting) books in a veteran-centric collection help elucidate special topics like the history of the Army Nurse Corps or naval aviation photographers during World War II. Students use their public library cards to access a large digital newspaper database, or browse digitally searchable microfilm of local newspapers not available online.

Research milestones, such as submitting iterations of “data sheets”—organized grids for project notetaking—and biography drafts help the project team understand what the students are struggling with and provide support accordingly. By the time this issue of The Broad Side arrives in mailboxes across the state, the team will be reviewing those final drafts and prepping them for publication.

It can be hectic or tedious by turns, and it definitely tests the endurance of the staff, researchers, and teachers who make it possible. But it’s all worth it.

(Continued on back)
**Politics and War**

**RAFAEL VENO POLING** (1925-2002) of Barbour County served as a top turret gunner on B-24 Liberator bombers during World War II with the 376th Bombardment Group, nicknamed the “Liberators.” His plane was shot down in 1944 during a raid over Romania, where he was captured and held as a POW for five months. After the war, he obtained a degree from Morris Harvey College in Charleston, and owned Poor Ralph’s Country Store in his hometown of Philippi.

**DENNIS HOWARD BENNETT** (1921-1943), also of Philippi, worked as a young man at the Pardee and Curtin Mine Company in Weston, where his father was a foreman. In May 1942, he was serving as a sailor aboard the destroyer USS Sims (DD-409), escorting the fleet oiler USS Neosho (AO-23), when his ship was spotted by Japanese scout planes searching for American aircraft carriers in the Coral Sea. Mistaking Sims and Neosho for more important targets, the Japanese attacked with an overwhelming force of dive bombers. Five bomb hits sank Sims in minutes, leaving only thirteen survivors. Since his remains were not recovered, Bennett was listed as missing until a year after the sinking.

**EDWIN NEIL BRISSEY** (1919-1945) of Ritchie County graduated from Salem College while working at the Hazel Atlas Glass Company in Clarksburg. He joined the Army Air Force in January 1942 and rose to the rank of captain, piloting a C-54 Skymaster transport based in India. Brissey flew supplies to Allied troops fighting Japanese forces in China via a treacherous route piloting a C-54 Skymaster transport based in India. Brissey flew supplies to Allied troops fighting Japanese forces in China via a treacherous route. His plane was shot down in 1944 during a raid over Romania, where he was captured and held as a POW for five months. After the war, he obtained a degree from Morris Harvey College in Charleston, and owned Poor Ralph’s Country Store in his hometown of Philippi.

**BRANDON ROBERT SAPP** (1983-2004) of Lake Worth, Florida, frequently vacationed with his family at Tygart Lake, Taylor County, as a young boy. After enlisting in the Army, he joined the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The 7th experienced heavy fighting in Najaf against a Mahdi Army militia force that had seized the city. During a night patrol, Sapp was killed when an IED exploded near his M2 Bradley armored vehicle. According to his comrades, all of whom survived, Brandon saved their lives by sensing something was wrong and asking the driver to reverse just before the IED detonated.

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