

HALLOWED
GROUND

by Kyle Warmack,
Council Program Officer

It might seem odd to focus on veterans in April, when the national holidays most associated with military service are in May and November. But this April 24 will see the conclusion of student work on the 2023 West Virginia National Cemeteries Project (WVNCP).

The project, made possible with Veterans Legacy Grant Program (VLGP) funding from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, supports two classes of Grafton High School students working for six months to research and write biographies of veterans interred in West Virginia's two national cemeteries. At the end of this second project year, the VLGP grant also makes possible a new set of state-compliant classroom activities, by means of which teachers can teach U.S. History lessons through the stories of West Virginia veterans.

This special issue of *The Broad Side* provides background and insight into the WVNCP. For more information and the current biographies, visit the Programs tab at wvhumanities.org.

In 1865, the nation was awash in death.

Four years of civil war had caused, in the final devastating enumeration, well over half a million American fatalities. Bones remained unburied on dozens of battlefields, sometimes years after the combatants had moved on. The sheer scale of death, pockmarking 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 well 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 Union soldiers.

It was a monumental task. "Such a consecration of a nation's power and resources to a *sentiment*, the world has never witnessed," wrote one military observer.

A wartime portrait of U.S. Quartermaster General Montgomery C. Meigs. Lincoln and other Union leaders found Meigs indispensable.

Library of Congress

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 Droop 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 scourge of war still haunts us. Only two years have passed since 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 900 in Syria, of over 170,000 active military personnel deployed abroad. The U.S. military currently maintains about 1.3 million active-duty troops.

Thankfully, the great endeavor begun by General Meigs remains with us, too. Today the system of national cemeteries Meigs helped create spans the country from sea to sea, a "consecration" upheld through even our nation's darkest hours. From Gettysburg to Grafton, from Puerto Rico to Pruntytown, these United States continue to set aside labor and resources for the *sentiment* so astutely observed by Meigs's contemporary 150 years ago: that the citizens who serve the nation in uniform deserve everlasting dignity and respect.

As Lincoln famously said at Gettysburg in 1863, a battlefield soon to have a national cemetery of its own, "It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this."

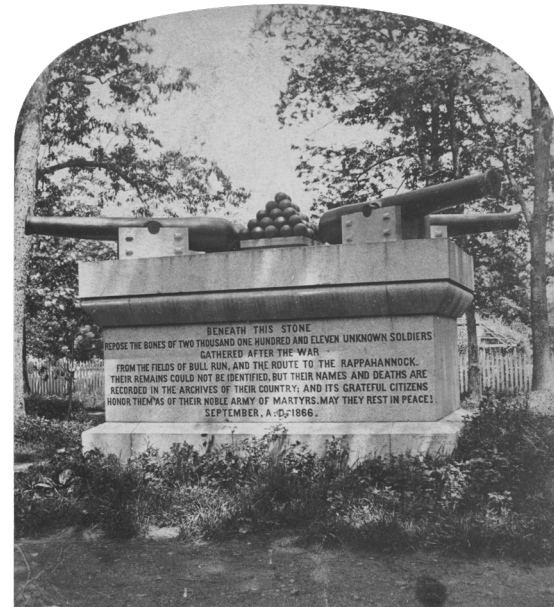
This spirit of respect animates the work of 2,500-odd National Cemetery Administration employees today, many of whom are veterans themselves. The connection they feel to the 155 national cemeteries in their care runs deep. It is also the bedrock undergirding the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project (WVNCP), through which the Council for the past two years has striven 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 Zukowski and Becky Bartlett's classes begin the WVNCP each October, they start with almost nothing.

Groups of students in twos and threes 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 interred in the Grafton and West Virginia National Cemeteries possess enough public information for the students to write a complete biography.



Arlington's "original" Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, designed by Meigs himself and dedicated in 1866 for unidentified Union soldiers killed at Bull Run. Library of Congress

From this miniscule set of clues the students widen their search radius over the next six months. Ancestry, Fold3, 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.

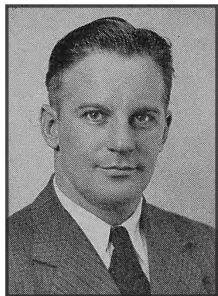
It can be hectic or tedious by turns, and it definitely tests the endurance of the staff, researchers, and teachers who make it possible. But it's all worth it.

(Continued on back)

ROLL OF HONOR

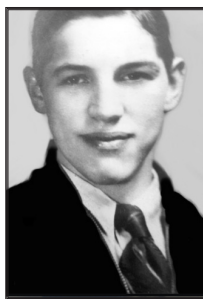
Here follows a selection of short summaries drawn from West Virginia National Cemeteries Project biographies. The Council is honored to participate in the vital work of the Veterans Legacy Grant Program.

For full biographies, visit wvhumanities.org and select "West Virginia National Cemeteries Project" from the Programs menu. The current project year's biographies will be added this May, in time for Memorial Day.

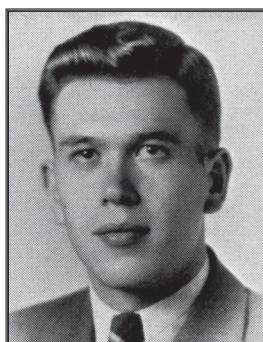


Ralph Wayne Poling (1925-2002) of Barbour County served as a top turret gunner on B-24 Liberator bombers during World War II with the 376th Bombardment Group, nicknamed the "Liberandos." His plane was shot down in 1944 during a raid over Romania, where he was captured and held as a POW for five months. 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.



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 sieged the city. During a night patrol, Sapp was killed when an IED exploded near his M2 Bradley armored vehicle. According to his crewmates, all of whom survived, Brandon saved their lives by sensing something was wrong and asking the driver to reverse just before the IED detonated.



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 "over the hump" of the Himalaya Mountains. On July 4, 1945, Brissey's plane disappeared en-route to Kunming, China. No trace of the aircraft or crew was ever found.

EVENTS APRIL - MAY 2023

| | |
|--|---|
| Apr 6 Amicus Curiae Lecture - John Stauffer presents on his book about Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Brad D. Smith Foundation Hall, Huntington. 7pm | Apr 24 West Virginia National Cemeteries Project - Commemoration of project veterans and student work. Taylor County Historical Society, Grafton. 4pm |
| Apr 13 West Virginia, Writing, and Otherness - Public Reading and Conversation with Neema Avashia and Rahul Mehta. Marshall University, Huntington. 7:30pm | May 21 Creating a Path towards Equal Education: The Role of Border States in Desegregation - Little Lecture by Mary Beth Brown. MacFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. 2pm |
| Apr 23 The Fifth Border State - Little Lecture on West Virginia statehood by author Scott MacKenzie. Books available for purchase. MacFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. 2pm | Various History Alive! - Living history presentations throughout the state. Visit the Events calendar at wvhumanities.org for a full list of scheduled presentations. |

HALLOWED GROUND

(Continued from front)

What makes all of this important?

As Lincoln already put so well, "We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract." If our scribbles are pale shadows of what has already been accomplished by these veterans, why put these students through the ringer?

Even humanities professionals often struggle to convey in concise terms—with the passion and clarity they feel about their work—what the humanities really are. A field that (arbitrarily) encompasses disciplines as disparate as history, sociology, women's studies, archaeology, linguistics, political science, folklore, and dozens more is bound to have some identity issues. But there are family ties binding all these academic branches together. Perhaps this band of lovable misfits we call "the humanities" can best be summed up as *the stories we tell about ourselves, and the study of how we tell those stories.*

This comes with a corollary: Which stories we choose to remember says something about us as a society. At our best, we honor the finest traditions of the past, consider the pressing needs of the present, and lay cornerstones for a more enlightened future. It goes without saying that ensuring the histories of the everyday veterans among us are thoroughly researched and preserved is an endeavor worthy of the past.

But what of the present?

As the proliferation of online misinformation, alternative facts, and social media echo chambers has shown us, there is no time like the present to reinforce robust habits of information literacy. Students wading into the WVNCP have their hands full with poorly cited sources, inaccurate dates, gaps in official records, and other confusing data. Sometimes even the most basic facts require rigorous cross-referencing. At times, students are forced to present the most historically *likely* scenario, while acknowledging the parts we just don't have the data to confirm. Much like professional historians.

These aren't just academic skills—they're life skills. Separating plausible reality from wishful thinking isn't just a historian's craft: it's also the stock and trade of the foreign policy expert, the small business owner, the military tactician, and the structural engineer. Undertaking the story of another human being's life is an enormous responsibility, and it requires discipline to sift through tedious details for the correct answers. That kind of grit serves us well in any walk of life.

But it does us most credit when exercised in the service of others. Especially when those others have so bravely served our nation. We cannot further consecrate what these men and women have given us, but we can do our part to preserve the stories behind the stones.

We regret the Events section had to be so small this issue. Trust us, there's plenty going on! As always, visit wvhumanities.org and click "Events" for the most current calendar of Council programming.

The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia.

1310 Kanawha Blvd. E
Charleston WV 25301
304.346.8500

