

WWI at the Hjemkomst

“It is a consolation to me to know that my son sleeps in France among the honored dead, where such splendid care is taken of the cemeteries by the United States Government, for I know that after the passing of this generation our Government shall always care for the last resting places of its honored sons.” This was written by Alice McGrath, mother of John McGrath in 1931 following a visit to her son’s grave in France. John McGrath was one of three Marines from Barnesville killed very early in the war. This is from one of the displays at the Historical and Cultural Society of Clay County now open in the Hjemkomst Center. My special thanks to Mark Peihl and Markus Krueger at the Museum for providing me with information in this article. The display called Three Marines from Barnesville honors John McGrath, John Tuskie and Frank Stahl, all Barnesville High School graduates. Prior to the war, Stahl was working for the railroad, Tuskie was studying to be a barber and McGrath was attending college in Wisconsin. All three joined the Marine Corps. On the morning of 19 July 1918 McGrath and Stahl met in the trenches. They talked about home, about how Tuskie died earlier in action in Belleau Wood and wished each other luck. That afternoon, McGrath was killed by a machine gun, Stahl was badly wounded by an artillery shell the same day. Stahl was taken to a hospital where with the help of nurses, he wrote a letter home before dying of his wounds on 1 August. That is how we know the story of their meeting in the trenches.

The battle of Belleau Wood was such a hard-won success it led General Pershing to say, "The deadliest weapon in the world is a Marine and his rifle!" and that "the Battle of Belleau Wood was for the U.S. the biggest battle since Appomattox and the most considerable engagement American troops had ever had with a foreign enemy."

On a very personal note, my father, Adolph Bakke also saw action in the battle of Belleau Wood. Luckily, he survived or I would not be here today. As with most of our combat soldiers, he did not talk about the war and his part in it.

About 116,000 American soldiers were killed in WWI, most of them buried in Europe. Following the war, the War Department surveyed the next of kin of those buried in Europe asking if the remains should be returned to the US or moved to American cemeteries in Europe. About 75,000 bodies were returned to the US. Of the 45 men from Clay County killed in Europe, 28 were returned to the US, 15 were buried in American cemeteries and two are listed as missing.

The exhibit at the Hjemkomst is super. Hours are Monday thru Saturday from 9:00am to 5:00pm and Sunday noon to 5:00pm. There is a small admission charge.