

“MY BUDDY”

By Chris Sanders

While passing by the Millville Pennsylvania Quaker Meeting House, as I frequently do, I always glance over at the flag prominently displayed nearby which has a white dove on it and the words, “There is no way to Peace. Peace is the way.” When it first caught my eye, I had to do a double-take for a moment and the “aha” light bulb went off! To the Quakers known for their conscientious objection to war and fighting in wars, this flag very succinctly expresses their belief.

So when I was shuffling through my mounds of papers at home, a never-ending process, I ran across the name of my Dad’s best friend in high school, which quickly brought war to mind again and how futile it was (my Quaker heritage perhaps coming out). I remember our conversation—my Dad’s and mine—as we meandered through Berwick, Pennsylvania’s Pine Grove Cemetery on one of his infrequent trips from Virginia back to his home town. He wanted to see how many names he could recognize from the past. We were astonished how many veterans there were as evidenced by the myriad of bright American flags flying brightly beside the graves. Just out of the blue my dad said, “I wonder if my best friend is here? He joined the service and was killed only a year later.” There was a silent moment for I had never heard of this friend before. I could see the deep sadness in my Dad’s eyes as he recalled the memory. I quietly asked his friend’s name—“Steve Hovancak,” he responded. I said, “Do you know what happened?” He shook his head, no. And we continued. I vowed in my mind to see what I could find out about Steve. A quick trip to the Berwick Library found Steve’s photo, with the big bright smile, in the 1943 Berwick Blue and White Year Book, stating his ambition was “machinist.” Activities: Drill Corp. Diploma: General. I could find nothing else at the time—that was about eight years ago and my dad has since passed.

Steve never left my mind, however. I would still peck around from time to time to see if I could find anything, but no luck. Then one day about six months ago —BINGO! I found a “Record of Burial Place of Veteran” on the internet for one Steve P. Hovancak! He was born December 19, 1924 and died September 17, 1944, veteran of WWII, Army, Private, 3rd Inf. Div., Dates of Service July 1943-September 17, 1944. Cemetery, St. Mary’s, Berwick, PA. Under remarks it stated, Headstone placed, body interred in FRANCE. He was 20 years old.



Steve's 1942 Draft Registration Card showed he was a student, 6 feet in height, weighed 140 pounds, was light complected and had brown eyes. Per WWII Enlistment records Steve enlisted at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania on 7 June 1943. There was no branch assignment, his grade was private, and his Component was Selectees (Enlisted Men). He had three years of high school. It was not unusual at the time for "boys" to forego their education to run off and fight for freedom.

Steve's brother Carl quit the ACF in Berwick, signed up, and began active duty March 15, 1943 about three months before Steve—probably why "little brother" Steve decided to follow in his footsteps. Carl was separated from active duty on December 21, 1945, and was compensated for almost two years of service \$405.00.

The 3rd Division to which Steve was attached was the only division of the United States Army during WWII that fought the Axis on all European fronts and was among the first American combat units to engage in offensive ground operations. By the end of the war the 15th infantry had 16 Medal of Honor recipients, including Audie Murphy, the most highly decorated American soldier of the war. The 15th was on the WWII Honor Roll.

A timeline of events happening a few months before and after Steve's death on September 9, 1944, helped me to understand where Steve may have been during the time. Operation Overlord (D-Day) occurred on June 6, 1944. A huge invasion fleet moved across the English Channel to the Normandy beaches of France.

Early August, the United States Seventh Army, which included Steve's 15th Infantry Regiment, landed on the southern coast of France and pushed rapidly up the Rhone Valley to join the Allied troops pouring in from Normandy. Paris fell August 25th. Within six months after D-Day,

France had been liberated. Christmas 1944 found Allies fighting with desperation at the Battle of the Bulge. The Allies prevailed. By February 1945 allied preparations had been completed for the invasion of Germany. On May 1, Hitler committed suicide in the burning ruins of Berlin. The German machine started rapidly collapsing and on May 4, 1945, Germany surrendered. May 8, 1945 (VE-Day) marked the formal end of the war in Europe, eight months after Steve was killed (Sept. 17, 1944).

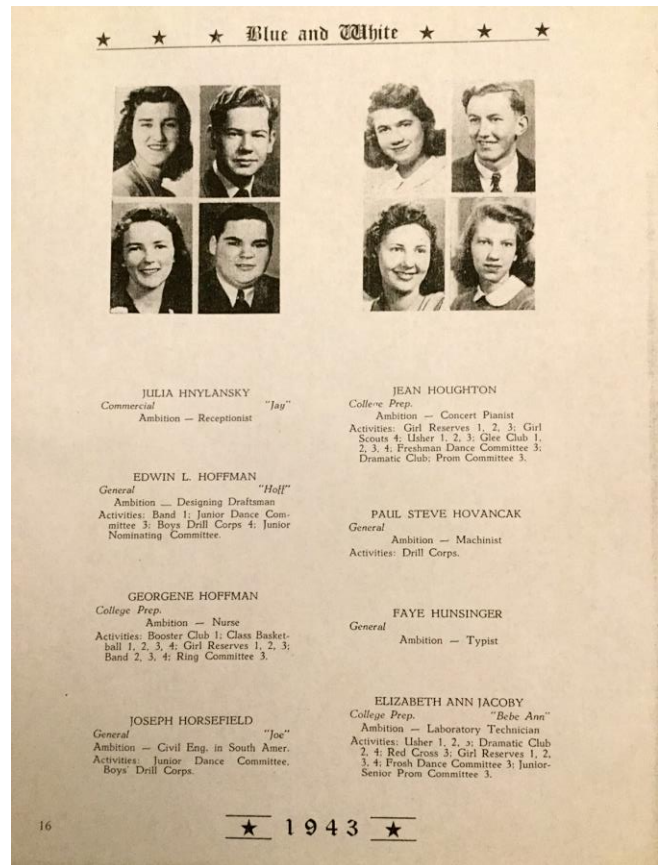
Steve is buried in the Epinal American Cemetery in France, Plot B Row 30 Grave 13. He was awarded the Purple Heart and is on the World War II Honor Roll. The cemetery of over 48 acres lies 230 miles southeast of Paris in the shadow of the Vosges Mountains. The majority of the nearly 5,300 Americans buried here lost their lives in the Rhone Valley and in the fight across central France.

As described by the American Battle Monuments Commission, “A Court of Honor provides entrance to the cemetery. On its limestone facade is a relief carving depicting the Survival of the Spirit. The names of the missing in action are remembered on walls surrounding the memorial building. Inside is a small, devotional chapel. A map room has a large colored-glass mosaic that depicts troop movements and military engagements in the European Theater during World War II. This angel with a laurel branch symbolized the final victory. Four Medal of Honor recipients are buried in the field of honor.”

Epinal, France was liberated from the German Army September 23, 1944 (six days after Steve was killed) by the United States Army and began receiving and burying the remains of American and German soldiers fifteen days later. Shortly after the cemetery’s inception, the mayor of Epinal requested that members of his community adopt graves in the cemetery and place flowers on them to honor the U.S. Soldiers that liberated their city. Since the end of the war, members of the French community continued to take care of and place flowers on the graves of fallen U.S. soldiers.

I viewed the Epinal Cemetery on YouTube and was awed at the beauty (yes, beauty) of the place. I was also humbled at the acres of identical white crosses one could see, indicating the loss of good American boys. Yes, I got teary-eyed, especially when I viewed Steve’s marker. A huge bouquet of flowers, and a small American flag on one side and the French flag on the other, graced his grave. So far away from home was he. Oh how much I wished I could have shown this to my Dad when he was living. But then, “Best Friends” meet again in Heaven, don’t they?

I can only imagine the loss that was felt by his family too. Steve had seven brothers and sisters. His dad John, a farmer, was from Czechoslovakia, and language spoken was Slovak, as shown on the 1930 census. Steve's mother Caroline died in 1937, age 37, so she did not have to endure the agony of seeing her sons go off to war and one of them being killed. The dad died in 1962, a long time to ponder on your son who was killed and rests so far away. The parents are buried in Berwick St. Mary's Cemetery, with Steve's represented marker placed right in front of theirs.



Dad John received all of \$500.00 Pennsylvania Veterans Compensation in 1950 as Steve's survivor, "KIA" standing out beside Steve's name on the approval application.

I think of Steve's large family and how they must have missed him. All the nieces and nephews that were born, all the birthdays and holidays missed. The life Steve could have led—marriage, children—longevity. He and my Dad "friends for life," for my dad never threw friends away. The tales he and my dad could have exchanged, for my dad joined the Army in 1944 after high school graduation and was shipped to the Philippines and Korea.

But Steve was only one of many such "boys." Like the Quaker flag says, "There is no way to Peace. Peace is the way."

As the 1940 Bing Crosby recording, says, "Life is a book that we study, some of its leaves bring a sigh. There it was written by a buddy, that we must part you and I. My buddy, my buddy..... your buddy misses you."