

THE RETURN OF PFC FRANCE E. RACE

By John F. Hall

This is a true story about my maternal grandparents, Adelbert and Mary Race, and my uncle, PFC Francis E. Race. Grandfather Race was a street car conductor in the late 1920s. He injured his hand, and it became infected and it turned into gangrene. Penicillin did not become available



to hospitals, in the United States, until March of 1945, Grandfather Adelbert died from that gangrene. His wife, Mary with no way to feed or shelter their nine children, became destitute. The Social Security Act was not signed into law, by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, until August 1935. The regular payment did not begin until January, 1940. The Springfield Orphanage took in Grandmother Race and her nine children. My mother, Marion G. Race, was one of the oldest of the children.

She told me this story about her brother Francis. He was drafted into the Army and was deployed to France during World War II. On August 29, 1944, he was in a house with about ten newly arrived soldiers. A German soldier threw a grenade into the house. Her brother, Private First-Class Francis E. Race, knowing that there was no time for all of them to escape, jumped on the grenade, to save their lives. In John, Chapter 15, Verse 13, are these words: "Greater love has no one than to lay down his life for his friends." My mother carried a brief newspaper notice in her purse, until the day that she died. That notice contained the following words: "War Hero's Body Returns Monday. Pfc Francis E. Race, the son of Mary E. Hennessy Race and the late Adelbert W. Race of 28 Montford Street, who died of wounds received in France Aug 29, 1944 will arrive in Springfield Monday at Union Station at 1:45. A military escort will escort the body to St. Michael's Cathedral where funeral services will be held at 2:30."

In 1985, my wife, Paula, my son, John, and I went to pay our respects at my uncle Francis' grave. We went to the Saint Michael's Cemetery administrative office. The receptionist gave me directions to his grave, located in the Saint Paul Section, plot 138. She told me that his parents, Mary and Adelbert, and two of his siblings are all buried there. So we drove over to where Francis is buried. To my shock, there were no tombstones for any member of the Race family. I could not believe that a war hero like Francis, did not have a tombstone. For 41 years, Francis Race had been forgotten and left unknown in an unmarked grave. Because the Race family was extremely poor, a tombstone was a luxury, that she could not afford, for her husband, Adelbert, and her three children. I began my quest to obtain a military tombstone for Francis. It was easier said than done. I ran into a fire wall. On July 12, 1973, a fire occurred at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, MO.

Approximately 80% of the Army personnel discharged between November 1, 1912 to January 1, 1960 were destroyed. PFC Francis E. Race's personnel and medical records were destroyed in that fire. My active duty military service began on my 17th birthday, June 29, 1962. I received an Honorable Discharge from the Army on June 29, 1968. My personnel and medical records were

also destroyed in that 1973 fire. I had no way to prove the injuries that I suffered as a paratrooper in the 101" Airborne Division. From 1977 to 2005, I continued to serve in the Kentucky Army National Guard, and the Army Reserve. I retired on my 60" birthday, in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

I mailed a letter to the Secretary of Defense, Casper Weinberger, and requested that a death certificate be issued for PFC Race, since all of his records were destroyed in the Saint Louis fire. My requested was granted. I then requested a tombstone from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. I paid the cost to have it placed at PFC Francis' grave.

The word "hero" describes a person who demonstrates an utmost commitment to their morals, no matter the obstacles or consequences. Heroes are venerated in stories for possessing extraordinary abilities, such as strength, intelligence, or fortitude. My mother, the former Marion G. Race gave me my middle name, Francis, to honor the memory of her brother Francis. She was pregnant with me when my uncle was killed, during the battle of the Bulge, in World War II.

Congress passed the Selective Training and Service Act on May 18, 1917. It required males of ages 18 to 45, to register with the Selective Service System. Thanks to my friend, Mrs. Audrey Lambert, (ajlambert.com), who was able to obtain a copy of my uncle's registration card, I was able to provide the following information. Uncle Francis was born June 26, 1910. he was living at 342 West 47th Street, New York City, New York. He was employed by the F.W. Woolworth department store. He was married to Genever Race.

I'll end this story with a song written by Dean Pitchford and Jim Steinman called, Holding on for a Hero." These are some of their lyrics: "Where have all the good men gone and where are all the gods? Where's the streetwise Hercules to fight the risin' odds? Isn't there a white knight upon a fiery steed? ...He's gotta be sure and it's gotta be soon and he's gotta be larger than life...). I was once like my uncle Francis Race. We were infantry soldiers. We both carried M-1 rifles. We both wore steel helmet, and dog tags. The least that I can do is to honor him.

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