

Back from the battlefield

Dog tag from residents' father discovered in France



Photo by Alexander Cohn / Monitor staff
Francis LaClair (left) and his sister, Mary Annette Cleveland, look for their father, Nelson LaClair, in a photo taken at Camp Devens, (now Fort Devens) Mass. during World War I; Thursday, January 26, 2012. A tour guide found their father's World War I dog tag outside of Verdun, France and got in contact with Francis LaClair. Nelson LaClair received the Silver Star for his service as a medic on the Western Front and returned home to found the Penacook post of the American Legion. (Alexander Cohn / Monitor staff)



Nelson LaClair

By Ray Duckler / Monitor Columnist January 29, 2012

Francis LaClair reacted with eyebrows rising and questions flying. Who is Thierry Maquet?

Why is he writing me from Belgium? How does he know my father, Nelson J. LaClair?

How in the world – or in Europe – did he find me? Is this a hoax?

Thankfully, Francis LaClair, who turned 91 yesterday, can use the Internet.

He corresponded with the mystery man, who gives tours of French battlefields from nearly 100 years ago.

He discovered that his father's dog tag from World War I, found in the leaves and green moss of France, will be mailed home to Penacook.

The tag has been overseas since 1918, the last year of the war. Maquet wrote a letter to the Penacook American Legion, and the letter was forwarded to LaClair. "This man must have done a lot of research to find the Legion," LaClair said.

The dog tag will be on its way to Concord. Penacook and Boscawen, where the surviving LaClair children now live.

Francis, who moved recently to a bungalow at Havenwood-Heritage Heights, is the oldest of 10 kids and one of five left who can appreciate the find.

Maquet wrote in an email sent yesterday that he found the tag next to some shrapnel last September, while leading a tour.

He thought that meant the soldier it belonged to had died. "I looked in the U.S. military cemeteries in the region. No," Maquet wrote.

"An American met on the internet sent me the story of the 103rd Infantry Regiment and I found that Nelson J. LaClair had not died in the war."

The tag, Maquet wrote, will be in the mail soon. Whenever it gets here, the surviving three sons and two daughters

will see a round piece of aluminum the size of a half dollar. LaClair has the photos to prove it, emailed to him by Maquet.

They'll see their father's middle initial, "J," and last name, "LACLAIR," clearly inscribed; and the "ON" from the end of his first name – Nelson.

The "P" in private is missing, but the "VT" is there, as is "DEPT" and "INF." Flip it over, and you'll see "2888," the elder LaClair's identification number in the National Guard. The only thing I can think of is I remember he told me once about waking up and realizing he was in the trenches," LaClair said.

The only thing I can think of was a concussion from a shell, and it might have knocked him off and the dog tag off.

He never mentioned that he lost something." The French and Americans lost nearly 200,000 men in the 1918 Battle of the

Argonne Forest, the final Allied offensive before the armistice ended the war in November of that year. more than 100,000 Germans died.

Meanwhile, a kid from Penacook in his late teens survived the war and left behind the piece all soldiers wear around their necks, in case they are killed in battle.