1945 August 20-26

Gathering Up the Dead

Helps Register Graves Of U.S. Men In France

ASSEMBLY AREA COMMAND, France — (Special) — The 3059th quartermaster graves registration company, composed entirely of combat veterans from every fighting branch of the army, has arrived at Camp Chicago in the assembly area command for redeployment.

Since Nov. 7, 1944, the members of the company were assigned the job of maintaining, beautifying and operating 11 U. S. army cemeteries near Normandy beach.

According to the commanding officer, Capt. Robert E. Berry, Wilmington, Del., less than one-half of one per cent of the graves are marked "unknown" because of the thorough method of identification the army has adopted.

If the soldier's dog-tags have been lost, his identification can usually be established by finger prints, tooth charts, scars, or markings on his clothing and personal effects.

Although the United States army continues to supervise these military cemeteries, thousands of French civilians have "adopted" the graves. They bring flowers every Sunday, and many of them correspond with the interred soldiers' relatives in America.

A member of the company is Corp. Harry H. Maxwell, 600½ Copeland avenue, La Crosse, Wis.

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 August 21, page 7)

The Quartermaster Corps goes all the way back to the American Revolution when the Second Continental Congress authorized it on June 16, 1975. Quartermasters provided most supplies for the troops by working with local purchasing agents who received a commission. During the Civil War, the

Quartermaster Department took on the responsibility of caring for the dead and maintaining national cemeteries. [1]

During any war, taking care of the dead after the battle is a task that nobody wants.

The 3059th Graves Registration Company was just one of many such units performing this job in World War II. **Harry H. Maxwell of La Crosse** is the first La Crosse County man we have seen mentioned as having done that duty during the war.

Harry Howard Maxwell was born on May 24, 1923, in Sawyer County, Wisconsin. His parents were Howard Cliffton Maxwell and Ruth (Rose) Maxwell.[2] He had two brothers, Raymond and Donald, and a sister named Dorothy.[3]

At the time Maxwell registered for the Selective Service in June 1942, the five-foot-eight-inches tall, 148-pound, nineteen-year-old was living with his mother at 702 Powell Street in La Crosse. He worked for Safticycle Co. in La Crosse. In November 1942, they moved to 600 1/2 Copeland Avenue.[4]

We do not know much about Maxwell's unique service during World War II, but we can get a sense of it from others who had a similar experience.

Graves Registration at work on Omaha Beach, 1944 June 7
(med-dept.com)

Sometimes soldiers were temporarily assigned to graves registration details. Author James Jones wrote of the time on Guadalcanal when he was assigned to a group to dig up American bodies from a battle two weeks earlier. The dead were from another regiment, so men from his unit were ordered to do it.

Even so, one of the men had a brother in that regiment. They dug up the man's brother on that day. As each body was dug up and put into a body bag for transport, one dog tag was given to an officer for record-keeping purposes and the other dog tag remained with the body. Four of those bodies had no dog tags, so they were recorded as unknown.[5]

The climate and elements could make the job even worse than it normally would be.

When correspondent Robert Sherrod landed at Tarawa after the fighting, he wrote that the "overwhelming smell of the dead hit me full in the face." When the tide came in, it carried along with it the bodies of Marines who had been killed in the water during the landing. Corpsmen waded in and pulled the remains up on the beach. It was a ghastly job after the bodies had been floating in the water in the tropical heat for a couple of days. The bodies were buried in a trench by a bulldozer. [6]

Marine dead on the beach at Tarawa
(National WII Museum)

In the freezing winter weather, bodies were frozen in sometimes grotesque poses. They were loaded like cordwood on to trucks.

Battlefield conditions sometimes dictated that bodies were not recovered in a timely fashion. At the Anzio beachhead on the Italian coast, constant German shelling meant that many of the dead "rotted for months."[7]

Burying the dead at Henri-Chapelle, Belgium, 1945 March 14
(HistoryNet.com)

Modern weaponry made the horrible task even more gruesome. "'You know what a direct hit by a shell does to a guy?' a member of a Graves Registration detail said to a reporter. 'Sometimes all we have is a leg or a hunk of arm.'"[8]

Six days after the invasion of Iwo Jima in the Pacific, the 4th Marine Division was already starting to bury its dead in a temporary cemetery. Lt. Gage Hotaling, a Navy chaplain assigned to Graves Registration, said, "'At one time, we had four hundred or five hundred bodies stacked up waiting for burial . . . I am not a smoker, but I found that the only way that I could go around and count bodies was to smoke one cigarette after another . . . I was addicted to smoking for twenty-six days . . .'"[9]

Historian Stephen Ambrose wrote that the men of the Graves Registration detail "were usually drunk," because that was the only way they could get through it.[10]

Graves Registration was a large and important operation during World War II. As with everything in the Army, there was a procedure to be followed. It was outlined in a field manual.
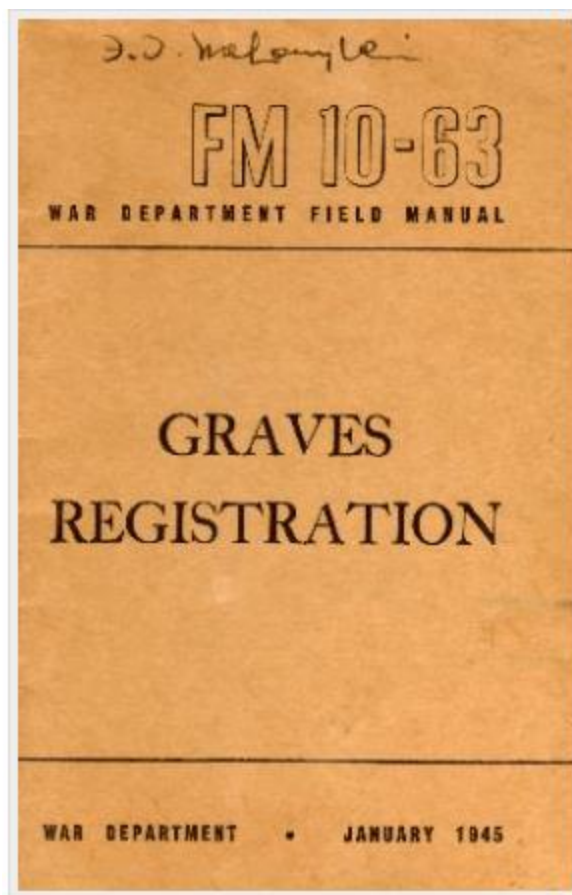
Illustration of Field Manual FM 10-63 describing
"Graves Registration", published by the War
Department, dated 15 January 1945.

(med-dept.com)

The normal procedure during World War II after land battles was to bury the dead in temporary cemeteries as soon as possible. Later the bodies would be dug up and moved to a division or army cemetery in the rear area. After the war, the family could choose to have the body brought back to the United States for burial. Bodies were being disinterred and brought back to the United States for years after the war. The American Battle Monuments Commission maintains military cemeteries around the world for those Americans who remain where they died.[11]

For those killed at sea, burial at sea was the universal method of body disposal. The body was sewn into a canvas bag weighted with a five-inch shell and placed on a board draped with an American flag. With shipmates standing at attention and detail to fire a funeral volley, the board would be tipped so the body dropped into the sea.

Many bodies were not recovered, so these men would be listed as "Missing." After a year, the status was changed to "Missing-Presumed Dead."

The personal effects of the deceased service person would be returned to the next of kin. Next of kin also received a "death gratuity" from the United States government equal to six months of the deceased person's pay.[12]

Perhaps Corporal Harry Maxwell's time in Europe was not so bad. His company performed maintenance of cemeteries at Normandy beginning in November 1944 when the war had moved far to the east. But how can we know that was all? Was he haunted by nightmares after the war? Did he have memories that he tried to drown in alcohol? Or was his post-war experience no different than that of any other veteran who had seen the brutality of war firsthand? We will never know.

Maxwell returned to La Crosse after his time in the Army. He worked for Trane Company for 39 years. Maxwell was a member of American Legion Post 417 on French Island and the La Crosse Chapter of Disabled American Veterans.[13]

On May 16, 1959, he married Chrystal Whitman of 2602 Jackson Street.[14] Three years later, Harry was living at 523 Car Street and Chrystal was living at 2827 Harvey Street when they were divorced. They had no children.[15]

Harry Maxwell was 66 years old when he died on December 4, 1989. The man who had taken care of the dead during the most destructive war in human history was entombed at the Gardens of Peace Mausoleum.[16]

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Sources & Notes:

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[4] The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; St. Louis, Missouri; *Draft Registration Cards for Wisconsin, 10/16/1940-03/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*, Box: 461.
[5] Donald L. Miller, *The Story of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 154.
[6] Miller, 208-209.
[7] Miller, 229.
[8] Miller, 229-230.
[9] Miller, 556.
[10] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 317.
[11] Ambrose, 318.
[12] "What is a death gratuity for a veteran?" *West Salem Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 August 30, page 7.
[13] *La Crosse Tribune*, 1989 December 7.
[14] "Marriage Licenses," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1959 May 20, page 26.
[15] "Circuit Court," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1961 May 29, page 2.
[16] *La Crosse Tribune*, 1989 December 7.