

Finding the Stories of the Fallen in World War II

Jennifer Holik sheds light on the records that can provide significant details about your ancestor's life in the service in WWII



A bugler blows TAPS at the Memorial Day service in 1947 at Hamm Cemetery in Luxembourg. (Courtesy of American Battle Monuments Commission)

***People say, 'Dead Men Tell No Tales.'
I disagree.***

I have researched World War II personnel across all branches, for several years. Some of the easiest research and stories have come from the fallen — the dead men who can no longer speak. These men left behind a record that often, but not always, contains so much detail, the remaining research becomes easier, especially if the service file burned. This record is the Individual Deceased Personnel File or IDPF. The IDPF is a death file that was created by the Graves Registration Service (GRS), to document the remains of

soldiers located, and establish files for those who were still considered Missing In Action (MIA).

Why was a death file created when a soldier was declared missing? It was rare for someone who was declared missing to ever return alive, unless they were declared a Prisoner of War (POW). The file was started and included a Battle Casualty Report that listed the soldier as MIA. If the soldier's remains were recovered later, his status would be changed to KIA. If he was never recovered, he would receive a Finding of Death

(FOD) and his death date would be at least one year plus one day after his MIA status began. The FOD allowed the next-of-kin to begin closing his estate and collect the death payment and insurance money.

The IDPF always contained a soldier's name, unit, and service or serial number. When remains recovered were unable to be identified, no name or service number were available. In those cases, the GRS used an X-number and the file was called an X-File. The X-number was the next number of burial in a temporary cemetery.

Each temporary cemetery had its own X-numbering system. Details on the soldier would be recorded in the X-File just as it would have the IDPF. A match to a soldier would be attempted using other records. In cases where an unknown soldier with an X-File was identified, the X-File was merged into the IDPF. Therefore, the IDPF will have both soldier with his service number pages and X-File pages.

Soldiers who were never recovered have information about

their deaths in the IDPF. There will be additional paperwork to show they were given a status of UNRECOVERABLE. If this was given, in most cases, the remains could not be recovered due to the circumstances surrounding their death; the location of death; political reasons; or they were lost and unable to be found.

So, what information do these files contain?

Important! The men of the GRS were human and sometimes made mistakes. They were not working with the technology we have today, which

includes spreadsheets and databases. They worked with paper and pencil. There were also so many deaths and individuals missing during the war, that sometimes paperwork or photographs were included in the wrong file. If you receive a file with papers or photographs that belong to another serviceman or woman, request that individual's file to see if any of your serviceman's papers are included.

Contents of an IDPF

The main components of an IDPF are generally the same across all branches of the military during

World War II. The contents of each file will vary based on the circumstances of death. For instance, if a soldier's remains were declared UNRECOVERABLE, the IDPF will often contain lists of others within the unit or search area that were also deemed UNRECOVERABLE. Sometimes, investigating those others who were in the same unit, will provide additional context for your soldier's story.

Report of Burial

A Report of Burial contained the soldier's name, date of death, place of death, and a copy of his identification tag, if located, stamped onto the form using an addressograph machine. The report also contained the grave location of the soldier with the names of the men buried on either side of him, to help with identification purposes. A list of personal effects was included if any were found on the body. If the soldier was recovered after the war, it is possible a Report of Interment was used rather than a Report of Burial. They are essentially the same form.

If Deceased Was Unidentified

When remains were brought to temporary cemeteries to be identified and buried, other documents were created to assist in the identification process. Sometimes they were created in the field and other times at the cemetery. Three forms in particular were used to document fingerprints, if the fingers were in good condition; a skeletal form to document which bones were recovered and the length of the arms and legs. And finally, a tooth chart to document missing teeth, fillings, and dental work done, when teeth remained.

CORRECTED COPY

REPORT OF BURIAL 27 May 1946
TM 10-430 AND AR 30-1915

Graves Registration Form No. 1 (Revised 1 Sept. 1943)

104 343

WILBANKS Ray D. Pvt. 20444302
Initial Rank Serial No.

504th Para Inf. Rgt. 82nd Airborne Div.
Unit Organization

N.E. of BEEK, Holland 6 October 1944
Place of Death Date of Death Cause of Death

1400 - 18 July 45 MARGRATEN, US. Military Cemetery K-645482
Time and Date of Burial Name of Cemetery Name or Coordinates of Location

221 9
Grave Number Row Number

Disposition of Identification Tags: Buried with body Yes No Attached to Marker Yes No

If No Identification Tags Previously buried as Unknown X-1216 (Margraten)
How remains identified? Identified through: 1) Cartridge Belt of X-1216 marked "4302". 2) First Aid Pouch marked "W-4302". 3) 82 A/B patch on jacket. 4) Date and place of death of X-1216 in agreement with A.G. Battle Gas Reports also 504 Para Inf. Rgt. Gas Reports of which Pvt. Wilbanks was a unit member. 5) X-1216 disinterred from same Civ. Cem. with four (4) other Paratroopers who took part in same action in which Pvt. Wilbanks lost his life.

To determine Right or Left use Deceased's Right and Left.

Who is buried on:	IRISGOLL	33882098	S/Sgt	511 Inf. Rgt.	220
Deceased's Right:	Name	Serial No.	Rank	Organization	Grave No.
Deceased's Left:	DEWESE	0-1285392	1/Lt.	508 Para Inf.	222
	Name	Serial No.	Rank	Organization	Grave No.

Emergency Addressee: Mrs. Allie S. Wilbanks, mother
397 North Avenue, N.W., Atlanta, Georgia
Address

Religion: Unknown

List only Personal Effects Found on Body and disposition of same:
NONE

REBURIAL
Previously buried in isolated grave located at: N.E. of BEEK, Holland, E-777617.

This corrected copy of Report of Burial, prepared in the Office of the American Graves Registration Command.

Signature of Officer or other person reporting burial: N.J. SLOANE
Capt., GRC

Verified by GRS Office

Declassified in accordance with E.O. 13526, dated 5 January 2010

The Report of Burial for Ray Wilbanks provides information on his identification. (Courtesy of Author's Collection)

Using this information with documents from the service files of potential soldiers who are known or assumed to be deceased, GRS was sometimes able to make an identification. Keep in mind, that in those days, we did not have all the technology and DNA capabilities we do today. This is one reason many remains are still awaiting identification even though they have been recovered.

When information is received from the service files, usually a few service details will be added into the IDPF. This may be basic training or other duty station dates and locations and similar service information.

IMPORTANT!

The entire service file was never duplicated and included in the IDPF. There are some researchers online who will tell you otherwise, but this is untrue. I have examined hundreds of IDPFs and spoken with others who research the Missing and never once have we seen a service file within the IDPF.

Casualty Report

The Battle Casualty Report contained the usual service information plus the date of casualty, which could have been designated as MIA or KIA, name of the next of kin and relationship to the deceased as well as the date notified of the casualty. If a soldier was originally declared MIA and later known to be deceased, another form will be included showing the status change.

Report of Death

The Report of Death listed the deceased's usual information, branch of service, date of birth and death, date of active entry in service, where he was killed,

emergency contact and beneficiary information.

Telegrams

Telegrams or letters sent to the next-of-kin regarding MIA and KIA statuses may be found within the IDPF.

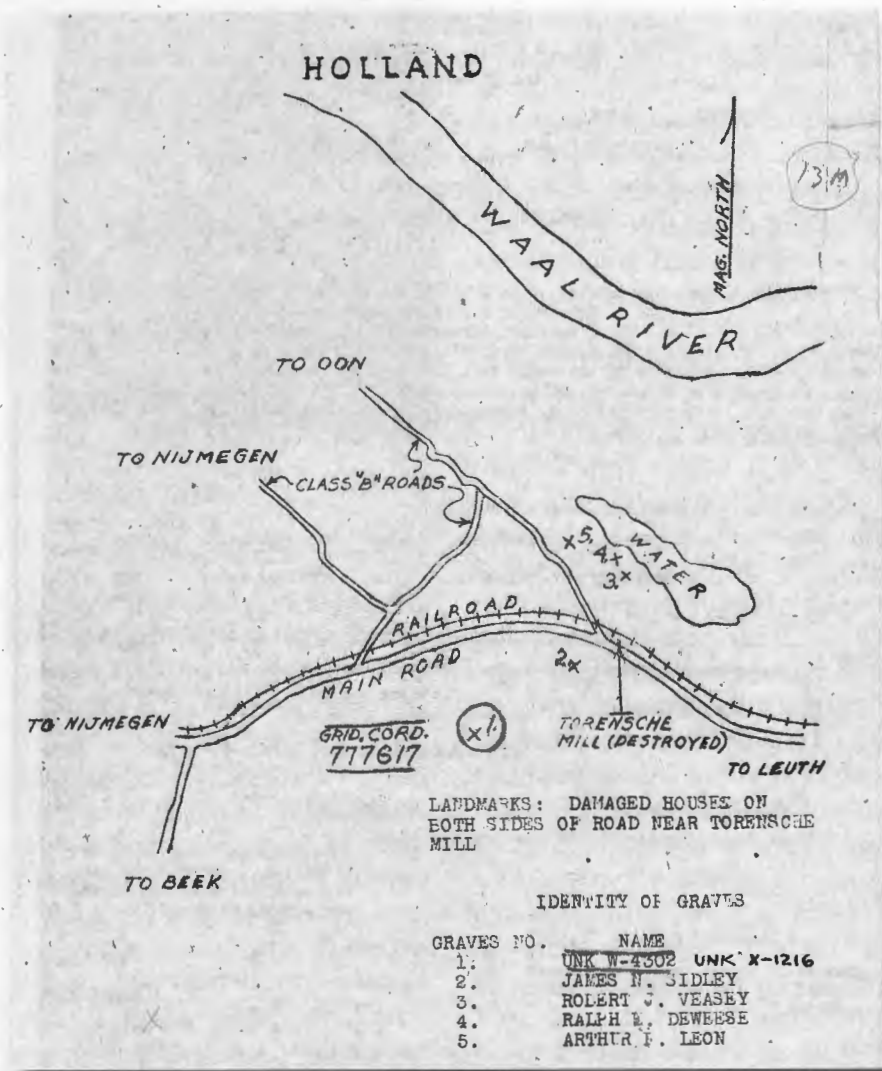
Inventory of Effects

The Inventory of Effects form described the personal effects collected, which were to be sent to the family. If effects were collected on the remains after death, they will often be listed on the Report of Burial and an inventory form. If the soldier

had effects elsewhere (their bag or foot locker, or storage locker in the US) those items would have been inventoried separately. Next-of-kin were required to sign and return a letter stating they received the effects. Often, they wrote a letter to the military asking about specific items which were not sent. These family letters can be difficult to read.

Prisoner of War Cards or Information

If a soldier was a POW in the European Theater of War, their IDPF usually contained the



A map of the search area where GRS located several graves after a battle near Nijmegen, Holland. (Courtesy of Author's Collection)

POW card and information from captured German records or the Red Cross. These cards may include photos of the soldier. Individuals taken as a POW by the Japanese in the Pacific Theater of War usually do not have the card in their IDPF. Those cards must be requested separately from NARA in College Park, MD.

Report of Investigation Area Search

After the war, the men of the GRS searched areas where battles were known to have occurred or information surfaced that indicated where remains may be recovered. These searches were documented in the IDPF and contain testimony from town mayors or religious leaders, citizens, and GRS. Maps, drawings of cemeteries or areas where remains were recovered and other documentation is often found in the documents which make up this section of the file.

Disinterment Directive

After the war, the government gave families the option to have their soldier's remains repatriated for burial in the US or buried overseas in an official military cemetery. At this time, the temporary cemeteries disinterred all the remains and re-identified them, documenting everything on a Disinterment Directive. This form contained name, rank, service number, date of death, cemetery name and location of grave, name and address of next of kin, condition of remains, date disinterred and remains prepared.

Family Correspondence

IDPFs often contain many letters from the next-of-kin to the

DISINTERMENT DIRECTIVE									
SECTION A - NAME AND BURIAL LOCATION OF DECEASED				DIRECTIVE NUMBER		DATE			
NAME				SERIAL NUMBER		RANK	ARM	DATE OF DEATH	
WILBANKS RAY D				20444302		PVT	1	DAY MONTH YEAR	
CEMETERY				DISPOSITION OF REMAINS		CODE DIST. PT. CAUSE OF DEATH			
PLOT	ROW	GRAVE	COUNTRY						
KK	9	221	MARGRATEN HOLLAND						
SECTION B - CONSIGNEE AND NEXT OF KIN									
NAME AND ADDRESS OF CONSIGNEE					NAME AND ADDRESS OF NEXT OF KIN				
SECTION C - DISINTERMENT AND IDENTIFICATION									
NAME			SERIAL NUMBER		RANK	DATE OF DEATH		DATE DISINTERRED	
RAY D. WILBANKS			20444302		PVT.			26 AUG. 48.	
IDENTIFICATION TAG ON		ORGANIZATION			RELIGION		IDENTIFICATION VERIFIED BY		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REMAINS GRS					UNK.		CLYDE B. SPINKS, CAPT. RA.		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MARKER GRS							NAME AND TITLE		
SECTION D - PREPARATION OF REMAINS FOR SHIPMENT									
NATURE OF BURIAL				CONDITION OF REMAINS					
UNIFORM				FRACTURED SKULL R/L HUMERUS, PROXIMAL ENDS OF R/L ULNA FRACTURED R/PELVIS. REMAINS COMPLETE. ADVANCED STAGE OF DECOMPOSITION.					
OTHER MEANS OF IDENTIFICATION									
REPORT OF BURIAL FROM REMAINS LISTS AS X-1216.									
MINOR DISCREPANCIES / NONE									
REMAINS PREPARED AND PLACED IN CASKET									
DATE		BY							
27 AUG. 48.		ELAM E. POORBAUGH, EMBALMER							
CASKET SEALED BY				EMBALMER (SIGNATURE)					
ELAM E. POORBAUGH				ELAM E. POORBAUGH					
CASKET BOXED AND MARKED				SIGNING ADDRESS VERIFIED BY					
DATE				MARKINGS VERIFIED BY					
27 AUG. 48. DONALD L. HOPKINS				ERNEST J. OGLESBY JR. 1/LT. CAV.					
I hereby certify that all the foregoing operations were conducted and accomplished under my immediate supervision and that the report above is correct.									
				ERNEST J. OGLESBY, JR. 1/LT. CAV.					
				SIGNATURE OF GRS INSPECTOR					
1 Prepare Discrepancy Report QMC Form 1194a for major discrepancies.									
QMC FORM 1194 REV. 15 MAR 48									

The Disinterment Directive for Ray Wilbanks, F Co., 504th PIR 82nd Airborne, temporarily buried in Margraten. The document explains the state of his remains and means of identification. (Courtesy of Author's Collection)

military. The letters can be painful to read because of the emotion conveyed. Sometimes there are arguments between the widow and parents as to location of final burial or who should receive personal effects. There are also heartfelt letters from next-of-kin documenting service information. Common themes in the letters include:

- Questions about the location of burial of their soldier. When the remains can return home. How to get the remains home.
- Questions about personal effects not received.
- Information about who is legally the next-of-kin, especially if the soldier was married and his widow remarried.

● Sept. 30th ● 1948th
 Dept of Army Office of Quartermaster -
 General Washington D.C.
 Dear sire.
 Am Writing you in regards to my son
 Pfc. ^{Sr.} Ray D. Wilbanks 20 444 302
 I have had a number of letters from
 your office. but have never had a
 direct reply as to when to expect my
 son to be returned for Burial in
 my own grave lot. and as I see
 in the papers of Atlanta, Ga. there is
 a lot of the Rocks unclaimed, but
 I have Complied With every thing
 so far as I know. as to filling out
 form that was sent to me for the
 return of my sons Body. also had
 H.M. Patterson Journal home to fill
 out the form for Burial when ever

- 2 -
 It was received here in Atlanta, Ga.
 and that has been over a year ago.
 and we have had no word of
 information what so ever since that
 time. I also sent in a Photostatic
 Copy of his former Wifes Marriage.
 to another man before we received
 final word from your office of his
 death. and as I see in the Atlanta
 papers where all Cemeteries will be
 closed after Nov. 1st 1948. Will you
 please tell me what is wrong at once.
 because my wife is Blind from all
 the worry. and I am to old to do
 much my self. because of ill health.
 please let me know why I have not
 received my sons Body. and if
 our

Letter from Ray Wilbanks' mother to the military. Notice the details this letter contains. (Courtesy of Author's Collection)

Final Disposition of Remains after the War

In about 1947 for the European Theater of War and 1948 for the Pacific Theater of War, the government began working with families to determine where remains should be permanently buried.

There were many options given to families, but the primary two were:

- Have the remains disinterred at government expense and returned to a US cemetery for burial.
- Reburial in a permanent American cemetery overseas.

The soldiers who remained behind at the request of their families, or who were unknowns, were interred permanently in a



Hamm Cemetery (now Luxembourg Cemetery) final interment services for WWII Fallen. (Photo courtesy of the American Battle Monuments Commission)

3-

You are going to do any thing about it for me, and if not please tel me. Where and Who Can help me to get his Body home for Burial. you stated in the last letter I had from you, in Reply Refer to Burial of Private Ray D. Wilbanks, 20 444 302 Plot KK, Row 9, Grave 221, United States Military Cemetery Margraten, Holland

Also some of the letters say refer to Dm & M F 293 Private Ray D. Wilbanks Sn 20 444 302 so Will you please find out about my Romb Body and When I Can have it for Burial in my own lot. Please dont delay the Answer. Sincerely

A. W. Wilbanks 397 North Ave. N.E
Atlanta Ga

permanent American Military Cemetery which became part of the American Battle Monuments Commission. For those who remained, burial services were held for each Soldier Dead at the permanent cemetery. Burial flags were then sent to the next-of-kin.

Requesting IDPFs

At the time this article was published, the IDPFs are being handled by the US Army Human Resources Command through Ft. Knox, Kentucky. They are free files which are uploaded to an online transfer service after the file is scanned. An email with download instructions is sent to the requestor.

The downside to this nice arrangement of a scanned, free file is that it often takes 12-15+ months to receive the file. While all the IDPFs up to the letter 'L' have been scanned, only one person is working the job to take and fill requests. Even if the file was scanned, it will likely take months to receive it.

To request the file, email:

USARMY.KNOX.HRC.MBX.FOIA@MAIL.MIL

Cite FOIA and provide as many details about your soldier, sailor, or Marine as possible. There are IDPFs for civilians KIA. Try to include: Full Name, Service Number, Death Date, Birth Date, Unit, Theater of War, and your name, phone number, and email address.

IMPORTANT!

There are a couple of professional researchers who claim they can get the IDPF for you from the NARA office in Suitland, MD. This is not the case. Researchers are not able to gain access to these records at this time, through that facility. All requests must go through Ft. Knox. Army Human Resources Command has been digitizing these files for several years and maintains control of them.

IMPORTANT!

Many World War II websites still contain outdated information as to the location and requisition procedure for IDPFs. If the information does not say the files are available through Ft. Knox, the information is out of date and incorrect.

Want to Learn More?

IDPFs contain much more information than I can discuss in one article. There are several ways you can learn more. Visit my website, The World War II Research and Writing Center and:

- Order a copy of Volume 1 or 2 of my Stories from the World War II Battlefield to read an entire chapter dedicated to these records, <http://bit.ly/1RMfaFD>.
- Subscribe to my blog from my website, where I discuss research, military travel, and books.
- Attend one of my World War II Programs in the US or Europe. See the Appearances section of my website and check back often as new dates and locations are always being added.
- View full IDPFs across all branches in the Casualty Files, <http://bit.ly/1Ubj1JX>.

I hope you take the time to order and review this record if your soldier was KIA. It is time well spent, and will provide much greater detail than you can imagine. ☞☞



JENNIFER HOLIK is a Chicago-based genealogist and military historian specializing in World War II US records, research, and writing.