

The Cedar Box and the Dog Tags

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

It was a small but well-built cedar chest, one of those like the ladies use for recipes, though this seemed even smaller. Accompanying it were the usual alphabetical cards, looking unused, though a later search found they contained three slips of paper.

It was the other contents that got our attention. A soldier's Dog Tags, for example, looking well shined and lacking wear. Apparently standard, they contained the religious preference, the usual identification numbers, and a name.

The Dog Tags

Dog tags were traditionally hard to read until they filled with the dirt and grime of military living. These tags were so well cleaned and shined that it was with difficulty that we made out the name: Donald St. Hilaire. More on him and on another St. Hilaire in a moment.

So where did the box come from, and why did I have it? Recently the local County Veterans office needed to downsize, and decided to donate all of its accumulated military paraphernalia to the American Legion, I was recruited to look it over, and it was carefully transferred to the County Historical Society by a group of local veterans.

The Shoulder Insignia of a Major

For some reason, the little cedar box demanded my attention, and I separated it from the rest of a various pile of material, and began an examination. Inside were several items. Most notable besides the dog tags, were two regular size gold insignia of a major, and one smaller size of the same. The dog tags, as I said, were for a Donald St. Hilaire

What to do? Was there a story here, with so little to go by? Fortunately a call to the Veterans Office produced records of a St. Hilaire in La Valle, actually Dutch Hollow, complete with phone number and address.

My call that evening was answered by a perplexed gentleman, properly suspicious of a stranger calling to say he had the man's dog tags! Donald T. St. Germaine had no idea how the dog tags got to the Veterans Office.

After I properly identified myself, he explained that he was born in Chicago in 1923, was pilot of a transport C-47 in the Aleutians, making the rank of Captain in the 11th Air Force, and had probably never heard of LaValle and Dutch Hollow in those days. Today he is a retired widower, neighbor to Bud Sprecher at that lake..

The Lapel Insignia of a Major

There's more to this story. We mentioned the two shiny gold major's shoulder insignia which were also in the little cedar chest. Don was a Captain. Still perplexed, Don reported that he had a son, Donald J. St. Hilaire---who was a major in the army, apparently during the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

Typical of our intelligence personnel, young Don rarely spoke to his family of his activities. He passed on about six years ago.. Don says his son had seven rows of military ribbons, apparently for his clandestine service. The major's insignia were slightly different from the usually plain leaves incidentally. Special.

Our story might have ended there, with the mystery of the military property of two military men, father and son in a little cedar box. However, with the aid of a strong magnifying glass, the aging eyes of your scribe reviewed the middle initial. It was Donald J, not Donald T! They belonged to the son, not the father to whom I had just spoken.

The slips of paper

We mentioned the three slips of paper with names on them, found in the card file. Young Donald was in restricted service, activities unknown. On one of the addresses carries a name and address on a street unknown in Baraboo. Was this an alias?

So much time has elapsed that the slips have lost their significance. One other name was listed in Terrytown, and another in Hillpoint. The St Hilaires were Chicago people until Don Sr.'s retirement at Dutch Hollow. Why the Sauk County addresses? Just friends?

Or is it really someone else's cedar box? It is all part of the mystery of the little cedar box, and how it found its way to the Sauk County Veterans Office.

