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## The Rouen Post, October 1939

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# THE ROUEN POST

A PAPER DEVOTED TO THE INTERESTS OF ROUEN POST No. 242

WILLIAM STACK

Editor

## THE FUNERAL OF BRIGADIER GENERAL MICHIE

"When beggars die there are no comets seen;  
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes."



Col. Borden S. Veeder

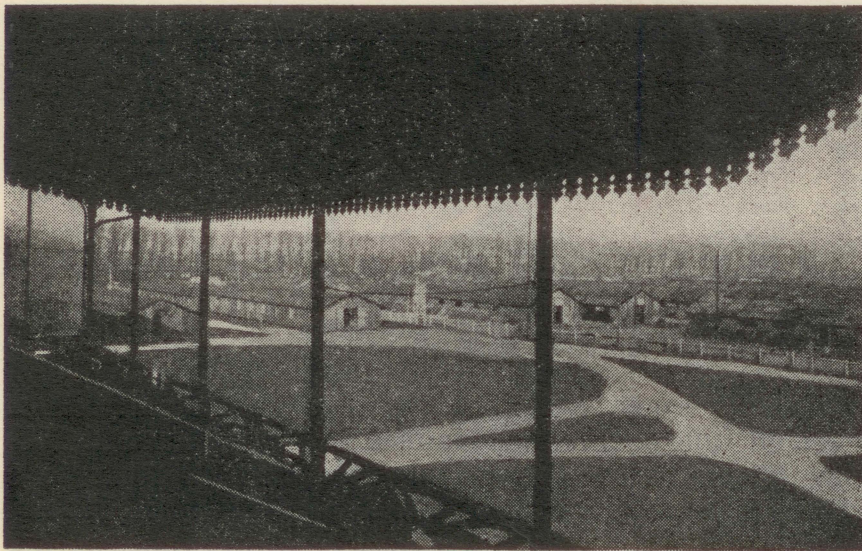
Death boarded a troop train rumbling through the early dawn near Rouen on June 4, 1918, and claimed Brigadier General Robert E. Lee Michie of the 53d Infantry Brigade, en route to a British training area behind the Somme. The funeral of General Michie, the only American general officer to die in France during the World War, was held two days later in Rouen under the direction of Colonel Borden S. Veeder, Commander of the American unit operating British General Hospital No. 12. The problems that confronted Colonel Veeder on that memorable occasion are revealed for the first time in the following record from his war diary:

June 4 (1918, Rouen, France)—Early this morning the Commanding Officer of Red Cross Hospital No. 2, hospital for sick and wounded British and American officers in Rouen) phoned saying he had the body of a dead American general and please come over. Motored into the city about 10 and found it was Brigadier General Michie who had died of a heart attack on a train between Le Havre and Rouen during the night. He had landed in Le Havre a few days previously, in command of the 53rd Infantry, en route to the vicinity of Abbeville for intensive training behind British lines. Train had been stopped at Rouen, where Americans fired farewell salute at the station and the body, accompanied by an aide, Lt. —, was sent to Red Cross Hospital. Found body in mortuary under large American flag and learned that Aide had departed for British base headquarters. Arranged for funeral next afternoon in regular way and stopped at headquarters to find Aide. Saw Gen. — (Commanding General British Base at Rouen). Aide wanted to arrange to send body back to the United States immediately. Told him it was against regulations and had to sit hard to bring him down to fact that he was in France. Gave permission for him to order metal coffin and invited him to stay with Unit 21 until funeral was over.

Shortly after returning to camp received visit from French Chief of Staff and Captain D—. Said General — (General in Command French Troisieme region in which Rouen is located) had learned of death of an American general, expressed deepest sympathy and wanted to show gratitude of France by holding military funeral befitting rank. Expressed appreciation and said arrangements already made to bury the general in British Cemetery as all other American dead in Rouen had been buried. Much argument and the two officers left quite put out. Called British Base and reported incident. Hour later received telephone requests from both French and British headquarters to attend conference 2 p. m. at British base headquarters.



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General Hospital No. 12

were overlooking fact that the deceased was an American general—and that there was an American army unit in Rouen. Was it not fitting that he should be interred by an American outfit according to American army regulations? Both grabbed at suggestion which permitted them to gracefully withdraw from an argument that was rapidly getting them nowhere.

Back to camp and spent hour poring over regulations and manuals for funeral regulations and services. Only information obtained was that number of guns fired varies according to rank of general. Useless information as we have no guns. Nothing to do but plan the funeral and call it "American Regulations."

June 5—Conference with O. C. British cemeteries and settled on funeral for tomorrow afternoon. He to arrange grave and firing squad. Called at French headquarters, informed General D— of death of an American general, who was to be buried from Base Hospital No. 12 tomorrow at 2:30, and requested French representation. With tear-filled eyes he talked of France and America and promised to be present with his staff and a company of poilus. On way out arranged with Captain D— for cassion to carry coffin. Then to British base headquarters to inform General P of the death. Said he would come with his staff. Hinted that French were sending troops and was told that a British infantry detachment would be present. Arranged with Chief of Staff for British band. Returned to camp and found Prefect of Seine-Inferior, and Mayor of Rouen awaiting me. Both made impassioned speeches expressing sympathy. Invited them to funeral which obviously was expected.

After lunch French staff officer arrived to say President of France was sending a general from Paris as his special representative at funeral. Suddenly realized how much to do was being made and got American general in charge of Le Havre base on telephone and insisted we must have some American generals present to keep up our end. After some argument he finally agreed to send a couple of stray brigadiers to Rouen next morning.

Spent rest of day on details and drawing up a special order of day for funeral. Arranged for a marquee to be erected on race track early tomorrow morning, and for body to be brought over from No. 2. Plan is to have various groups line up and have

To Rouen for conference at 2 p. m. with British and French Chiefs of Staff. Long hot argument. British claimed responsibility and right to conduct funeral as General Michie and Brigade were attached to British Army for training. French insisted upon right to conduct funeral as General's death had occurred on French soil. Both angry and stubborn. After listening for half an hour, politely reminded wrangling officers that they



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band and cassion pass in review. As they turn right through gate, groups will right face and follow in fours in the march to cemetery. Flipped coin to decide whether British or French officers precede—the reverse order for British and French troops. Arranged with Cleveland Hospital Unit No. 4 to send officers and men.

Procession as planned:

- 1—Band.
- 2—Cassion with body.
- 3—Generals.
- 4—American officers.
- 5—British officers.
- 6—French officers.
- 7—American troops.
- 8—French troops.
- 9—British troops.
- 10—Others including Prefect and Mayor.

Told Aide to walk behind behind cassion alone as a representative of the division and the only person present who knew General Michie.

June 6:

Weather mild and clear. Body brought over early and placed under tent with guard of non-coms. Had places measured out and marked on parade ground for each group and assigned the following officers to see that the detachments found proper place on arrival and received instructions: Captain Post, French; Captain Eyerman, British; Captain Rainey, Belgian; Captain McCulloch, Civilians. Lieutenant Hester will command detachment of troops from General Hospital No. 12.

By lunch everything seemed in readiness. At 1:30 French staff car arrived with two excited officers. Had forgotten the Belgians (small officer base in Rouen), Jumped into car and raced three miles to Belgian headquarters where old Inspector General S— was waiting. Informed him of death of American general and invited Belgian representation at funeral. Obviously all prepared for invitation as twenty Belgian officers beat me back to General Hospital No. 12 and Belgian general put in appearance three minutes after my return. Moved groups to put Belgian officers next to French ahead of American troops. Luckily no Belgian troops to increase problems.

Just ready to give the signal to start when officer in charge of the group of generals rushed over and said they were having a row and could I settle it. Found General D— and the general from Paris in a heated argument over which should walk first. General D —, the senior in rank, but the Paris general claimed right as representative of French president. Told American generals to fall in anywhere in the group and let the French generals settle it between themselves—that it was not our row and as we were going to start for the cemetery at once they would either have to fall in somewhere or drop out and argue. Never found out how it ended.

Started to rejoin American officers and was overtaken by Mayor and Prefect who were “insulted” because they were placed last instead of with the generals. Told them



Grave of General Michie



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that their position in the procession was according to "American Regulations" and they would have to stay in place assigned. They won out, for as soon as procession started and reached an L formation, they cut from the rear and ran—the Mayor, high hat in hand and tails of dress coat standing out in the wind—and fell in with the generals.

Race course lined with spectators—patients in hospital "blues," nurses, troops and hundreds of French civilians lining route to cemetery.

At grave in cemetery found detachment of South African Scotch Rifles detailed for firing squad. Almost a catastrophe at grave. Body and metal casket so heavy the sergeant pall bearers were nearly pulled into the grave when they started to lower the casket. British chaplain read a prayer and our American padre the burial service. Firing squad muffed the third volley (learned later they were confined to barracks for a month for their blunder). Taps by our bugler. Thanked all the allied nations for their honoring the General.

Back to the mess with O. C. Cemeteries to talk it over. Decided after all we had done very well for a group of amateur soldiers in the Medical Corps. Certainly a "show" for the first (and only) American general to die in France, and of whom not a single person taking part (except his aide) had ever heard of until two days previously.

### JORDAN TAKES THE HELM

Another member of Rouen Post No. 242, joined the gradually increasing group of that organization's past commanders, as Philip Conrath yielded his gavel to the eager hands of his successor, George H. B. Jordan, at the Post meeting, October 11, in Garavelli's Restaurant. Jordan announced that his plans for the coming year were somewhat nebulous, but he could assure the members that one of the objectives of his administration would be the correct spelling of his name in the monthly issues of the **Rouen Post**.

Oskar A. Schmidt was the speaker of the evening. Schmidt, a member of the firm of Hamilton & Schmidt Surgical Company, gave an interesting account of his experiences as a traveler in Germany, Austria, and Italy shortly after England and France declared war upon Germany.

Tom Sheedy, the former Post Chaplain, climbed out of the moth balls to attend his first meeting in several months and spent the evening heckling "Weaving Willie" Engel. Other Unit 21 veterans that we didn't expect to meet, were Robert (Shorty) Richner, Werner Hencke, and Harold Pope. Richner was recently discharged from the Veterans' Hospital at Jefferson Barracks. Hencke is associated with his father in a long established plumbing business. Pope is a detail man in the sales department of the Bardenheier Wine Company. Prior to his association with the Bardenheier Company, Pope spent several years as a representative of the Colgate Soap Company in eastern Missouri and Arkansas. He resides with his wife and three-year old daughter at 4937 Chippewa street.

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