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The Joint Archives *Quarterly*

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A WORLD WAR I TRIBUTE TO UNCLE GEORGE BONEBURG

by Michael George Griffin

I am the namesake of George Boneburg, my uncle, who was killed in World War I. My name is Michael George Griffin. My mother Jennie (Boneburg) Griffin gave me his name as my middle name. I have been intensely proud of him all of my life. His photo in uniform, plus other memorabilia, has adorned my dresser my entire life. It was my determination to always remember him and, in doing so, he would continue to live on in recognition. Perhaps the similarities of our birth dates spurred me on with this notion. Uncle George was born March 12, 1898. I was born on March 13, 1929. We are both Pisces.

Not too much is known of George prior to his enlistment. I have one photograph of him in his earlier years. The Family Bonenberg immigrated from Ermelo, which is located within the Province of Gelderland, The Netherlands, sometime in 1867; we've been unable to determine exactly when. George's grandfather (Jan Bonenberg), grandmother (Grietje) and six children arrived and settled near Forest Grove, which is located in Jamestown Township, the southeastern part of Ottawa County, Michigan. Two more children were born after arrival, the last to be George's father, Jacob Bonenberg, who was my grandfather. The Bonenberg name changed many times during the years, depending upon whatever

peculiarities existed at the time. In any event, Bonenberg was used by Jacob and his wife Harriet (Hattie) Rozema, as shown on George's birth certificate. Later, the family name became Boneberg or Boneburg.



Another oddity that has never been explained is George's first name. He was baptized Gerrit Bonenberg on June 12, 1898, in the Forest Grove Reformed Church. And, according to the 100 year history of the Hudsonville First Christian Reformed Church (1902-2002), he is also noted along with other family members as Gerrit. The Bonenbergs were charter members of the Hudsonville First Christian Reformed Church. The last name was then listed as Boonenberg.

Growing up, George must have been quite bilingual. Although his father Jacob, or Jake, was an American citizen, I recall he spoke with a heavy Dutch accent.

According to census records, Jacob's father, Jan Bonenberg, spoke no English. I also recall my mother Jennie (Bonenberg) Griffin in her 80s could still speak some Dutch. It is evident, therefore, in George's earlier years at home, the entire family spoke Dutch.

(continued on page 2)

From the Director



In this fall issue of the *Quarterly*, longtime Joint Archives of Holland supporter and friend, Michael George Griffin, shares the story of his uncle, George Boneburg, who was from Hudsonville and killed during World War I. I know you will enjoy Michael's story and the dedication that went into making sure that the

facts were found and written down for future generations to enjoy and use.

We also want to thank his wife, Maria Astrid Griffin, for her work on the translation of the Forest Grove Reformed Church's consistory minutes (1869-1917), from Dutch to English. Much of the history of this congregation had been unknown because of the language barrier. After three years of painstaking volunteer work, Astrid released that history via the English language and shared it with the consistory members at Forest Grove in May 2008. Today, those minutes are open for public research because of Astrid's dedication and the church's desire to share it. Thank you, Mike and Astrid.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

George Boneburg (continued from page 1)

It seems important to me, and relevant, to try to get to know George a bit by delving into his family life. Referring to him as "My Uncle George who was killed in World War I" seems too simple. How was it for him growing up? For example, the services at the Forest Grove Reformed Church were conducted in Dutch until 1918.

According to Forest Grove Reformed Church records, the Jacob Bonenberg family transferred to Zutphen Reformed Church on May 21, 1901. As previously noted, the Bonenberg family was a part of the founding of the Hudsonville First Christian Reformed Church in 1902. It was not until after September 1921 that the morning and evening services changed from Dutch to English. It was in 1933 that English was made the official language of that church.

From the above chronology, it is not surprising young George was bilingual, fluent in both Dutch and English, when he volunteered for the service in 1917. The exact date of George's enlistment is not revealed, however, the *Grand Rapids Press* refers to his enlistment following the enactment of the draft law. He avoided

the draft to ensure he could be with his local National Guard unit and be with his friends.

After enlistment, some information is available regarding the path which took George through training and his journey to the battlefields in France. "In the 126th final muster, it had the required strength of 3,635 enlisted men. It was intensively trained at Grayling, Michigan, and Camp McArthur, Texas, and embarked on the *President Grant* for France from Camp Merritt, New Jersey at midnight, February 18, 1918. The 126th became a unit in the Thirty-second Division, which took part in many desperate encounters with the enemy. It is recorded as having been in the Alsace defensive sector; in the Chateau-Thierry, or Aisne-Marne, offensive; Soissons sector, or Oise-Aisne defensive (Juvigny); in the Meuse-Argonne offensive. In the latter action the Division was used as a spearhead and fought for 20 days without rest or pause."

"The Thirty-second Division fought so nobly that the French called it "Les Terribles" or "The Terribles."

"Total casualties of the 126th were 562 men killed, 2,430 wounded or gassed."

More specific data is available from the Grand Rapids library in "History of the 126th Infantry in World War 1917-1919." It should be noted here that George, Lyle and cousin Horace Melvin Barnaby from Grand Rapids, were all killed about the same time, in the same action.

Throughout my entire adulthood, the service and death of my Uncle George has haunted me. I wondered how it all happened. He served valiantly; he rose to the rank of corporal; he died in action on the battlefield, and years later was brought back home to be buried in the Georgetown Township cemetery. As a youngster, and in my teens, the family ventured out to the Boneburg family gravesite, near Hudsonville, on Memorial Day to plant fresh flowers. It was all very solemn and impressive. Here I was, his namesake, feeling somewhat lost in an ancestral mist of not knowing. I could feel his presence within me, but I needed and desired to know more.



George (right) with his close chum, Lyle Barnaby

The beginning of this journey to discover the answers started without me realizing it. In July of 1978 I married (2nd time) a lady from The Netherlands. Had I not married her, I would have never had the opportunity to pursue these unanswered questions. Throughout the ensuing years, we traveled, for business and personal reasons, somewhat extensively within Europe. It's mighty convenient to travel for both business and personal reasons with a Dutch wife who speaks French, German and Spanish, along with Dutch and English.

In September of 2003 we decided to visit Eastern France to walk the area of the Meuse-Argonne battlegrounds. The Meuse is the river and the Argonne a large area of woods, both located in the Alsace in Eastern France. In preparation for our trip, I contacted the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) in Washington, which is responsible for permanent American Military Battlegrounds abroad. They forwarded me the day-to-day history of the advancement of the troops. They also provided me with the name of the superintendent of the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery, Mr. Joseph P. Rivers. Mr. Rivers became the key for us to unravel this mystery, and he was responsible for our being able to complete our quest.

Corporal George Boneburg was a member of the 126th Infantry, 32nd Division, Company K. He was killed on October 16, 1918, just 26 days prior to Armistice Day on November 11, 1918. The history records state: "History records no more sustained and severe fighting than on this front during October. The highly organized positions of the Germans were defended with desperate tenacity by experienced troops. The bitterness of this fighting is attested by the 27,000 casualties suffered by these American Divisions in the general vicinity of the present location of the Meuse-Argonne cemetery." (From the historic pamphlet *WWI Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery - ABMC*)

The 126th Infantry has an illustrious record. It was organized from units of the Michigan Brigade of National Guard troops. The fighting on the days before and just after Cpl. George Boneburg was killed is noted from the history of the 32nd Division National Guard. The operations map of September 30–October 20, 1918, portrays where the front line was located each day at the end of the fighting.

According to the book *History of the 126th Infantry in World War I, 1917-1919*, the following is stated, "The enemy bombarded our lines with heavy shells causing a number of casualties." This was on the night of October 15 and undoubtedly the morning of the 16th. "The casualties for the day were 12 men killed and 46



LYLE BARNABY & GEORGE BONEBURG

HUDSONVILLE LAID SACRIFICE
LIVES IN FRANCE.

"Corporal George Boneburg and Corporal Horace Barnaby of Hudsonville with the 126th in France are reported as killed on October 16th. Albert Hevinga and John Raterink, friends of the deceased and also Hudsonville boys, write to friends and relatives telling how the boys met death. Corporal Boneburg was shot through the head and died instantly. Corporal Barnaby was shot in both legs, both arms and lungs, and died the next day. Hevinga and Raterink were with Barnaby when he died. During the same battle Raterink was wounded in the hand."

Zeland Record
December 6, 1918

wounded." From Company K, George's Company, there were four men killed and nine men wounded. One of the four was George and another, undoubtedly, Barnaby.

A diarist wrote, "In the Argonne, bodies were not hard to find. Chaplains, both Catholic and Protestant, helped with the work. One man noted, burying a body involved removing and keeping one of the dead man's dog tags and leaving the other on the body. The dead were buried in pits, their bodies covered with blankets (or coats) and then dirt, after which a chaplain offered a prayer and a short sermon."

The 32nd commander, Major General William G. Haan, liked to describe his division as a "fighting machine." The 32nd commander was an insistent disciplinarian who believed in training and did as much of it as was possible. The 32nd came into the line in the Meuse-Argonne on September 30–October 1, 1918. The men went up to the front with an attitude, a combination of competence and "getting the job done."

The 32nd remained in the line longer than most and it included a brilliant attack and capture of Cote Dame Marie with no casualties. This occurred on October 14th. On October 17th, Haan wrote to his commander that the 32nd was exhausted and he did not want to hurt the division's morale by keeping it on the front line. It

had been on the line for 20 days and its regiment reduced to cadres. He went on to write, "No general advance was made on October 16th. The lines were organized for defense. (But) strong combat patrols from the 127th and 126th Infantry Regiment reconnoitered Bois de Bantheville."

The 32nd Division was replaced from within the woods on the night of October 19-20 by the 89th Division. George was killed three days prior to replacement.

During our review and actual tour of the battlefield within the woods of the Bois de Bantheville in August 2006, Joseph Rivers, Superintendent of the Meuse-Argonne Military Cemetery, stated, "Based upon the terrain, your Uncle George was probably on a reconnaissance mission with his Officer to determine the location of the Germans."

Note: Cpl. George Boneburg was killed in the Bois (Forest) de Bantheville, October 16, 1918. How he was killed is still not exactly known. From several different sources, we learned he was shot through the head or he died from shrapnel or from a concussion; "no marks were visible."

According to a report by E. W. Dickerson from the *Grand Rapids Press*, who interviewed soldiers from the front, it was stated, "Lieut. Avery Gilleo of Grand Rapids was in command and was wounded in the right leg by shrapnel. Corp. George Boneburg of Hudsonville was at Lieut. Gilleo's side and killed by the shell which wounded his Commanding Officer."

George was buried in the field, most likely with two other soldiers, as reported on a memorandum dated January 4, 1922. That memorandum also contains survey coordinates. It was those coordinates, plus an old map, which enabled us to locate the approximate location of his grave.

On May 9, 1919, Mrs. Jacob Boneburg (my grandmother) addressed a letter to the government inquiring when her son, Cpl. Boneburg, would be brought here. A telegram was sent to the family on December 3, 1921 notifying them the body would be shipped at government expense, but requesting shipping instructions. These instructions were sent by telegram by Jake Boneburg (my grandfather) on December 5, 1921.

On December 21, 1921, Jake Boneburg acknowledged receipt of the remains of Cpl. George Boneburg. As it was told to me by my mother, Jennie (Boneburg) Griffin, the casket was opened by her father Jacob

Boneburg and another son, Steven, who did confirm identification by his teeth and jaw.



Today, George lies interred in the Georgetown Township Cemetery, Ottawa County, in the family plot.

In August 2006, on our second trip to the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery, we arranged for a meeting with the cemetery superintendent, Mr. Joseph P. Rivers. With a large smile he said to us "Mr. and Mrs. Griffin, I have wonderful news for you. With a very old obsolete map of the area and using your coordinates from Washington, we have identified where your uncle was buried from October 1918 until September 1921." Months prior to our arrival I had forwarded to Mr. Rivers the coordinates I discovered from Cpl. Boneburg's military file.

It was a gray day, very rainy and wet. Mr. Rivers provided us with boots. We drove old lumber roads still used today, which date back to WWI. We stopped in a fire clearing and began to walk through the woods, Mr. Rivers studying his handheld Global Positioning System (GPS). There were old shell holes in the ground all

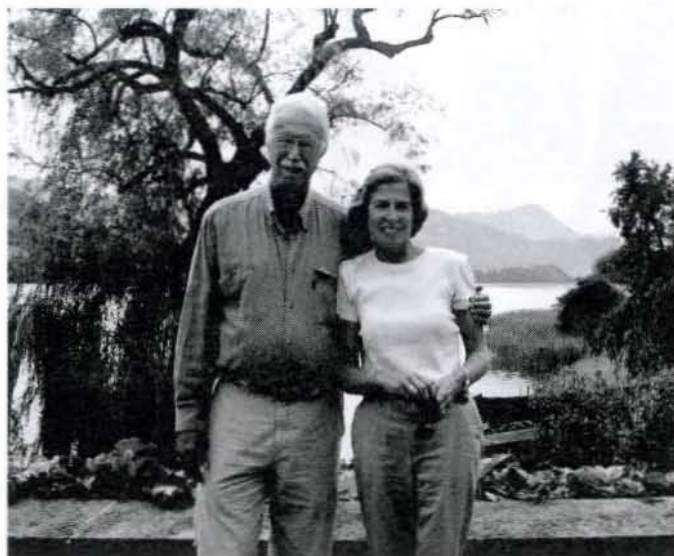
around us. At a particular point we stopped as Mr. Rivers read the GPS and announced "Mr. Griffin, it is here within a few yards, where your uncle was buried and he was undoubtedly killed by the burst of one of the shells when it exploded." We were thrilled and excited. We stood in the nearest shell hole and Mr. Rivers snapped our photo standing alongside his Aide-de-Camp. This was on August 29, 2006.

After all these years of wondering how, when and where, we felt closure! On behalf of all of the Boneburgs, my mother, my grandparents, my cousins and for George himself, I was standing in the place, in France, where he fell.

He has always been my hero, a valiant, brave soldier, who did his duty to protect his country and he paid the supreme sacrifice. George lives on. I will forever be grateful for this young man from Hudsonville. He was my Uncle George and I am his namesake, Michael George (Boneburg) Griffin. Finally, I dedicate this quest to my son, Michael George Griffin of Salt Lake City, Utah. After I am gone,

George's name will live on through my son. Let us hope that this memorial will be read and studied for years to come.

George Boneburg's name is honored on one of the plaques placed on one of the pylons of the War Memorial located in Fulton Park downtown Grand Rapids. Likewise, he is listed on the Roll of Honor, First Christian Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan, of which he is a charter member (Gerrit Boonenberg). George's name is also inscribed on the World War I monument in Central Park in Grand Haven, Michigan. His name there is listed as George Boenburg.



SPECIAL MERITS OF APPRECIATION

My wife of 31 years, Maria Astrid (Verhoef) Griffin, a Dutch national who became an American citizen on October 29, 2009. Astrid supported me with intense interest throughout this pilgrimage, which included three trips to the Meuse-Argonne battlefields in France, 2003, 2006 and 2008. She is computer literate, whose talents without would have left this project hopeless!

My cousin Karen Flack of Ashtabula, Ohio. Karen is the daughter of Louise (Boneburg) Witte. Louise was a sister to my mother, Jennie (Boneburg) Griffin, and therefore both were sisters of George Boneburg. Karen is fastidious with her determination to flush out information regarding the Boneburg genealogy. She writes letters and gets results.

Donald Jager of Grandville, Michigan. Don is a distant cousin. He descends from Gerrit Schuitema, whose wife Grietje (Eibrink) Schuitema produced two sons, Albert and Henry, prior to Gerrit's passing. Then, Grietje married Jan Bonenberg. Don therefore is related to the Boneburgs as descending from Schuitema, a stepson, who was Albert (Bert) Schuitema. Both families immigrated as one in 1867. They settled near Forest Grove, Jamestown Township, Michigan.

Don has an insatiable appetite for his genealogy with both the Schuitemas and the Bonenbergs. He also has great computer skills. He has gathered much material. Don also produced a paper on George Boneburg for the Hudsonville Library, some of it reproduced here.



War Memorial Plaque
Grand Rapids



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