BENJAMIN WILLIAM STEWART

RESEARCHED BY: Chris Stewart

DATE OF BIRTH
October 5, 1896

DATE OF DEATH
February 1, 1986

HOMETOWN
Golden Valley, Minnesota

ENTERED THE MILITARY
December 14, 1917

BRANCH OF SERVICE
U.S. Army

UNIT
3rd Division, 7th Infantry Regiment, Company M

RANK
Corporal

CEMETERY
Section P-1, Site 3612
Fort Snelling National Cemetery
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BEFORE THE WAR

Hannibal, Missouri was first settled in the early 1800s along the western bank of the Mississippi River as an important offloading point for river steamboats that connected small local economies. Over the next 50 years, Hannibal’s population expanded sixfold as the city prospered due to the booming lumber industry. By the early 1900s other industries began to grow as well.

During this time of transition, two families of modest means called Hannibal home. Robert Stewart, a local carpenter, and his wife, Lorane, had three sons: Chester, Rolla, and Ben. Walter and Augusta Griffen and their five children moved to Hannibal from Kansas, and created the Yankee Produce Company, a vegetable and flower greenhouse located just blocks away from the Mississippi River.

In 1905, when Robert Stewart passed away, the Stewart family relied on its sons for support. The eldest, Chester, began work as a railroad office clerk while his brothers continued their education. By the time the United States mobilized in preparation to enter the conflict in Europe, Rolla was studying medicine near Hannibal and Chester had moved to Minneapolis to teach at the University of Minnesota medical school. The youngest of the Stewarts, Ben, worked as a welder on the Hannibal railroads after his graduation from Hannibal High School in 1916. He also worked at the local flower shop, Griffen’s Flowers, where he discovered his passion for floristry and for his future wife, the youngest Griffen daughter, Alta.
Within a year, the war disrupted the trajectory of both of these families. In the Stewart family, Rolla was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1917 while Ben volunteered for service that same year after hearing that there was a need for welders. On December 14, 1917, he was inducted and entered service at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, a large training and recruitment center for soldiers from across the midwest. Before leaving Hannibal, he married Alta on October 6, 1917.

**MILITARY EXPERIENCE**

**TRAINING & EMBARKATION**

After his enlistment, Ben Stewart reported to Camp Grant, Illinois. When Stewart arrived along with more than 20,000 other men, he was classified under the administration of the 161st Depot Brigade while awaiting assignment to a specific unit. In February 1918, he was assigned as a motor mechanic for a casual company associated with the Signal Corps. During this time, casual detachments and companies were considered temporary units used for the purpose of organizing personnel who were awaiting permanent assignment or discharge.

As a result of the United States’ desire to retain its neutrality prior to its declaration of war on Germany, the conscription, training, equipping, and mobilization of military personnel was delayed and disorganized. The demands of General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) on the Western Front, to maintain full American control over its forces placed further stress on the effort. Large scale deployment was not feasible until 1918 despite the AEF allowing Americans soldiers to be temporarily embedded into French and British units on the Western Front.

On March 27, 1918, Stewart’s work experience as a welder was put aside as a result of the emergent need for an American mobilization, and he was assigned to the 3rd Infantry Division, 7th Infantry Regiment, Company M. He reported to Camp Hancock near Augusta, Georgia, for additional training and then to Camp Merritt, New Jersey, for embarkation. In early April, his unit set sail on the USS *America* for Brest, France, where he was promoted to the non-commissioned officer rank of corporal for Company M. By May 13, the 3rd Division was at full strength, with Companies L and M stationed at Vaudrémont, France.
ON THE FRONT

In March 1918, German forces began their Spring Offensive, pushing deep into Allied territory along the Lys, Somme, Oise, Aise, and Marne Rivers with the objective to capture Paris and force peace. On May 30, the 3rd Division mobilized to aid in the defense of Château-Thierry, arriving on the front shortly before Germans captured the key village on June 1. Stewart and the 3rd Division were assigned to the south bank of the Marne River to the east of Château-Thierry to prevent any further German advance that occupied the north bank.

For the first week of June, the 3rd Battalion of the 7th Infantry Regiment, including Company M, protected the line from Chierry to Mézy, seeing little action. Due to the lack of German offensive movements in this sector, the 7th Infantry Regiment was detached to aid elsewhere in the Château-Thierry sector from June 15 to 30, 1918 in Belleau Wood.

The area surrounding Belleau Wood, located a few miles northwest of Château-Thierry, was contested for much of June 1918. In the first week of fighting, the U.S. Marines 4th Brigade established its tenacious reputation as the “teufel hunden” or “devil dogs,” a moniker supposedly given for their refusal to retreat from the woods despite severe casualties. When the 7th Infantry relieved the 4th Marine Brigade on June 15, they were ordered to hold the line and eliminate remaining German forces near the wood.

On June 17, the 3rd Battalion joined the rest of the 7th Infantry Regiment to cover a three-mile stretch from Bouresches northwest to Torcy. In the first offensive action of the war for the 7th Infantry Regiment, the men could not successfully dislodge a 400 man German machine gun nest despite three attacks over several days. On June 23, after suffering 349 casualties, 51 of whom were killed in action, the Marines relieved the 7th Infantry Regiment.

Despite their losses, the German General Headquarters positively assessed the 3rd Division: “The raid in the Belleau Wood was carried out with audacity. The Division is to be considered altogether as a good one, whose fighting value will increase with wider experience in warfare.” Belleau Wood was cleared within days, and the focus shifted again to the action along the Marne River.

VICTIM OF A GAS ATTACK

In the final phase of the Spring Offensive, the German Army targeted the Champagne-Marne to the east of Château-Thierry and developed plans to cross the Marne River by mid-July. French XXXVIII Corps’ General de Mondésir called for a defense of the Marne “with one foot in the water,” as any attempt by the German forces to cross would have to be done in small, disorganized units over foot bridges or in small boats.

On July 2, commanders of the 7th Infantry Regiment positioned Company M and K along a railroad line south of the river where the unit saw little action through July 14. New intelligence reports forewarned of a coming German advance southward, an attack that commenced just after midnight on July 15. German artillery launched a mixture of high explosives, gas, and shrapnel shells for nearly eight hours. Under this cover, Germany infantry
crossed the river in small groups and established 12 different temporary bridges in the 3rd Division’s sector. Major W. M. Somervall, the 3rd Division’s gas officer, reported after-action tallies of the bombardment:

“A count of shell holes in the shelled area indicates that about 1000 gas shells per square kilometer were used during the first three hours of the bombardment...Gas discipline in the various units was excellent...Respirators were quickly adjusted, men kept cool, and in spite of intense shelling with gas...the actual casualties were few.”

During this German advance, an artillery gas shell landed amongst Company M near Stewart. Years later, Stewart reported to his family that the explosion of the shell knocked him to the ground and dislodged his gas mask. Although he survived with only slight injuries, he reported suffering the effects of shellshock and gas on his discharge papers.

The larger battle for the Marne continued for three days. Company M defended a high ground in front of the Bois d’Aigremont, while counter attacks were launched to re-secure the territory taken by the German offensive. Despite heavy losses, the 7th Infantry Regiment regained their territory along the Marne over the next day and patrols looking German resistance found none. By the morning of July 17, General Joseph Dickman, commander of the 3rd Division, reported confidently that “on the front of the 3rd Division there are no Germans south of the Marne, except the dead.”

Relief of the 7th Infantry west of Moulins, 1918. U.S. Army Center of Military History.
Between July 15-17, the 3rd Division endured a total of 3,151 casualties (606 killed in action), 730 of which came from the 7th Infantry Regiment. Lieutenant H. L. White, Company M’s commanding officer, reported:

“We have been under heavy shell fire...since the night of the 14th, and have had nothing to eat or drink, nor have we had any sleep since that time. My men were exhausted...but were there ready to receive [the Germans] when they arrived. This regiment has not only held its ground, which it was told to hold at all costs, but it has even taken over ground that was not expected of it...I consider the action of this shell-torn and gas-shattered regiment most commendable, even deserving of the highest praise.”

The successful defense by the 3rd Division set the stage for the massive Allied counterattack on July 18 in which Château-Thierry was retaken. For their stalwart defense of the front, the 3rd Division earned the title the “Rock of the Marne.” On July 21, elements of the 3rd Division crossed the Marne River at Mézy, Fossoy, and Chierry in pursuit of German forces. By the end of the month, the focus of the AEF campaign shifted to preparations for future offensive actions and the 3rd Division saw no time on the front lines until early September.

It is unclear how long Stewart remained with his unit after his injury and if he was removed from active duty, as no records of hospitalization were found. The 3rd Division would go on to fight at the heart of the AEF’s rapid drive northward in the final phase of the war in the Meuse-Argonne through late October 1918. By March 1919, while his comrades were stationed along the Rhine River, Stewart had returned home. On January 20, 1919, Stewart boarded the USS Connecticut in Brest and sailed to Camp Merritt, New Jersey. He arrived on February 2, 1919, and was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army from Camp Dodge, Iowa, on February 18, 1919.

Armistice Anniversary Parade in Hannibal, Missouri in November 1919. Courtesy of the Stewart Family.
VETERAN EXPERIENCE

Nearly 2,000 Missourians did not return home with Stewart after the war and more than 11,000 war casualties were reported for the state. Stewart returned to Hannibal and worked at Griffen’s Flowers with his wife’s family. Over the next six years, the Stewarts had three sons: William, Donald, and Raymond. In 1926, Ben and Alta purchased a plot of land in Golden Valley, Minnesota, which was advertised as including both a house and a small greenhouse on the property.

The family made ends meet by driving to Minneapolis each day to sell produce and flowers at the local farmer’s market. The floral industry in the 1920s Minneapolis-St.Paul area was quite competitive.

In the 1930s both the Stewart family and their floral business expanded. They added a fourth son, Joseph, officially opened the Stewart Flower Gardens, and added a retail space, the Minnetonka Flower Shop, in nearby Wayzata, Minnesota. By 1938, Stewart was a well-recognized local business figure. The Golden Valley Planning Commission named him to a local committee of florists and tasked him with planting large sections of lilac bushes in public parks and along major roads in the area for an annual festival.

In the 1940s, the three eldest Stewart sons were drafted into service to fight in World War II. Sergeant William Stewart, Staff Sergeant Donald Stewart, and Private First Class Raymond Stewart all survived the conflict. Despite their shared experience in combat, their father rarely ever spoke with his sons about his experiences in World War I. On occasion, he complained about how his breathing was affected as a result of the gas attack he suffered in 1918. In 1949, all four sons became financial partners in the floral business and the next generation of Stewarts modernized it by connecting phone lines, cementing sidewalks, and installing automatic watering systems.
Benjamin and Alta became the proud grandparents of eight grandchildren and spent their summers fishing at their lake home on Lake Minnetonka, travelling to new destinations, and enjoying camping weekends. In the 1960s, Stewart transitioned to retirement, relinquishing his financial share of the floral business to his three eldest sons in 1963, and selling many parcels of the original property he purchased in Golden Valley. In 1986, Stewart passed away at age 89. His wife of nearly 70 years followed him just five years later.

**COMMEMORATION**

After his passing, Stewart was buried in Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minneapolis, Minnesota, just miles from the historic military fort established in 1805. Administered by the National Cemetery Administration of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the cemetery is the resting place for more than 225,000 service members and their families. Today, Stewart’s wife, brother, and three veteran sons are all buried at Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

For their service in World War I, the 3rd Division is recognized with an obelisk and plaque at Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. In Château-Thierry, the “heroic deeds of the Third Infantry Division, U.S. Army, World War I” are remembered with a large, public memorial at the center of town.

*Above:* Stewart’s grave at Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2018. Courtesy of the Stewart Family.

In Hannibal, Missouri, the Service Mothers of World War II constructed a large memorial honoring more than 5,000 soldiers from the surrounding area who served in either world war.

In 2018, an extensive restoration project of the eight cast aluminum plaques displayed at the Hannibal memorial, on which Stewart’s name is included, was completed. In 2019, in conjunction with Hannibal’s bicentennial celebration, resident service members will be honored on photo banners displayed on lampposts throughout the town from Memorial Day through Veterans Day. The Hannibal Parks and Recreation Department is also considering plans for an additional memorial to Hannibal veterans.
PROFILE: BENJAMIN WILLIAM STEWART

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Stewart Family Photographs. 2018. Courtesy of Christopher Stewart.


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