

War dead have tales to tell

Vancouver Barracks U.S. Army Post Cemetery brings military history alive



Vivian Johnson

The Musicians Monument at the Vancouver Barracks U.S. Army Post Cemetery honors a group of soldiers and musicians killed during the Battle of the Clearwater in 1877. Their unit, the 21st Infantry, took heavy casualties in the battle against the Nez Perce.

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Vancouver Barracks Post Cemetery



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The broken pillar marking the grave of Maj. William Kelly is part of a Greek tradition and style that was adopted by other cultures in the 1800s. The pillar represents a life, with the broken top marking where that life came to an end, said Maj. Jeff Davis, chairman of the Vancouver Barracks Military Association.



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There are hundreds of stories to tell as you walk amongst the markers at the Vancouver Barracks U.S. Army Post Cemetery. Each stone represents a life.

Something in the distance made Maj. Jeff Davis pause in mid-sentence as he stood amid the markers at the Vancouver Barracks U.S. Army Post Cemetery.

“Hey, I think I see Capt. Western,” he said, walking off as if to meet an old friend. “Hold on, I’ll be right back.”

Davis strolled across a few neatly ordered cemetery rows then stopped in front of a large white gravestone under a tree.

The occupant, Capt. C.B. Western, 14th Infantry, died on June 10, 1890 — but Davis had a story about him at the ready.

“He got into a somewhat famous duel with a surgeon,” said Davis, who is chairman of the Vancouver Barracks Military Association. “Western was defending a lady’s honor. The two got into a gunfight and the surgeon lost his little finger, and Western got shot through the collarbone, I believe.”

The Web archive Ghostcowboy.com has an old newspaper account with a little more information about the fight.

According to a story dated March 27, 1880, Western did not fare well in the “street duel” against Dr. Lecompte in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Planning a Memorial Day visit

No events are scheduled for the Vancouver Barracks U.S. Army Post Cemetery over Memorial Day weekend, but visitors are encouraged to drop by and pay their respects to the veterans buried there.

For more information about the site, check out its [website](#).

“Both officers were wounded, and it is thought that Capt. Western will not recover. If he does, he will be unfit for service in the Army, as his left arm is so badly shattered that he will not have the use of it,” it reads.

But the joke was on the writer.

“Not only did he survive, but he was able to stay in the Army,” Davis said. “Although one of his arms was several inches shorter afterwards.”

Sharing stories

There’s something to say about each one of the 1,400 or so graves in the cemetery — even the mysterious ones in the back rows marked “unknown.”

“Each gravestone is a story, just like their lives — and there are hundreds of stories and lives here,” Davis said.

The heart-shaped cemetery, established in 1882, is the final resting spot for four Medal of Honor recipients, hundreds of soldiers and their family members, Army musicians, a handful of civilians and even a few foreign prisoners of war.

Some of their lives were profoundly heroic, and others profoundly human, said Bill Schell, who manages the grounds.

One soldier that comes to mind, M. John Charles (Jr.), was accidentally shot to death by his companion in 1849, according to his marker. “It’s sad, but it’s also like wow, that’s unusual to have that on a grave,” Schell said.

The Medal of Honor recipients also have their share of mysteries and tales.

First Sgt. James M. Hill, who fought with the 5th U.S. Cavalry in the Indian Campaigns, got his medal for action at Turret Mountain, Ariz., on March 25, 1873.

Hill, who died in 1919, has only a vague, brief citation for “gallantry in action” listed — and not much else is known about him, Davis said.

“If he was cited for gallantry he must have done something extraordinary,” Davis said. “Those were very rough battles.”

A lot more is known about Medal of Honor recipient Moses Williams, a Buffalo Soldier in the 9th Cavalry who also fought in the Indian Campaigns. He was cited for his actions on Aug. 16, 1881, when he saved the lives of at least three other soldiers by holding an exposed position with his commanding officer under heavy fire.

“Later on he became an ordnance sergeant,” Davis said. “That was a very important job. They’re the ones that made sure all the gunpowder and bullets worked.”

The other two Medal of Honor recipients, Herman Pfisterer, a musician in the 21st U.S. Infantry, and William W. McCammon, a first lieutenant in the 24th Missouri Infantry, apparently knew each other.

Pfisterer, who Davis thinks was a bugle player, was cited for rescuing wounded soldiers from a Spanish American War battlefield at Santiago, Cuba, on July 1, 1898.

McCammon, who at the time was a provost marshal, was cited for his actions on Oct. 3, 1862, when he assumed command of his company in a Civil War battle in Corinth, Miss., and continued to lead his unit to hold their ground under heavy fire until the enemy retreated the next day.

Though McCammon was much older than Pfisterer, the two were in the same infantry regiment for a few years near the end of McCammon's service, Davis said.

"Oh yeah, they would certainly have known each other," Davis said. "I don't know that that's ever happened before — having two Medal of Honor recipients in the same unit."

Another interesting stone in the cemetery marks what Davis calls the "Musicians Monument."

That stone lists five soldiers: Cpl. Charles Carlin, Cpl. James Doyle, Musician John G. Heinemann, Pvt. Charles Clarke and Pvt. Alson Compton, all of the 21st Infantry.

The soldiers were killed in action at the Battle of the Clearwater on July 11, 1877, during the Indian Campaigns. The grassy landscape near the monument seems too small to fit five graves, so the group was probably either buried near the battlefield or in other military cemeteries, Davis said.

And while they all aren't noted as musicians on the stone, Davis said he's fairly certain they all played instruments for the Army.

"In the battle there was a spot where the Army had set up several cannon, and the Nez Perce attacked that area and killed the musicians," Davis said. "Whether they were there playing or doing support activities at the time is unclear."

The group was probably made up of drummers and fifers, he added.

"Musicians got paid a little bit extra, because they were skilled professionals," Davis said. "Their duties were different depending on what unit they were in. In the cavalry, musicians learned to play on horseback. They were often used to keep the march."

As for all the graves marked "unknown" near the back of the cemetery, most were moved from two other graveyards many years ago. The older sites used many wooden markers, which had deteriorated over time, Davis said.

Also near the back are a few stones from Italian and German prisoners of war who were captured and brought to Vancouver during World War II.

"When we took prisoners, we brought some of them back to the U.S.," Davis said. "They were kept at Vancouver Barracks or Camp Bonneville, and they stayed there until the end of the war, when they were repatriated. But some of them died before they could go back, and they were buried here."

Paying respects

It might seem a little strange to leave flowers or a flag on the grave of a soldier who died more than 100 years ago, or a soldier who you have no personal connection with, but both Davis and Schell said it's something they'd love to see more of.

“We absolutely encourage that — it's especially nice when young people find a connection to those that have served our country,” Schell said.

Families of those who were buried at the site more recently, including the many World War II and Korean War veterans placed there in recent years, are often glad to see roses or other small items placed as a sign of respect, Davis said.

“On Veterans Day there were some women who went and put roses on every grave here — and I thought that was pretty neat,” said Davis, who has several veterans from his own family interred in the nearby Catholic cemetery.

Another way to pay respects is to place a small stone on top of a grave marker. The practice started as a Jewish tradition, but it has spread to become more mainstream for all religions and beliefs, Davis said.

“I think it's kind of cool,” Davis said.