Puptent Poets

By Jamie Eves • December 6, 2022

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On Memorial Day weekend in 2019, while picking up litter with the Willimantic Trash Mob along Bridge Street, I found two leaves from a 1945 book, . I had not known about this book before I found this small piece of it, but have since found out that the full title was , and that it featured poems written by American GIs serving in the Mediterranean Sea campaigns of World War II. *Stars and Stripes*, the official United States military newspaper, ran "Puptent Poets" as a regular column, and encouraged ordinary soldiers to submit their work. The poems were of uneven quality, but the point was that the editors of *Stars and Stripes* didn't view soldiers as warriors only, but as human beings with feelings and thoughts and ideas and emotions, and thought that it might be good to encourage soldiers to express themselves in poetry. Hundred of them did. The poems in the book were culled from the column by Cpl. Charles A. Hogan and Cpl. John Welsh III. (Welsh went on to become a professional writer after the war; Hogan did not.) Lt. Ed Hill edited the book, and illustrations were provided by Stanley Metzoff — an important enough artist that he has a (brief) entry in Wikipedia. Why were two pages from this long out-of-print book tucked under a tussock of grass in a park near the old stone bridge over the Willimantic River?

One leaf was the inside flyleaf of the book, which bore the inscription of the GI who had owned it. PFC Robert L. Lecomte (31400930) had acquired *Puptent Poets* in 1945, the year it was published. On July 6, 1945, to be exact, in Rome Italy. Who was Robert Lecomte, and did he have any connection to Connecticut?

As it turns out, he did. Having his serial number, it was possible to trace Lecomte online. As he himself wrote on the flyleaf, he was part of Battery B of the 604th Field Artillery Battalion, a part of the 25th Artillery Regiment of the United States Army, stationed in Italy. He enlisted at Portland, Maine, in 1944, and mustered out in 1946, shortly after the end of World War II. Lecomte's obituary — published in 2014 in the *Norwich Bulletin* — contained further information. Lecomte was born in 1926 in Westbrook, Maine, an old textile mill city (much like Norwich, and a bit bigger than Willimantic) located just west of Portland, Maine's largest city. His family hailed from Minot, Maine, a rural town adjacent to Lewiston, another textile mill city. Lecomte was of French Canadian descent, like so many others who lived in New England's scores of textile mill towns, the son of Eugende Lecomte and Hazel Landry. He was discharged with the rank of Sergeant. He returned to Maine, and in 1950 married Glenna Verrill in Portland. Shortly after, Robert and Glenna moved to Connecticut, where Robert took a job with Electric Boat. Robert Lecomte was a resident of Quaker Hill, CT, when he died in 2014. He worked for EB for 30 years as a rigger. How two pages from a book he bought in 1945 made their way to a park in Willimantic five years after his death is a mystery.

Lecomte, Hogan, Welsh, Hill, and Metzoff all survived the war, but many others didn't, and it is those who we honor on Memorial Day. And not surprisingly, the dead were also much on the minds of the GIs who wrote poems for *Puptent Poets*, and probably on the minds of readers like Lecomte, as well. Some of the poems described everyday life in the U.S. Army. Some were humorous. Some were romantic. Some were crude. But a lot of them — the best of them — focused on fallen comrades. In authentic (if sometimes strained) cadences, the poets remembered the dead. Grieving that World War II had followed so closely World War I — that the sacrifices of the earlier war's soldiers seemed to have been in vain — Pvt. Jack Nantell penned "Hatred's Yield":

“I’ve seen ‘the crosses row on row,’ / I’ve seen the graves at Anzio. / In Flanders fields men cannot sleep — / Their faith, the world found hard to keep. / Versailles’ fate was slyly sealed / Before earth’s gaping wounds had healed. / And now again rows of crosses / Mutely tell of nations’ losses. / In how many fields, / In how many lands / Will soldiers die by soldiers’ hands? / Until at long last mankind yields / To truth and reason’s studied choice / Ignoring hatred’s strident voice.”

Another amateur poet, Lt. Winifred Cochran, of the Army Nursing Corps, wrote about a pilot killed in aerial combat. Was the pilot in her poem, “Tremendous Wings,” a patient? A friend? “Ablaze in a man-made hell,” Cochran wrote, “I think you smiled a saddened smile / At the tiny distance you fell.”

Immigrants and children of immigrants, mill workers and children of mill workers, women and men, poets and readers of poetry — the United States Army in World War II represented a broad and diverse nation. Not all soldiers survived. But their comrades carried their memories. And somehow, borne on some wind, a piece of those memories blew into a grassy field in a park in Willimantic.