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Lost in WWII, soldier comes home

JAY PRICE, Staff Writer

Bill Burkett can't remember - he was only 3 months old - but his older sisters, Gladys and Katherine, can't forget the tall man framed in the door with the telegram, and their mother standing there, speechless.

Their father, Pvt. Lawrence P. Burkett, 28, was missing in action somewhere in Germany. It was December 1944.

Even after the Army amended Burkett's status in 1945 to "killed in action," they hoped he'd come home one day. But gradually, as the years drifted by without any word, they began to believe that he had been killed and would never come home to Ashe County.

They were half right.

Tuesday, the three Burkett children and Bill's wife, Jean, made the long drive down from the mountains to meet their father's casket at Raleigh-Durham International Airport. Bill is 62, Katherine Burkett Gentry is 70 and Gladys Burkett Shatley is 72.

It was a bittersweet day, said Bill Burkett. They found it hard not to wonder what life might have been like had their father come home alive.

Their mother, Dora, who died in 1994, never remarried.

"For a long time, she thought he might come home," Bill Burkett said. "There was nobody for her but him."

The Burketts have lived for generations in the mountains along the far northwestern corner of the state. Lawrence Burkett's father, Dave, was a justice of the peace, a county jailer and a farmer. Lawrence grew up to become a carpenter, and his daughters remember that he was often gone a week at a time on jobs, not a surprising thing given how remote Ashe County was in those days, with nearly all its roads dirt.

They raised pigs and chickens and, like most of their neighbors, tended a big garden.

He was a kind man, his daughters said. He loved fishing the mountain streams and ponds, and hunting for raccoons, deer and bear. He was famous throughout the county for his singing voice. On Sundays, his bass was the foundation of the choir at Friendship Baptist Church, soaring through gospels such as "I'll Fly Away."

In April 1944, he was drafted into the Army, and he shipped out that fall for Europe with the 90th Infantry Division. Bill Burkett was just 5 days old when his dad left, and in the handful of cards and letters that made their way home, it was clear that his father was thinking about him.



Daughters Gladys Burkett Shatley, Katherine Burkett Gentry, son Bill Burkett and his wife, Jean, pay their respects at the casket of Pvt. Lawrence Burkett, who was killed in action in Germany in 1944.

Staff Photos by Ethan Hyman

The young soldier asked his daughters to look out for their mom and for Bill, and he even sent the infant his own letter in a messy handwriting that Bill apparently inherited.

"Be a good boy," he wrote.

Then 90th Infantry got a hard assignment: breaching Germany's defenses near the city of Saarbrücken just over the border from France. His unit had pushed across the frigid Saar River and was defending a bridge near the town of Dillingen when the Germans attacked on Dec. 10, trying to force the Americans back over the river toward France. The next day, a fellow soldier saw Burkett get hit, but the fighting was so fierce the man couldn't get to him. Later he did, and said that the body was cold.

By then, Burkett's regiment had lost so many men that fewer than half could fight. The battle was so intense, though, that there was no time to recover the body, and the U.S. soldiers had to move out of the area.

As the years stretched on, Dora Burkett and the children kept hoping the Army was wrong, but gradually they came to believe that he had died.

With the modest government benefits and later with a job at a school cafeteria, Dora Burkett raised the children on her own, filling in the rough patches with harvests from the family garden.

"She could make a dollar go a long way," her son said. "We didn't lack for anything, but we didn't have a lot of extravagant things, either."

There are more than 78,000 U.S. troops still missing from World War II, more than the total number killed in Vietnam, but many of the lost are being still being recovered. In 2006, members of a German group dedicated to recovering war dead found some shell fragments with a metal detector and started digging. Deeper in the ground were bones and dog tags that said "Burkett."

An American team arrived in September, accepted the remains and dog tags and conducted a recovery effort, similar to an archaeological dig. In 12 days of careful digging, they found more remains and bits of U.S. military gear from the era.

The remains and artifacts were taken to the military lab in Hawaii for identification, and oral swabs were taken from two of Burkett's cousins to aid in DNA testing. March 30 of this year, the Army gave the Burkett siblings the news, and they finally allowed themselves to believe their father had been found.

Gladys quickly agreed to give up the burial plot beside her mother, and they began planning the service. But first they had to come down to Raleigh to meet Delta Flight 402.

An honor guard from the N.C. National Guard, a casualty assistance officer from Fort Bragg and a group of volunteers from the United Service Organizations gathered at the USO office at the airport, then filed over to the gate and down some stairs to the apron. The pilot, J.C. Porter, and co-pilot, Dave Sandstrom, joined the soldiers in a salute as the flag-covered coffin emerged from the cargo hold. As the coffin reached the bottom of the conveyor, the three siblings and Jean Burkett walked up and pressed their palms to it and held each other. The siblings, like their mother so many years ago when the telegram came, were unable to talk.

Above, passengers lined the glass wall of the terminal, some taking photos and video.

Then the honor guard eased the coffin into a white hearse and held a salute until it drove out of sight behind the plane. Their hands came down, and Lawrence Burkett was officially home. He will be buried Saturday at the church where he lent his bass voice to the choir, and where his wife still waits for him after all these years.

As the hearse drove away, the Burkett siblings put up their cameras, accepted handshakes and hugs, then climbed back up the stairs into the terminal building.

Inside, more than 200 Delta passengers burst into applause. The clapping continued until they had all passed, the honor guard, the USO team and, on legs stiffened by age, the three children who finally had their daddy back.

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N.C. soldier's remains return after 63 years

The Associated Press

JEFFERSON - The body of an Army private killed in World War II is returning to North Carolina after volunteers found his remains near the border of Germany and France.

Lawrence Burkett was 28 when he died in 1944. The Ashe County native will be buried in his church cemetery this weekend in Jefferson, a small town north of Boone.

His wife, Dora, died in 1994, never knowing what happened to her husband's body.

"I think (she) really thought Daddy would come back (alive)," said Gladys Shatley, who was 10 years old the day her father left for the war. Her sister, Katherine, was 7, and their brother, Bill, was 5 days old.

German volunteers searching for missing soldiers last year found Burkett's remains and dog tags near the Siegfried Line, a series of war defenses built by German forces. The U.S. military's Central Identification Laboratory used mouth swabs from two cousins to confirm DNA results that proved the identity of the remains.

Burkett was on sentry duty in the early morning of Dec. 11, 1944, as German troops attacked with mortar shells from the north and northeast as they tried to repel advancing allied forces. Burkett's family said another soldier saw Burkett get hit and later found the soldier cold to the touch.

But after several more days of fighting, the military couldn't find Burkett's body. He was one of 30 U.S. soldiers missing after the battle. There are more than 78,000 service members still missing from World War II.

Burkett had worked as a carpenter, mainly building homes, in the 1930s and 1940s. He also raised pigs and chickens, and he sang in the Friendship Baptist Church choir and played in a quartet.

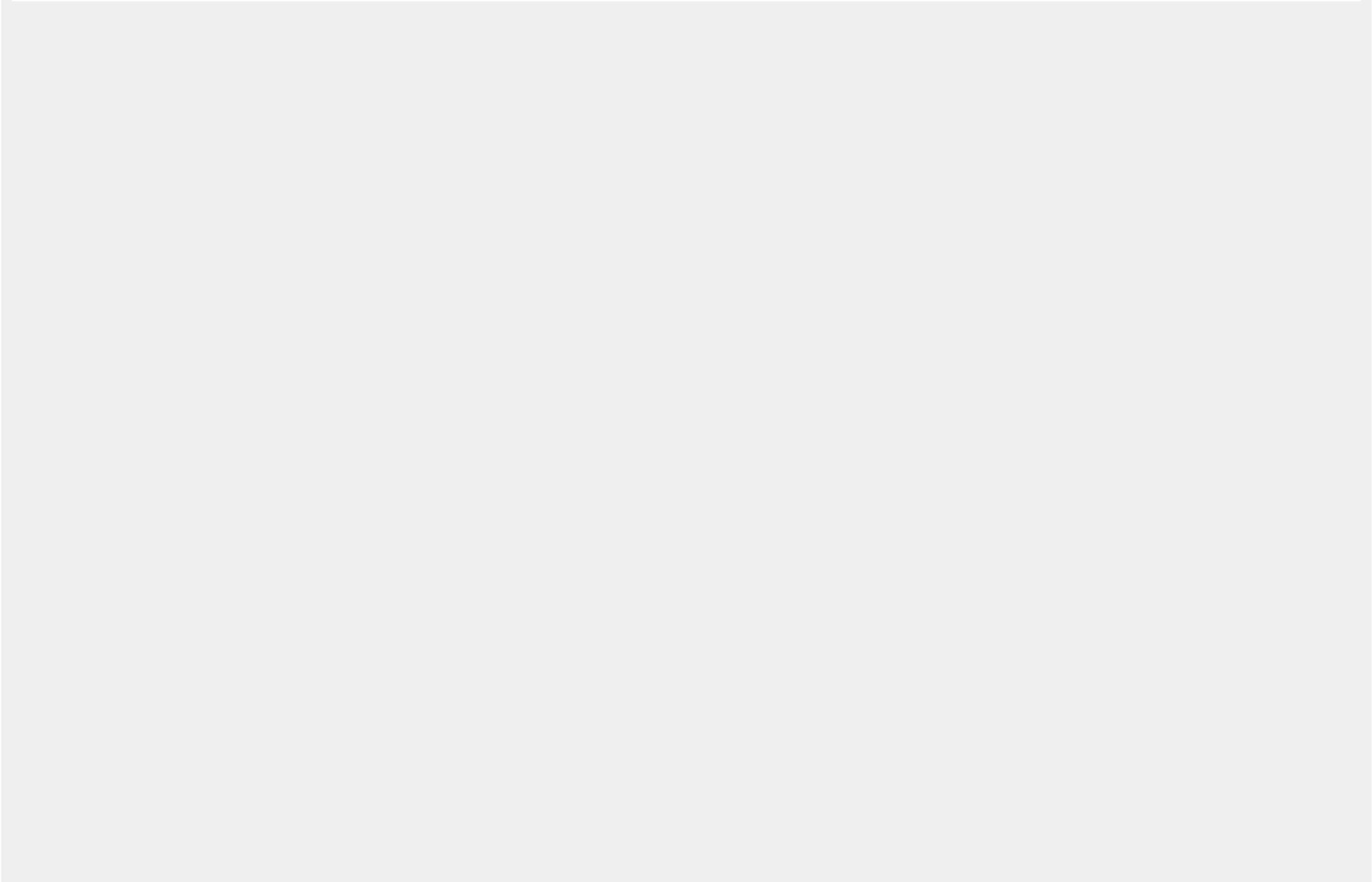
While Burkett's children say they are thrilled that their father is coming home, the experience has been painful and stirred up a past they thought was settled.

"I've heard about my daddy all these years, and you think about what would it have been like if he were here," said Burkett's son, Bill.

Information from: Winston-Salem Journal, <http://www.journalnow.com>

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Staff Photos by Ethan Hyman

Daughters Gladys Burkett Shatley, Katherine Burkett Gentry, son Bill Burkett and his wife, Jean, pay their respects at the casket of Pvt. Lawrence Burkett, who was killed in action in Germany in 1944.

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Pvt. Lawrence P. Burkett

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A military honors team of the N.C. National Guard carries the casket of Pvt. Lawrence Burkett to a hearse after its flight to Raleigh-Durham International Airport. The remains will be buried in the family plot in Western North Carolina.

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