

## Milam County W.W.I Soldier's Identification Returns Home Kyle Schiller Barrett

Pvt. First Class Oliver H. Lankford, a U.S. soldier, who served in World War I, was posthumously responsible for an impromptu gathering at the Milam County Courthouse on Monday afternoon. County Judge Bill Whitmire hosted a small gathering in his office as a once lost "dog tag" from 1918 was given to the Milam County Historical Commission and the Milam County Historical Museum. County officials attending this meeting included District Judge John Youngblood, District Attorney Bill Torrey, Historical Commission Chairman Holly Bonorden Jentsch, Museum Director Kyle Barrett, and Veteran's Services Reps. Alan and Crystal Smith. This group welcomed Genevieve Mathieu, visiting from Grapevine, Texas. Ms. Mathieu quietly walked into the county courthouse holding an envelope with a European postmark and containing a once lost, well-traveled piece of Milam County History.

Oliver H. Lankford was born in Guntersville, Alabama, July 18, 1891. He was the youngest of seven children. His parents Robert and Mary Lankford moved their family to Texas in 1895. Beginning at age four, Oliver grew up in Milam County and family lived in Gause. Sadly, his mother died when he was only seven years old. As an adult, he worked as a farm laborer in Milam County until he was called to serve in WW I. He was sent to France in March 1918. Assigned to the US Army Third Division hospital unit, Lankford drove a mule drawn supply wagon. His division saw heavy fighting as they moved across France near the end of WW I. One fateful day, October 4, 1918, Pvt. Lankford's supply wagon was hit by a stray shell during a major artillery bombardment, and he was killed instantly. This happened enroute to Montfaucon, France.

Fast forward to present-day... because now a page of history has been reopened for this US soldier. His dog tag, a soldier's medal identification badge, was recently discovered in the Ornain River in France. While on a kayaking trip, Mary Grzeczka, a nursery schoolteacher from Longeville en Barrois, France, made an unusual discovery. Lying at the bottom of the Ornain River's clear water was a round aluminum coin sized object. The circular medal object was inscribed in English with the name Oliver Lankford, PVT. 1CL U.S.A. This being the dog tag lost by a son of Milam County so far from home in 1918. Perhaps Lankford lost his identification tag during the blast that took his life. A French newspaper article suggested that perhaps the American soldier lost his dog tag in the Ornain River while doing his laundry. The story tells that US troops washed their uniforms in the river while they were stationed near the town of Longeville. This might explain how Mary, our kayaking schoolteacher made this discovery near her home. Regardless of how the artifact was found, it has now made its way back to its owner's roots.

Pvt. Lankford's World War I era dog tag found its way to Cameron in a miraculous turn of events. Holly Jentsch was contacted by Genevieve Mathieu about bringing the dog tag to Milam County. Genevieve's cousin, Mary Grzeczka, who found the dog tag, had first contacted the Milam County Historical Commission Chairman hoping to find some of Lankford's descendants. However, the serviceman never married, had no apparent heirs, and none of his family seems to still be living in Milam County. Mary had also contacted the US Consulate in France but had little to no success finding a living relative of Pvt. Lankford. For months she continued her emails and communication from Europe to Texas with Holly Jentsch. After endless research, Jentsch persuaded Mary and Genevieve to return Pvt. Lankford's dog tag to Milam County, where it will be on display in the Milam County Historical Museum's WW I collection. Our county owes three ladies a huge thank you for working diligently to preserve this historic piece. Jentsch, Mathieu, and Grzeczka are to be commended for keeping the memory of Oliver Lankford alive in the hearts and minds of Milam County's citizens. Also, Milam County Judge Whitmire and other officials can be credited with saving this important part of local and American Military History. These individuals clearly value our county's historic past.

And, what of the contribution of Pvt. Lankford himself. The 27-year-old Texan was killed in action and gave his life for his country. Upon his death, Oliver Lankford was buried with other American servicemen in a cemetery in Montfaucon, France. Through the efforts of his brother, Robert, the soldier's grave and body (without his dog tag) were located in France and brought back to the United States for a hero's burial. A full Military Funeral was given to Pvt. Oliver H. Lankford on Armistice Day, November 11, 1921. He was laid to rest by his comrades from the American Legion Post No. 9 in Cameron. Oliver is buried next to his mother, Mary F. Lankford, in the Salem (or Salem-Wilson) Cemetery south of Cameron. Unlike his mother, Oliver does not have a gravestone to mark his final resting place. That's where Veteran's Services Representative Alan Smith and his wife Crystal come in. They are researching Lankford's military records and feel confident that a stone will soon mark the grave of this valiant soldier from the farmlands of Milam County. This is still a developing story and will be updated when new information becomes available. Today, Oliver Lankford's name can be found listed among the many hero's names carved on the Veteran's Memorial Wall at the northeast corner of the Milam County Courthouse Square in downtown Cameron.

To view many artifacts and discover more about the history of one of the oldest counties in Texas, visit the Milam County Historical Museum open Wednesday-Saturday 10-3; the Old Milam County Jail Museum open Saturday 10-3 and by appointment on weekdays; the Milam County Railroad Museum and Old Town Cameron is open Wednesday-Saturday 10-4.