

# Legacy of Ashes

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NBC

February 20 2008



Recently, volunteers in Missouri and a handful of other states discovered the cremated remains of war veterans inside small canisters and cardboard boxes.

Instead of receiving their promised military burial, these war heroes have been forgotten and left on mortuary and hospital shelves for decades.

A national effort is underway to give these veterans a proper and dignified burial.

On a cold January day, Missouri's Patriot Guard would form its customary flag line and another veteran would be laid to rest with honor and respect.

But not all veterans receive that dignified ceremony.

At Oregon State Hospital, an estimated 1,000 unclaimed cremains of veterans are neatly stacked like cans on a grocery store shelf.

A series of gut wrenching photographs, taken by Rob Finch, were first published in the Oregonian in 2005.

The photos of cremains inspired people like Linda Smith of Dixon, Missouri, to take action.

Smith said, "I was furious..storing cans like that, that were rusty and dented."

Smith and her husband Joe met while serving in the U.S. Navy 37 years ago.

The couple was sickened by the photographs of twisted and corroded canisters.

"They wrote that check, that blank check payable to the people of America that no matter what happens they are going to serve their country...As a nation, we let them down," Joe Smith explained.

Less than a year ago, the Smith's joined the Missing in America Project, MIAP.

The MIAP works with the Patriot Guard, the American Legion and Veterans Affairs, to identify the abandoned cremated remains of forgotten veterans.

They work to ensure that veterans are properly laid to rest.

"We visited 100 funeral homes in Missouri. There have been a few that have admitted they have them, but they won't let us inventory them," said Linda Smith.

While Oregon represents the most glaring case, the Smith's believe the cremains of thousands of veterans remain warehoused in dusty basements, and closets and backrooms waiting for a proper burial.

Of the 100 Missouri funeral homes visited, only Gerber Chapel, in Webster Groves, agreed to go through the legal process and release the first unclaimed veterans' remains to MIAP.

Gerber also provided gold urns for the ceremony.

Six Missouri war heroes would finally be remembered at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in St. Louis County.

Linda Smith read each of the veterans names as current soldiers brought their ashes to the front of the chapel

The first was Captain Paul Albert Pickel. During World War II CPT Pickel received the Bronze Star Medal and four Bronze Stars. His cremains sat on a shelf for 33 years.

Richard Franklin Beardsley also served in WWII as an Army Air Corp combat veteran. He spent 28 years on a shelf.

It was 27 years for 2nd LT Edward Allan Rudolph.