MB NEWS

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What We Owe the Names We Engrave

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Want to learn more? Listen to Mike Johns talk with Bill Beigel on an episode of the Monument Matters podcast.

The call came from a visitor standing before a West Coast veterans memorial wall. She'd found her great-uncle's name—a young man killed at 21 in World War II—engraved in stone alongside 761 others from his city. But that's all she found. A name. No stories about the hockey league he played for. Nothing about his track meets at Roosevelt High School. No mention of the morning in February 1945 when he climbed into his aircraft to search for German U-boats over the Caribbean and never returned. No record of what his mother wrote afterward: that his fellow servicemen attested that "the circumstances of war did not break down the nobility of his life and character."

She stood there with a smartphone in her hand and unanswered questions in her heart. Who was he, really?

As memorial builders, you create sacred spaces where communities remember. The walls you design, the names you carefully engrave—this work matters profoundly. Each name represents a life given, a family forever changed, a debt that can never be repaid.

But across thousands of cities and small towns, memorial walls stand incomplete. Not because you didn't do your job—you did it beautifully. But because the way we've always created these lists has a fundamental limitation.

THE CROWDSOURCING GAP

The standard practice seems logical: Ask the public to submit names. Locals, volunteers, historical society members respond with dedication, combing old newspapers, interviewing relatives, cross-checking databases. Memorial committees spend months—sometimes years—creating their lists.

Yet it's impossible to get it completely right this way.

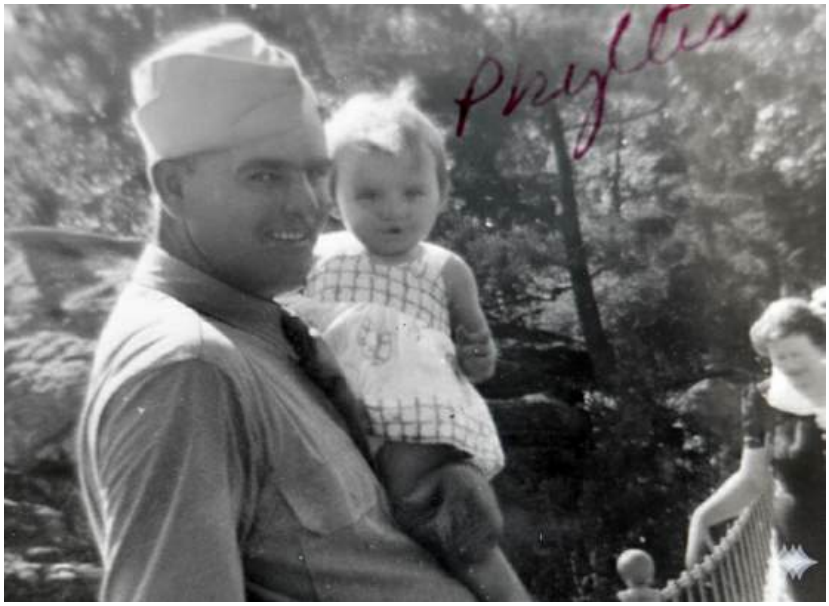
Family stories get muddled. Crowd-sourcing is sadly inefficient. Some casualties—particularly non-battle deaths—slip through the cracks. These fallen heroes deserve remembrance, but their names often never make it onto our memorials.

Thousands of communities still lack memorials where people can gather to remember neighbors, students, sons and daughters who helped save the world. And even existing memorials, built with the best intentions and exhaustive local research, remain incomplete.

Most people don't know there's another way.

BEYOND THE NAMES

When visitors touch a name on a memorial wall, they're reaching



Phyllis Fondren, pictured with her father, TEC4 Parker Fondren. Phyllis was separated from her family after her father's death in WWII. She was reunited with them at age 75, after her family contacted Bill Beigel for his military records. Photo: Donna King. Used by permission.

through time toward someone who was once as alive as they are now. Someone who had breakfast on an ordinary Tuesday morning, who laughed with friends, who had dreams.

The names you engrave create that first connection. But imagine if visitors could discover who they were beyond the name.

They could learn the young man whose name they're touching once played for the Midget Hockey League, that his plane was never found, that his mother wrote about the nobility war couldn't break. Imagine if they could read actual military records, see photographs,

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understand the circumstances of that final mission. Imagine if they could add their own memories and photos to a digital memory chest honoring their loved one.

This isn't about replacing the memorial wall. It's about fulfilling its promise.

COMPLETING THE STORY

Official records still exist that tell these stories. Military casualty records. Service histories. Unit records. Correspondence between families and the War Department. These documents wait to be gathered, interpreted, preserved, and shared.

Professional military records researchers locate these materials and create verified, complete casualty lists—ensuring every rightful name is included and correctly spelled. But the real transformation comes when we gather surviving records revealing the human beings behind each name.

When communities and memorialists partner with professional researchers, they gain the raw materials of remembrance: personnel files, death circumstances, service histories. Crucially, communities can own this collection—making them the authoritative source about their honored fallen.

CREATING LIVING HISTORIES

Technology now exists to transform how people experience veterans memorials. Working with partners specializing in secure interactive systems, memorials can offer visitors the chance to explore individual stories through smartphones by tapping a special marker on or near your memorial wall.

A visitor before a wall of names can discover one belonged to a man who left behind a baby daughter—and that discovering his records reunited her with her father's family. Another was an "ordinary guy" who did extraordinary things. Another had a mother who moved heaven and earth to find where his plane went down. These aren't generic war stories—they're the irreplaceable lives of people from that specific community.

Interactive memorials don't diminish the power of names carved in stone. They amplify it. The memorial wall becomes not an ending but a beginning—a doorway into deeper understanding.

CRAFTING MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS

This partnership creates something unexpected: It draws people back. Families who once visited a memorial to pay respects now return to show younger generations, to discover new details. Communities take pride in having the most complete and meaningful memorial of its kind.

For memorial builders, this represents opportunity. When consulting on a new memorial or renovation, imagine offering not just beautiful design and craftsmanship, but a complete vision: verified casualty lists, authentic historical records, and interactive technology keeping the memorial vital for generations.

You're not just building walls. You're creating spaces where the past speaks to the present, where young people understand what was sacrificed, where "never forget" becomes more than a phrase—it becomes an experience.

THE WORK AHEAD

Every community that lost sons and daughters in our nation's wars deserves a memorial that tells complete stories. Descendants deserve to know more than a name. And the heroes themselves deserve to be remembered as the full human beings they were: students and athletes, workers and dreamers, neighbors and friends who stepped up when their country called.

As memorial builders, you hold a sacred trust. You create the physical spaces where remembrance happens. Now, you can ensure those spaces do more than mark loss—they can celebrate lives fully lived, even when cut tragically short.

The visitor who called me hasn't yet found her great-uncle's full story at that memorial. But she might. With the right research, records, and technology, every visitor could.

The names you engrave deserve nothing less than the complete truth of who they were. Together, we can make sure they get it. MB