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Korean War soldier's remains return back home to Racine

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The son of a World War I veteran and brother of three World War II veterans, Donald L. Baer wanted to serve his country, so he joined the U.S. Army at a time when the world was at peace.

He was 18 when he enlisted at a Racine recruiting station in 1948 and ended up in Japan with the 24th Infantry Division as part of the post-war occupational forces. Baer's company was assigned to guard an ammunition dump in Japan, which is what the unit was doing when North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950.



Baer

Within days, Baer and the rest of the 24th Infantry Division were rushed to Korea where the ill-equipped soldiers soon found themselves fighting a superior foe. A few weeks later, Baer and his company were in the South Korean city of Taejon defending the airport during a fierce battle.

That's the last time Baer was seen. He was at first declared missing and then presumed dead. His family back in Racine never knew what happened to their son and brother.

His family now knows he was killed during the battle, his body left behind as U.S. forces retreated. His remains were discovered a few years later and buried in South Korea. Then they were repatriated to the U.S. and buried in a grave without a name in Hawaii's Punchbowl.

Through the efforts of his siblings who pressured the American government, Baer's remains were identified recently. On Saturday, Baer will be buried in his hometown.

It's fitting that a guy who left his home to answer the call to duty will finally be laid to rest under a marker with his name on Veterans Day.

"I didn't think it would ever happen in my lifetime," said his sister, Janet Baril, 70, of Marion, Ill.

Baer was an easygoing young man with a broad smile who wanted to follow in the footsteps of his father and brothers. He needed the signature of an older brother to join the Army.



An Army honor guard moves Cpl. Donald L. Baer's casket from the plane to a waiting hearse. MICHAEL SEARS / MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

Baril was too young to know her brother but remembers the day someone came to her family's door to deliver the news the family had been dreading — Baer had been declared dead.

"There was the feeling in the family, at first he was missing, then they were hoping he would be released as a POW. Then it finally passed to not knowing what happened and wondering," said Baril.

"There's that missing feeling that you never have the closure. Our family was devastated by the loss, like all families."

Baril learned in 2001 that the military was seeking DNA samples from families of MIAs, including more than 7,700 declared missing in the Korean War. She reached out to groups seeking to identify remains and veterans groups of the 24th Infantry. Slowly, Baril began piecing together her brother's history, though some details have remained frustratingly elusive.

Many men in the 24th Infantry Division had been killed or captured, dying in POW camps or spending the rest of the war as POWs, including the division commander, a two-star general who was the highest-ranking American taken prisoner during the Korean War.

That meant there were not many survivors. But Baril eventually found a veteran who knew her brother and knew he had been killed in the battle around Taejon on July 20, 1950.

Exactly how, when and where he died is still unknown.

Baril requested graves registration reports and learned that five sets of remains were recovered in the Taejon area seven months after the battle. One was

identified and returned home while the other four were unidentified and buried in South Korea. A few years after the war ended, all unidentified suspected American remains — which totaled more than 800 — were moved to the large veterans cemetery in Hawaii known as the Punchbowl.

Baril sought help from other families of Korean War MIAs that had done extensive research to find their loved ones. When military reports of the Punchbowl unidentified remains were declassified in 2010, Baril learned a helmet inscribed with her brother's name had been found near the four unidentified remains. She knew the numbers assigned to those remains and asked that they be tested to see if one might be her brother.

A chest X-ray her brother had taken in 1948 was used to identify him. Baril and the rest of the family got the news in September.

On Thursday, an American Airlines flight from Hawaii via Phoenix arrived at Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee where family members huddled on the tarmac in a chilly wind to welcome home the loved one most were too young to have met.

Airport firefighters stood at attention next to their firetrucks and a TSA honor guard held a flag that flapped in the breeze as Baer's flag-draped coffin was solemnly removed from the cargo hold. Seven Army soldiers saluted while the casket was lowered before carrying it to a waiting hearse.

Baer's remains were accompanied by the grandson of one of his sisters, Air Force TSgt. Daniel Knautz who traveled from his base in North Dakota to Hawaii.

"I'm just glad to bring home a family member and fellow brother in arms," said Knautz. "I'm glad I could do this so he could have a dignified return home."

A funeral with full military honors for Donald Baer will be held at 1 p.m. Saturday at West Lawn Memorial Park Chapel, 9000 Washington Ave., Mount Pleasant.

The family asks that donations go toward a flagpole to fly Baer's memorial flag at West Lawn Memorial Park, a request from Baer's sister Rosemary, who has since died and who never gave up hope that one day her brother would come home.

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