



Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs



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Lisa Aug (502) 564-9203
Lisa.Aug@ky.gov
<http://www.veterans.ky.gov>

SGT Sandlin Comes Home: WWI Medal of Honor Recipient Re-Interred at New State Veterans Cemetery in Hyden

One hundred years ago, Eastern Kentucky's own Willie Sandlin received the Medal of Honor after single-handedly destroying three German machine gun emplacements and killing twenty-four of the enemy on September 26, 1918, at Bois de Forges. Only Sergeant Alvin York received more citations for valor in that war.

SGT Sandlin's Medal of Honor citation reads:

He showed conspicuous gallantry in action by advancing alone directly on a machinegun nest which was holding up the line with its fire. He killed the crew with a grenade and enabled the line to advance. Later in the day he attacked alone and put out of action 2 other machinegun nests, setting a splendid example of bravery and coolness to his men.

He died in 1949 of lung infections caused by his exposure to poison gas during the Battle of Argonne. He was buried at Hurricane Cemetery in Hyden, but later moved to Zachary Taylor National Cemetery in Louisville, where his widow was interred with him.

“We are deeply honored to welcome SGT Willie Sandlin home to Hyden, where he raised his family and continued his service to country and community,” said Commissioner Benjamin Adams of the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs.

“As Chairman of the WWI Centennial Commission, it is an honor to participate in the Commemoration of SGT Willie Sandlin, one of the true heroes of WWI,” said Kentucky native and Vietnam Veteran Terry Hamby. “SGT Sandlin set the standard for soldiers for the next 100 years. His humility and unassuming leadership serves as our example from then until now.

As work began to prepare a site for the future Kentucky Veterans Cemetery South East in Leslie County, SGT Sandlin’s immediate family, including his daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, along with members of the Leslie County community, started working to bring the Sandlins home.

“SGT Sandlin is very special to the people of Leslie County,” says Dean Osborne. He was well known here not just for his military service, but for his service to the community to help eradicate adult illiteracy. He never spoke about that day in the war, but often said how much more he could have done in his life had he been able to read and write better than he could.”

Osborne credited many people in Hyden and Leslie County for helping to make the state veterans cemetery a reality as well as make it possible to bring Willie and Belvia Sandlin home. “The honor for us to be able to have a veterans cemetery on our soil, we thought it would be wholly fitting if the family would agree to have him brought back to his home.”

Cemetery staff at KVCSE and the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs as well as Zachary Taylor National Cemetery helped with getting permissions, Greg Walker at the Walker Funeral Home with transportation, Fred and Joel Brashear at the Hyden Citizens Bank and the Leslie County Community Foundation with funding.

“The principals in making this move happen is his immediate family,” Osborne said. “They have worked very hard to get this done.

“You’ll rarely find a place in America that has the esteem and respect for veterans as mountains of Kentucky. SGT Sandlin was such an iconic figure, it seems perfect and fitting that he be the first burial for this cemetery.”

More than 100 people attended the memorial ceremony at KVCSE, including two dozen members of SGT Sandlin’s extended family to the fifth generation: from granddaughter to great-great grandchildren.

The Director of Kentucky Veterans Cemetery South East is Vaughda Wooten, a native of adjoining Perry County, a retired Army First Sergeant and Kentucky’s first female state veterans cemetery director.

The National Cemetery Administration of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs made a \$6 million grant to the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA) in January 2017 for construction and purchase of initial equipment. KDVA then covers the operations and maintenance costs.

The cemetery will expand in four phases, for a total of 4,588 by the end of Phase IV.

The year 2018 marks KDVA's 20th anniversary and two decades of ensuring that all Kentucky veterans and their families obtain the benefits and services they have earned. Other than residential fees for skilled nursing care, KDVA provides its services at no cost to the veteran.

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