

# Family of Pvt. Robert Bollie Stanley receives Purple Heart after 105 years

Stanley served in World War I

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The Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range and The Brunswick Town Chapter of National Society Daughters of the American Revolution received word from the military that Pvt. Robert Bollie Stanley received his Purple Heart posthumously and additional medals for his sacrifices in the Great War. Pvt. Stanley’s military story follows.

When the 365th Infantry embarked in Brest, France, on Feb. 17, 1919, to return to their loved ones in the United States, Private Robert B. Stanley did not join them. Instead, he was recovering from a battle in which he was wounded, taken prisoner by the enemy, and suffered the amputation of most of his right leg. He returned to the US over a month later on March 24, 1919, but was not discharged until completing five months of additional recovery. On Aug. 25, 1919, he returned home with a 95% disability classification.

**THE GREAT WAR**

Robert Bollie Stanley was born and raised in Shallotte. He was called to duty for World War I on March 29, 1918. He was one of a total of 25 Black men from Brunswick County ordered to report that day. Their destination was Camp Grant in Rockford, Ill.

Very few Black Americans served in combat units during WWI, instead serving mostly as laborers. Months after the US entered WWI, the War Department created two divisions, the 92nd Buffalo Soldiers Division, in honor of Black troops who served in the American West after the Civil War; and the 93rd Blue Helmets. Both divisions were comprised of primar-

ily Black combat units. The soldiers of the 92nd and the 93rd infantry divisions were the first Americans to fight in France.

After arriving in Camp Grant, only three of the draftees from Brunswick County out of the original 25 from that day were chosen for the honor of a combat position in the 92nd Division. The three men were William Frederick Brooks, William James Gordon and Robert Bollie Stanley. These men began training with Company H, 365th Infantry, 92nd Division in preparation for combat in France. Ultimately there were a total of seven Black men from Brunswick County holding combat positions in the 92nd Division.

The 365th Infantry was scheduled to board the USS Agamemnon at Hoboken, NJ, on June 10, 1918, to travel overseas to France. The 365th Infantry reached Brest, France, on June 19, 1918. They immediately began an eight week period of intensive training in offensive and defensive tactics. In August, they took up positions in the St. Dié sector, where they received their first contact with the enemy.

A journal written by their captain, Raymond Earl Hill, brings the countryside and experiences alive. One entry in August describes Captain Hill’s first experience of shell fire, giving a glimpse into what Pfc Gordon and Pvt Stanley were experiencing. (Captain Hill’s diary is available online at [whininpast.com](http://whininpast.com).)

“I had my first experience of shell fire. It is an experience that one cannot well describe. You hear the boom of the distant gun then the rushing whine and screeching of the shell as it passes, then you wait for the terrific explosion wondering how far beyond you it

will strike. It sure causes a weakness in the knees and a funny feeling up your back. The man that says he was not scared at those first shells he heard is either a damn fool or a liar.”

On Oct. 9, the 92nd Division relieved the French 68th Division and assumed command of the Marbach Sector. Their mission was to hold the line of the First Army east of Moselle, harassing the enemy by frequent patrols. During this period until October 31, the division was engaged in patrolling on the front.

On Oct. 29, 1918, Pvt. Robert Bollie Stanley was reported missing. He had been captured by the enemy and was not released until Nov. 27, 1918.

**A LIFE RESUMED WITH MORE SACRIFICES**

After the war, Robert married Ethel Harrison. She passed away at a young age, leaving several young children motherless. Robert Stanley ultimately raised five children on his own, including his grandson, Fred “Stan” Stanley, who he adopted and raised like a son.

Two of Pvt. Stanley’s sons served in WWII, one with the US Army and the other in the Navy. Pvt. Stanley’s last direct descendant, his youngest child, passed away in 2018. Stan, his grandson, served in the Navy for 20 years, followed by 21 years in the US Merchant Marines, retiring in 2010. He lives in North Carolina today. Stan continues the story of Robert Stanley’s life.

“Dad, which I called him, was a farmer, and I started at 9th grade and had quite an agricultural program until I graduated. That was our joy, planting, growing [raising] pigs, and all the support crops.

“We liked going to Shallotte Point to meet the fishing boats to get fresh seafood.”

In 1961, two weeks after Stan graduated from high school, Robert Stanley suffered a stroke, and 17-year-old Stan delayed his entrance into the Navy to care for the man who had already sacrificed so much. “I was by his bedside to watch him take his last breaths as God took him.”

That year in September, Robert Stanley passed away.

Stan recalls, “He never complained even when he was in excruciating pain, and never talked about the war.”

Robert Bollie Stanley was laid to rest on Sept. 22, 1961, in the same cemetery as his parents. He did not have a military headstone, no WWI honors were displayed, giving no indication he made such considerable sacrifices for his country.

On May 7, 2019, the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, along with members of the Brunswick Town Chapter, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, paid tribute to Pvt. Robert Bollie Stanley, WWI Brunswick County veteran and only known POW.

A flat military-style marker which was installed and dedicated was purchased with funds donated by Allen Dunstan, an out of town visitor who was deeply touched by Pvt. Stanley’s sacrifice. Five of Pvt. Stanley’s descendants, along with two cousins and a friend attended the ceremony and received the thanks and recognition for his sacrifice.

It was at this ceremony that Robert Stanley’s family mentioned their interest in obtaining a Purple



Photo contributed

**Pvt. Robert Bollie Stanley in uniform.**

Heart for his service. Pvt. Stanley would have received a Wound Chevron for his combat injuries. The Purple Heart, created by George Washington in 1782, was not officially re-established until 1932. Anyone who was killed or wounded in war since April 5, 1917, became eligible for the new medal.

The Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range took up the challenge. Finally, on May 17, 2023, they received word that the medals and ribbons were on their way.

They experienced a heart stopping moment when they received notification from USPS tracking that the package had been delivered, but they had not received it. “The thought of Pvt. Stanley’s medals and ribbons being lost in transport was too much to bear.”

What a joyous moment when the box arrived the

following day. “We did it!” The letter detailing the contents included, “We have verified Mr. Stanley’s entitlement to the following awards:

- Purple Heart (permanent order and certificate enclosed).
- Prisoner of War Medal.
- World War I Victory Medal with St Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne Battle clasps and France Service clasp.
- World War I Victory Button — Silver.”

On June 17, 2023, the ceremony to deliver the medals and awards to Robert Stanley’s family will be held at the cemetery where he was laid to rest.

“God has blessed me and allowed me to see and do so much, and even more so, allowed me to witness such an amazing recognition of my grandfather’s sacrifice,” said Fred “Stan” Stanley, May 7, 2019.