

Leonard R. Noreen
422/F



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BROOKSVILLE For Pfc. Leonard Noreen, 83, the military canteen cup he used while serving in World War II will never be "just" a cup. It was the one place he kept track of each of the foreign countries and cities he visited during a dizzying tour, stopping to inscribe their names into the cup's soft aluminum with a knife while resting in foxholes or riding in the back of a truck.

Until last week, he had not seen or spoke of the cup in more than 60 years. That was when he received an unexpected phone call at his Brooksville home from Michigan. The voice on the other end rattled off his military serial number and name — also inscribed in the cup — and recited the names of the places he had been. "She said, 'I've got something you lost,'" he said. "I didn't start crying, but I was tremendously emotional. It's only a cup, but I carried that thing for years. Noreen entered the Army in 1943 in Louisiana, drafted at age 18 with a letter from President Franklin Roosevelt. "That was it. I got a letter saying, 'You're in the Army now,' and I went to Fort Dix," he said. He was initially drafted into the 739th Division of the U.S. Army as an engineer, but funneled into the 106th Infantry in Belgium with other new troops to join combat. "They started shipping us to places where the war was being lost," he said. "They sent us in to reinforce them, and from then on we didn't stop. When you're losing a war, you don't stay in one place for too long." Africa. Italy. France. Belgium. Luxembourg. Detailed lists on each side of the cup, complete with cities, dates and "smash and drive," the motto of his unit, the **422nd Regiment**. By the end of the Battle of the Ardennes in December 1944 — later known as the historic Battle of The Bulge — more than 84,000 Allied soldiers had been killed. Of more than 100 in Noreen's unit, only 21 made it home alive, he said.

Noreen insists that he wasn't a hero, just an ordinary soldier who got thrown into the war like many others. "We were getting the living hell kicked out of us," he said. "We were outnumbered and outgunned. If the Germans hadn't run out of gasoline, they would have had us beat." But no matter where he was, he never lost track of the cup. When he had a free moment, he would use anything he could to inscribe the names of various places on it. "I was the only one dumb enough to do that," he recalled, chuckling. "Half the time we didn't know where we were. This cup has been more places than you can imagine."

Noreen said the cup — which he kept in immaculate condition during the war — was one of the few items he brought home with him in 1945, when he returned home at age 20 and settled in Averill Park, N.Y. His wife kept it clean and polished, and it sat on a shelf until the day he realized it was gone. "One of my kids probably took it to school and ended up leaving it someplace," he said. "The last time I saw it was almost 63 years ago."

The woman who found it — Monica Hill of Owosso, Mich. — said she initially found the cup more than 30 years ago in a field near Hudson, N.Y., where she grew up. She spent years using it as a change holder, and often wondered about the military veteran who had lost it. She even previously tried searching for him by serial number, but had little success because his military records were destroyed in a 1971 fire. She reopened her search this year with prodding from her husband, and found a phone number for Noreen in Brooksville. She called, and the rest is history.

"I get so many prank phone calls, and then this woman calls and knows things about my life that you would only know by (seeing the cup)," Noreen said. "It was amazing." She put it in the mail the next day, complete with a copy of a newspaper article about the cup, written in a Michigan newspaper.

Noreen, who moved to Brooksville in the '60s and still works part-time at Brooksville Transmission, said the simple canteen cup brought back more memories than he was ready for. He said he wished he could show it to his wife, who died 20 years ago from cancer. "It meant a lot to us," he said. "It was a history of where I'd been." No one could be more thrilled than his children. His son, Brooksville transmission specialist Eric Noreen, 51, said his father rarely spoke of the war and never mentioned the cup until it was found. "I was probably as shocked as he was," he said. "I just can't believe someone would be nice enough to return it. It all happened so fast."

His father admitted to feeling a little shocked at the cup's rustic appearance, which lost its luster through years in the dirt. "It sure is in rough shape," he said ruefully, running his fingers over its dents and scratches. "It wasn't in this condition when I lost it." Either way, he said he feels grateful to have it back, and feels a connection to the woman who kept it safe. "After 63 years, it's amazing to see it again," Noreen said.

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