

Biography of Melvin E. Roads



Post 1231 of the American Legion is named in memory of a local son who lost his life during the First World War. Melvin E. Roads, son of Orange and Jessie Roads was raised on Electric Avenue, East Greenbush, New York. He graduated from Rensselaer High School, after which he took employment in the state department of public works. He had tried to enlist in the Army but was turned down several times given a defect in the sight of one eye. Finally he reached his goal of military service by being drafted. His military occupation was that of an expert electrician.

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While still in training, his abilities were quickly recognized and he was offered the opportunity to enter the officers' training course. At the same time an opportunity was afforded him to go overseas for special service in the motor vehicle department. He chose the later and shortly after his arrival in France, he was assigned the duty of a front line dispatch bearer attached to the Fifth corps, headquarters' staff. It was in the role of driving a motorcycle/side car that he met his untimely death. Private Roads along with Major Alfred K. King (who occupied the side car) were killed near Laneuville France on November 10th, 1918 only a few hours before the armistice was signed. A letter sent to Melvin's parents by Colonel A. W. Foreman and published in the Albany Evening Journal, Wednesday, March 26, 1919 details the events leading up to their deaths."

"...On November 9th [1918], Major King expressed a desire to make sure that the 89th division was amply supplied with ammunition for crossing the Meuse river on the night of November 10th. He was in a side car driven by ... Private Roads and they proceeded as far as Laneuville and accomplished their mission. The Germans were heavily shelling the road running from Laneuville and they waited in that town until they thought an opportune moment would enable them to cross over the shell-swept zone. They ... proceeded along the road which was under heavy artillery fire and both were killed."

Colonel Foreman goes on to say, "*I felt on November 11th that something had occurred to prevent their return to the Fifth corps headquarters. I, therefore, determined to set out and find them. I was proceeding over this same road when I discovered Major King's body and that of Private Roads along the side of the road. Both had been instantly killed by a bursting shell. After summoning a chaplain from the 89th division I had the bodies of both laid to rest, side by side, near the cemetery at Laneuville.*

"The enclosed pictures will give you an idea of how the graves are marked and the steps taken to preserve their memory. The enclosed photographs were taken by Lieutenant Demozon of the French mission, attached to these headquarters. The head signs and railings were prepared and set up by the engineers attached to the Fifth corps."

After expressing words of the deepest sympathy, Colonel Foreman goes on to say in his letter, "*I can assure you of the bravery displayed by your son on numerous occasions while [I visited] the front line trenches with Major King. I recall on one particular occasion when Private Roads passed over the fire-swept road running south from Romange carrying dispatches to me from Major King. I shall always remember him as a brave American soldier, willing and anxious to do his duty.*

"I cannot pay too high a tribute to his loyalty and devotion to duty. He died as only a true soldier desired to die—killed in action."

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Mr. Roads sent a letter dated December 23, 1918 that was answered on February 3, 1919, by 2nd Lieutenant Cyrus A. Norton, the original of which is in the Post's archives. *"I am able to report the following: both [Private Roads] and the Major with whom he was riding, were killed by shrapnel on November 10th, 1918. Major's name was King. Both are buried in the same grave at Launeville, Dept of Meuse, just across the river(Meuse) from Stenay. Grave is marked by cross and identification tag. Grave surrounded by fence painted white and white cross of pebbles over each body. Grave located on outskirts of town on road leading to Beaumont. Located adjacent to French grave yard on right side of road leading out of town. Since answering a communication from Mrs. Roads, I have personally visited the place and if [it is] possible for me ...I will pay you a visit upon my discharge."* The lieutenant gave Melvin's parents his home address, which was Fort Dodge, Iowa.

It is apparent from the original correspondence on file that Mr. & Mrs. Roads wished to have the body of their son returned to the States, indeed, to East Greenbush. A letter dated March 17, 1921, signed by 1st Lieutenant J. F. Butler, Jr., of the Quartermaster Corps, Graves Registration Office, Hoboken, New Jersey, states the following: *"Receipt of your telegram of March 15th is hereby acknowledged and your wishes will be complied with. We will ship the body of Pvt. Melvin Roads to you at the earliest practicable date. You will be notified by telegraph date of departure of the body from this port and railroad line on which body will arrive at destination."*

And so the mortal remains of Private Melvin E. Roads which lay buried in France from 1918 to 1921, were re-interred in the family plot in the cemetery behind the Greenbush Reformed Church, on state highways 9 & 20 at Hays Rd., just across from Melvin's home on Electric Avenue.



Compiled by Ed Pratt