

Albert Cobb Martin

*590th Field Artillery Bn
106th Infantry Division
1st Lt ASN O-514722
Silver Star*



More than just a cross and a name

A Belgian man set out to trace one Minnesota soldier's story, from Minneapolis to the Battle of the Bulge.



How long has it been since anyone thought of Albert Cobb Martin?

Full of promise, the Army first lieutenant and Yale graduate from Minneapolis was 24 when he died in World War II. His mother and father died a few years later. Bert, as he

was called, was an only child. Most of his classmates and all of his close relatives are gone.

But half a world away, the Vandenberg family of Belgium won't forget his sacrifice. They never knew Martin, but for years, Marthe Vandenberg faithfully put flowers and flags on the Minnesotan's grave twice a year. When she died in 2006, her son Vincent took over.

For Vincent, the cryptic words on the white marble cross marking Martin's grave in the Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery posed a mystery. The notation -- ALBERT C. MARTIN, 1 LT 590 FA BN 106 DIV, MINNESOTA DEC. 21 1944 -- wasn't enough. He needed to know more.

As it turns out, Martin's memory shines bright for at least two women who knew the people who loved him. That a stranger wanted to know about him six decades after his death brought them both to tears.

In January, Vincent Vandenberg sent an e-mail to the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office: "Sire, let me introduce myself. I am 39 years old. ... I am very interested in WWII ... I have also adopted many graves from US Soldiers..."

"I am looking to find more information from 1 Lt. Albert C. Martin... from Hennepin County, Mn"

The e-mail was forwarded to Lisa Fleming, a county public affairs officer and a genealogy buff. Intrigued, she began digging through county records.

Martin, it turns out, was from a wealthy family. Property records showed his parents, Mac and Helen Cobb Martin, lived in a grand house on Mount Curve Avenue in Minneapolis' Lowry Hill neighborhood. Helen died in 1952, Mac in 1958.

When Fleming Googled "Albert Martin" she found him on a list of secret society members at Yale University. The school sent her a yearbook entry that described how Bert graduated in 1943 with a major in international relations.

He had attended the Blake School, and at Yale he played three sports and was a member of the Army Reserve. His photo shows a confident-looking young man with a slight smile and a patrician face.

After the war, the biography said, he probably would go into commercial aviation.

'Keep going'

Vandenberg had already done his own research about Martin's time in Europe. He e-mailed the Star Tribune photos of Martin's grave and sweeping images of Henri-Chapelle, dotted with almost 8,000 gravestones of soldiers who died in 1944 and '45.

He also sent documents, including an account of Martin's death during the Battle of the Bulge. Martin had been in Europe only a few weeks when his field artillery battalion, part of the **106th Infantry Division**, ended up near the frozen German-Belgium border.

On Dec. 21, 1944, they got caught in a traffic jam of retreating Americans. Worried about missing vehicles, Martin volunteered to go back. When his Jeep reached an open space, Germans opened fire. The driver tried to turn around. Martin was hit, fell out and yelled, "Keep going."

The driver sped away, the sound of Martin's gun "ringing in his ears. Several days later they found Lt. Martin's body. Near it lay three dead Germans." Martin posthumously was awarded the Purple Heart and the Silver Star.

Almost 18 months after his son died, Mac Martin received his effects, including a bracelet, a ring, a cigarette lighter and a wallet. In 1947, after seeing a story in Life magazine, he wrote to the War Department, worried that Bert might have been buried in a body bag. He asked that the body be cremated.



Nine miles from the cemetery where Bert's ashes were buried, Vandenberg lives today in the town of Baelen-Membach. He said his grandfather was a member of the Belgian Resistance. He wants to know more about the men whose graves he has adopted, partly to add information on commemorative websites.

"If they was not here in 1944, now I would be a German and I would not be free," Vandenberg wrote to the Star Tribune. "They gave their live for our freedom."

Proud of a son

Old newspapers and yearbooks fill in some details of Bert Martin's life.

His mother, Helen Cobb Martin, was the daughter of Albert Cobb, a prominent Minneapolis attorney who was a founder of what is now Faegre & Benson.

In 1922, Helen married Mac Martin, owner of a large and successful advertising agency and one of the founders of the Minnesota Better Business Bureau. Together, he and Helen designed their elegant house on Mount Curve Avenue. The fireplace included a fragment of the Great Wall of China.

Their son graduated from the Blake School in 1939. He was an academic and athletic star, the school's "head boy" (student body president), a cum laude graduate who earned 10 sports letters and was noted for his public speaking.

After Bert's mother died in a Connecticut psychiatric hospital, Mac Martin remarried. His stepdaughter was Sally Luther, a pioneering female member of the Minnesota Legislature. Now 89, she lives in Florida.

Marriage to Mac Martin, she said, was not Helen Cobb's first union. Bert was born in 1920 in Belgium, after his mother fell in love and married a Belgian man while volunteering in a USO-style group during World War I. The young couple soon divorced. Helen returned with Bert to Minneapolis, where she met and married Mac Martin.

Mac adopted Bert. Childless himself, he considered the boy and his niece, Frances Smith, known as Frankie, as his son and daughter.

"They just worshipped Bert," Luther said. "He was a wonderful boy, and Mac Martin was a terrific father to him."

Frankie Smith eventually moved to California, and Luther stayed in touch with her and her friend, Jean Leslie. Frankie died of Alzheimer's a few years ago, Luther said. When the Star Tribune called, Luther e-mailed Leslie.

"Oh Sally, your letter truly broke my heart," Leslie replied. "I wept. Frankie thought so much of Bert and was so happy to have a 'brother.' ... Uncle Mac, as Frankie called him, felt that his family was now made complete, a boy and a girl."

Luther, whose family knew the Martins during the war, remembers visiting a silent, grieving home on Mount Curve Avenue when word of Bert's death arrived in 1944. "It was a terrible tragedy," she said.

Leslie still has the military bracelet Bert was wearing when he died.

"If you or ... the nice grave-tender in Belgium would like the bracelet, I will be happy to send it," she wrote Luther.

Luther, her voice cracking, said that even after 60 years, Bert's death "is very hard to think about."

She wants the bracelet to go to Vandenberg in Belgium -- where Bert was born, and where he gave his life.

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