

Patriotic passion preserves the legacy of a veteran

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(Pictured left to right) Roger Briney, Walker Gaulding, and Nigel Mulvena. Don and his family couldn't thank the three men enough for reuniting them with the footlocker.

Family reunited with lost WWII colonel's footlocker, 50 years after his passing

One man's trash is another man's military footlocker from World War II. At least that was the case a little over a year ago at a Northumberland County trash disposal site when Roger Briney, a veteran from Heathsville, rescued a footlocker full of treasures from becoming a lost memory. Now, the day that Briney jumped into a trash compactor, with nothing but the intent of saving a 13-fold flag on his mind, has become a day that will forever be in the heart of the Parthree family from Maryland.

In a matter of minutes, a normal day turned into a heroic moment for Briney as he was taking his trash to a local disposal site. When he tossed his trash in the compactor, he immediately recognized the military footlocker and the folded American flag that was peeking out of it. He didn't think twice about jumping in to save it, just as the operator was about to compact it. Briney served in the Army Infantry in the early 70's, spent three years burying men at Arlington National Cemetery and later served as a member of the National Guard.

"The flag represents everything I represent," said Briney, as he reflected on his courageous decision to hurdle into the compactor and salvage the flag and the footlocker.

Briney took the items home and placed the footlocker in his basement for for what would be a year's time. He cleaned the flag and refolded it. Twice he scheduled it for an unserviceable disposal ceremony with the American Legion Post and both times he couldn't make it.

Briney's friend, Newland native Walker Gaulding, came over to his home to pick up an old, military desk. Under it sat the footlocker. Briney, who wasn't sure what to do with it, offered it to Gaulding knowing his love of history and "old stuff." Gaulding immediately took it to his truck, not wanting him to change his mind. "One of the reasons I didn't get into this very much was because I was so afraid that family had done that," said Briney, who never really looked through the footlocker, "I intentionally left that just sitting."

Gaulding took it home and went through the footlocker with his wife, in disbelief at its contents. They discovered pictures and passports, books and clothing, cigarette cases and newspaper articles, all belonging to Lt. Col. Clyde N. Parthree, an air force pilot during World War II. Not long after, Gaulding's friend Nigel Mulvena from Farnham came over to hang out and he couldn't help but show him all he had found. That same night, Mulvena made it his mission to find the Parthree family, with the hopes of returning the footlocker to its rightful home. When Mulvena searched the internet for the name Clyde Parthree he founded an obituary for Parthree's wife, Mary. He followed that obituary to others of the Parthree family until he came across one for the colonel's daughter Cheryl. On it was a comment from Don Parthree's family, the colonel's son and oldest child. Mulvena reached out to the funeral home and soon got in touch with Cindy Blass, Col. Parthree's granddaughter. Blass stated that at no point did she think it was a scam. She was simply in disbelief. Blass told Mulvena that her father, Don, had been talking about the footlocker for years, claiming it was one of his regrets in life not being able to get it back from his sister, Cheryl. Don is currently 79 years old and in an assisted living facility in La Plata, MD, but they knew they would need to make a special trip to reunite him with the footlocker at Gaulding's home in Newland.

On March 17, the Parthree family including Don, his daughter's Cindy and Dawn, Dawn's husband Bill Nevitt and Don's niece Sherri Harris, made their way across state lines for the moment they never imagined they would get back. Harris stated, "I never thought we'd see it again." She had lived with her grandmother, Col. Parthree's wife Mary, for many years and can recall bringing the footlocker down for Mary to reminisce upon many times. On the way to Gaulding's home to retrieve it, she saw an exact replica of her grandmother's car driving alongside them and knew they had another member of the family with them that day.

Once they arrived at Gaulding's home, they didn't waste any time getting Don out the car and towards the footlocker in Gaulding's workshop. He immediately opened it, placing his father's officer hat on his head like he said he used to do all the time as a child. They sat him down with the footlocker in front of him and he began to dig through like a kid opening presents at Christmas time. The family claimed Don was usually a quiet man, but his excitement over each item in the footlocker was infectious.

With every piece he picked up, he told stories of his father, the colonel. How his dad wanted him to join the air force as well, but he just wanted to marry the love of his life. How his dad loved to smoke, but was told to quit by his doctor after he had a heart attack. How his dad was strict, but would do anything to help anyone. Memories flooded the shop, engulfing each of the members of the Parthree family.

To them, Col. Parthree was a father and grandfather. The patriarch of their family. But to history, Col. Parthree was a prestigious air force pilot. The footlocker told the story of Col. Parthree's ventures as an air force pilot, which was called the Army Air Corps during his time in the air. He flew all over the world, with passports stamped in Italy, Greece, Saudi Arabi and Japan just to name a few. He was one of the few air force officers to

hold an airline Pilot's Flying Examiner's Rating. His duties in the service ranged from squadron commander to ferrying planes to U.S. and Allied forces during World War II. After the war, he was the personal pilot for General Archie J. Old, Jr. and General James W. Spry. He received many awards, such as 15,000 accident-free air miles awards. According to his son, Don, he even flew the Shah of Iran through hail, which the Shah had never seen before.

"He was a great pilot," stated Don, "the best."

The footlocker contains priceless treasures from Col. Parthree's vibrant life. He flew the Cheston Lee Eshelman designed plane nicknamed the "wingless wonder." The footlocker contains an Eshelman patch and picture from of the aircraft, Gaulding's favorite items as a history-lover. There's a picture of Baudouin, King of Belgium, signed 'To Major Clyde N. Parthree, in memory of my delightful trip in your care. May 14th – 31st, 1959.' There's a letter from artist Max Russell Woodson, thanking him for delivering a painting to a General. There are several cigarette cases, one with a picture of U.S. Occupied Germany on the cover and one still containing cigarettes. There was even Col. Parthree's parents' marriage license from 1907, still in fair condition.

"I couldn't believe this guy's entire life ended up in this box," stated Mulvena, as he remembered when he first looked through it with Gaulding a few weeks before this reunion. They saved the best part for last, giving Don his father's flag after he had gone through the footlocker. He clutched the flag in tears, not believing it was finally back in his arms since Col. Parthree's death in 1966. This was the moment Briney had been waiting for, making his risky jump in a trash compactor that day all worth it.

"For the rest of us this is an interesting story," stated Gaulding, "for Don this is his story."

Col. Parthree is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Seven years later, Briney would have walked past his grave not knowing their lives would soon be forever intertwined. It's unclear exactly how the footlocker ended up at the trash site in Northumberland. But what is clear is that every moment leading up to Col. Parthree's family being reunited with the footlocker was perfectly placed in time, kind of like the folds of a triangle American flag.

Taylor O'Bier is a Northern Neck News correspondent.



Don clutched his father's flag from the moment it was given to him.



There were several cigarette cases in the footlocker, one being from U.S. Occupied Germany.



Col. Parthree looked like a strict man, but his family said he was kindhearted.



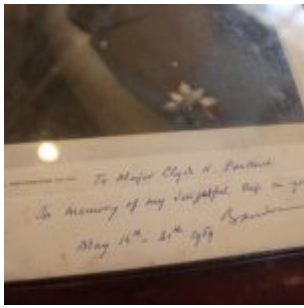
The footlocker was full of different items, including the Colonel's jacket and hat.



A signed picture Baudouin, King of Belgium thanking Col. Parthree for taking care of him.



Parthree flew a plane named the "flying wing" and the "wingless wonder" designed by Eshelman.



A signed pictured Baudouin, King of Belgium thanking Col. Parthree for taking care of him.

- ◦ Chitterchat's – Reedville
- T & J's Dairy Barn – Burgess
- Stevie's Ice Cream – Kilmarnock
- Nancy's Ice Cream Shop – Colonial Beach
- Better Than a Great Day Café – Tappahannock