

Translation:

Backnang Kreiszeitung Online, 30 April 2009

*Article by Matthias Nothstein*

## **An Exceptional Act of Reconciliation**

BACKNANG. The memorial service for Wilhelm Härer at the Steinbach cemetery was a living symbol of friendship and an exceptional act of reconciliation. More than 90 years after he died, representatives from the former enemy forces paid their respects to this soldier.

Wilhelm Härer died in action on 10 October 1918 during heavy fighting on Humserberg in the Argonne forest near the French village of Châtel Chéhéry, and had been listed as missing since then. It wasn't until last year, when U.S. Lieutenant Colonel Douglas Mastriano from the NATO Command in Heidelberg found Härer's identification tag (we reported). On Tuesday evening, a large number of military members from different nations, descendants of the deceased, and numerous citizens gathered at the Steinbach cemetery. Mayor Dr. Frank Nopper handed one half of Härer's ID-tag to Major General Mark P. Hertling, Commanding General, 1<sup>st</sup> AD, from Wiesbaden. It will be on display at the U.S. Army Museum in Washington.



Nopper called the fact, that former fierce enemies shook hands at the grave of Wilhelm Härer, an exceptional act of reconciliation. But it was also a day of remembrance regarding the millions of dead from the world wars, and a reminder to do everything we can so future generations will not have to experience such suffering again.

Dr. Roland Idler, who had coordinated the ceremony, described Härer's life as a soldier: he had fought in the heavy battles around Verdun and received the Württemberg Military

Meritorious Service Medal in silver. Härer died 22 days before his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday and 30 days before the start of ceasefire. In 1921 the missing soldier was declared dead. Idler praised his American friends. “They have placed great value on this ceremony. I pay my highest respects to them and I am very grateful.” Colonel Mastriano gave a detailed account of the battles during which Härer must have died. He pointed to the stone memorial bearing the names of the fallen soldiers: “So often we thoughtlessly pass by those monuments to the past with all those many names, and forget that they are more than faceless shadows of the past. They were fathers, sons and brothers and, like us, they too had hopes and dreams.”

Major General Hertling called to mind that people fight for what they believe in. “Even today there are German and American soldiers who – just like Härer – do just that in foreign countries.” The difference is that today former fierce opponents are fighting side by side for what they believe in.

Wilhelm Härer was unmarried and had six siblings. Two great-nephews and great-nieces are still alive today, said Steinbach’s municipal administrator Helmut Heinz. He called to mind the bitter result of WWI with almost 8 million soldiers killed in action. 406 men from Backnang did not come home, 45 of them were from Steinbach - to include Wilhelm Härer. The ceremony took place within a setting of prayers and benediction presented by U.S. chaplain Major Joey Byrd, and hymns played by the U.S. Army brass quintet. During the wreath-laying and the unveiling of the memorial plaque the song “I had a comrade once” was played, as well as the German and American national anthem.

#### Text of Plaque:

The identification tag of Wilhelm Härer was found by U.S. soldiers on 24 August 2008 in the Argonne forest near Châtel Chéhéry (France), and presented to the City of Backnang on 28 April 2009. One half of the identification tag was presented to the U.S. Army Museum in Washington D.C. as a symbol of understanding among nations.

Donated by Dr. Ronald Idler, Colonel Ret.

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### **Ich hatt' einen Kameraden**

von Ludwig Uhland (1787 – 1862)

German poet from Tübingen who studied literature, law and politics; this is his best known poem and an integral part of military funerals

Ich hatt' einen Kameraden,  
einen bessern findst du nit.  
Die Trommel schlug zum Streite,  
er ging an meiner Seite  
in gleichem Schritt und Tritt

Eine Kugel kam geflogen  
gilt's mir oder gilt es dir?  
Ihn hat es weggerissen  
er liegt vor meinen Füßen  
als wär's ein Stück von mir

Will mir die Hand no reichen,  
derweil ich eben lad'.  
"Kann dir die Hand nicht geben,  
bleib du im we'gen Leben  
Mein guter Kamerad!"

### **I had a Comrade**

Translation by Arthur Keveess

I had one faithful comrade,  
ere we heard the trumpet's call,  
and we pledged our hearts forever  
in battle joined together  
to beat the foe or fall.

A musket shot came screaming,  
to seal his fate or mine.  
Right at my feet he stumbled,  
and friendship's shrine it crumbled  
around that friend of mine.

His hand is blindly seeking  
the clasp I cannot give  
for duty calls me onward.  
Farewell my dying comrade,  
our love shall ever live.