

# Story Telling

## Banner Dedication Ceremony

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Good Evening and welcome to story time. I know what you're thinking, the heat's gone to her head and the library is up the street, she's lost. I assure you, though it's warm I know exactly where I am. The EMT's can go back to the ambulance. All the world's history is a string of stories told by some of the most amazing narrators ever. I've read some of the great narrators over the course of my life. Thomas Payne, Lincoln, Churchill, Jefferson, Patton, MacArthur, and though a little bit out there even some Einstein. All of whom had a great story to tell. Each in their own right giving their side of a story that sometimes didn't have a happy ending.

Through these narrated stories we are able to ascertain a list of shared experiences that each of us can recall from the top of our heads. Patton's dog mourning his death, Churchill's apprehension to get involved in WWII, Lincoln's last moments, MacArthur's quest to peacefully occupy Japan, Payne's views on democracy and self governance, Jefferson's quest to set up a Constitution that would be timeless and iron clad. Einstein's quest to solve general relativity with an 8th Grade education. But these aren't the stories we are here to talk about this evening.

Garnett has accomplished here an amazing representation of what we are most proud of, our service members. Each of the 313 banners now displayed has a story. Each face represents a native of Garnett in uniform, and each of them partaking in their own story worth telling. These banners represent pieces of our history that if we take the time to listen to their story we can see each of their own influence in the world. Among these faces are a person that helped liberate Buchenwald Concentration Camp at the close of WWII, they show the face of a POW shot down over Europe, they show young faces and smiles before deploying to Viet Nam, they show business men in their youth before they became successful lawyers and shop owners, they show a young man's face killed in Afghanistan. These faces all have unique experiences and stories that deserve to be told and remembered here in Garnett most of all.

Through countless hours of research, I have some of their stories, but with a list this long and growing, I've barely scratched the surface. As a young person, I look up at these banners and see a pair of eyes asking us to remember those stories. Let's do the math, 194 banners, 194 faces, that's about 396 eyeballs staring back at us. That's a heavy thought.

With permission from the family, I'm going to share a story that doesn't have the happiest of endings. Along Olive Street is a whole row of banners representing the Sheern family. There's quite a few of them. On the far south end of that Sheern family section is also a Shinkle. Years ago, while researching the bronze plaques from in front of Garnett High School, I started reading about Gene Sheern and John Shinkle. While trying to learn about them, I poured over their Garnett High School yearbooks. In every

picture that Gene Sheern was in, he was right next to John Shinkle and not because alphabetically that's the way they were listed. In Football, Men's Chorus, Debate Club, and more, where you find Gene you can most certainly find John.

These two young men clearly grew up here together. In the pictures they certainly look like they are the best of friends. One could almost say they acted a bit like brothers. John and Gene were not yet 18 at Graduation time and convinced their parents to sign for them to enlist in an attempt to avoid being drafted by the United States Army. Upon their graduation from High School in May of 1944, the two boys enlisted in the United States Navy with parental permission and together they reported to Camp Wallace, Texas. James Eugene Sheern and John Kenneth Shinkle came home after basic training on a 10 day leave before shipping out on the USS Mount Hood at the end of that summer. That was the last time they set foot in Anderson County. That was the last time they saw their families. The last time they hugged their mothers.

The USS Mount Hood was converted merchant ship, and was commissioned on August 6, 1944. She set sail bound for the Pacific Theater on October 21, carrying around 3,800 tons of ammunition and explosives in its five holds. She would eventually anchor in Seeadler Harbor on Manus Island, the largest American Naval Base west of Pearl Harbor. It was there on the morning of the 10th of November that while dispersing ammunition to other vessels preparing for the Philippine Invasion that the USS Mount Hood exploded. At 8:55 in the morning the terrible explosion sent a smoke cloud 7,000 feet into the air. The largest piece of the ship recovered measured 16 ft by 10 ft. The ship's former position was shown by a trench in the harbor floor 300 feet long, 50 feet wide and 35 feet deep. The Mount Hood and all it's crew aboard simply disappeared. The tragedy took the lives of 49 men from nearby ships, and 295 men aboard the Mount Hood, including S 1/c Gene Sheern and S 1/c John Shinkle. There were only 18 survivors who had been ashore when the ship exploded.

December 7th 1944, published in the Garnett Review on the front page are two smiling faces, their crisp blue uniforms with white trim show up in the black and white photos very well. The small two paragraph section reads:

*"Two Garnett homes were saddened this week upon receiving news from the War Department of sons missing in action. Mr and Mrs Frank Shinkle and Mr and Mrs Ralph Sheern, Sr were notified that their sons, John Shinkle S 1/c and Gene Sheern S 1/c were reported missing in action after the accidental explosion of the ammunition vessel, the Mount Hood, on which they were serving at an advanced base in the Central Pacific."*

From his duty station in the South Pacific at the time of the explosion, older brother Lt. Ralph Sheern read over the teletype on the USS Gallatin that Mount Hood had exploded and his little brother was gone. Neither of the men's remains were ever recovered. Two sets of devastated parents would mourn their sons, forever bearing guilt that they had caused their son's untimely death by allowing their enlistment at an early age. It would seem that these two young men, who did so many things together in

life, growing from boys to men, finishing school, enlisting in the Navy, graduating basic training and being stationed together, that the most fitting end if not to have come home together was to have been together in death. Both of them are still listed as Missing in Action. They are listed together on the Tablets of the Missing American Pacific Memorial in Manila, Philippines. Both men have memorial markers in Anderson County. And on Olive Street, both men have banners hanging next to each other that beg us to remember and tell their story.

As you leave here tonight, after hearing all of these names and seeing their faces above us, I ask that if you know any of their stories, that you start sharing them. Allowing those stories to be narrated by the men or women on those banners means that their experience is worth noting and places them in a position to teach others that we can all impact the world around us. Taking the time to listen to the stories means that not only do we value their experience as a service member, but we also value them as humans. We can all partake in this form of remembrance, which is so easy to do this close to Memorial Day. The greater challenge is remembering it on days like when our own struggles seem so much greater. Choosing to remember the eyes looking back at us from those banners and choosing to listen to their stories, I promise each of you, is not only amazing for the listener, but therapeutic for the teller. All it takes is being willing to be part of a little bit of story time.