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From the Archives

A Well-Traveled Class Ring Comes Home

J. OVERTON

While US Army Technical Sergeant James Gordon Deaton was suffering frostbite and German shelling in surrounded Bastogne, Belgium, his high school class ring was in the tropical Pacific Theater with the Marines. Deaton had loaned the ring, from Tennessee's Carter High School, class of 1940, to the man who would become his brother-in-law, Lee Burnette. Before the United States entered World War II, Deaton and Burnette had gone together to enlist in the Navy, but Deaton was turned down because of color-blindness. Burnett was assigned to the battleship *Oklahoma*. Sometime in 1941 he lost the ring in a shipboard dice game.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor and sinking of the *Oklahoma*, which killed 415 of her crew, Deaton assumed the ring had gone down with ship, or was on the finger of some anonymous sailor. He enlisted in the Army in 1943 and served with the 755th Field Artillery Battalion throughout the European Theater. After the war, Burnette stayed in the Navy, Deaton returned to Tennessee, and the ring was mostly forgotten. But in 1960, the secretary at Carter High School called Deaton to say his ring was being returned. Deaton thought salvage divers had recovered it from the *Oklahoma* wreckage or from a dead sailor's body. But he then received a letter beginning, "I believe I have a ring that belongs to you." The letter, from Norman L. Currin of San Diego, explained how Deaton's ring had survived the Pearl Harbor attack:

I was on the USS *Oklahoma* as gunnery sergeant in the Marine detachment at the time the ship was sunk. I remember picking up the ring from the deck as the ship was sinking, sort of a reflex action, as I can't remember just where on the ship it was. Since Dec. 7, 1941, the ring has traveled many thousands of miles in sea-bags, trunks, and barrels, and been in and out of storage many times.

For years Currin had wondered about the ring and its inscription, "J.G.D." and "Carter High School." In 1959 he contacted Jostens, the ring's manufacturer, and they gave him the address of Carter High School. He wrote to the school's secretary, who contacted Deaton's mother and asked if her son was a Carter graduate. She gave Deaton's address to Currin, and the combat veteran ring finally returned home.

Sources:

Bart Pittman, "Much-Traveled Class Ring Recovered after 19 Years," *Knoxville Journal* (Tennessee), 9 March 1960, pp. 1-2.

Interviews with Mr. Deaton.