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Nekoosa WWII soldier laid to rest after going missing in battle 73 years ago

Keith Uhlig, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin Published 7:31 a.m. CT Sept. 24, 2017 | Updated 8:25 a.m. CT Sept. 24, 2017

Gerald "Bud" Wipfli, one of 14 children, entered the U.S. Army in 1942 when he was 21 years old. He went missing in the battle of Hurtgen Forest.



(Photo: Alexandra Wimley/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

NEKOOSA - Pfc. Gerald Wipfli has been laid to rest at last.

Wipfli had been listed as [missing in action](https://www.fieldsofhonor-database.com/index.php/en/american-war-cemetery-henri-chapelle-w/54050-wipfli-gerald-f) (<https://www.fieldsofhonor-database.com/index.php/en/american-war-cemetery-henri-chapelle-w/54050-wipfli-gerald-f>) since November of 1944. The U.S. Army soldier from Nekoosa disappeared near Schmidt, Germany, in the midst of the battle for [Hurtgen Forest](http://www.pbs.org/thewar/detail_5224.htm) (http://www.pbs.org/thewar/detail_5224.htm).

Wipfli's remains were found in 2010 by a utility crew laying cable in the region. It took years and the efforts of the workers, German authorities and the [Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency](http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Article/1235077/soldier-missing-from-world-war-ii-accounted-for-wipfli/) (<http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Article/1235077/soldier-missing-from-world-war-ii-accounted-for-wipfli/>) to use DNA evidence to clearly identify the body as that of Wipfli.

He was known as Bud when he was growing up in Nekoosa, said Wipfli's niece Ann Roboul, 66, of Nekoosa. His family held a funeral and a burial with full military rites on Saturday.

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Pfc. Gerald Wipfli went missing in action in Germany in November of 1944. (Photo: Photo courtesy of Ann Roboul)

"We never thought in a million years this would happen. It's just amazing," Roboul said. "It does give you some sense of closure. ... But it's also bittersweet. It's sad that his (deceased) brothers and sisters, those who knew him well, and his parents never knew what happened to him."

Roboul is the daughter of Elizabeth Barth Michaels, 91, of Nekoosa. Michaels is Wipfli's sister and the last living member of his immediate family. Michaels was the youngest daughter and Wipfli was the youngest son of Dominick and Anna Wipfli, who had 12 other children.

Wipfli, according to family stories, was an All-American kid, a guy who would have made a great subject for a Norman Rockwell painting. In his pictures, Roboul said, "he had a great smile. He was the all-around good neighbor who went off to war. He looks innocent and hopeful."

He was born on Feb. 13, 1921. He worked at Nekoosa Port Edwards Paper for a bit before entering the Army in September 1942 to fight in World War II. He was 21.



Elizabeth Barth Michaels, 91, the only living sibling of Pfc. Gerald F. Wipfli of Nekoosa, Wis., holds the ceremonial flag during Wipfli's burial service on Saturday, Sept. 23, 2017, in Nekoosa. Wipfli was reported missing in action in 1944 during World War II. His remains were found in 2010. (Photo: Alexandra Wimley/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

Wipfli regularly wrote letters to his parents, Roboul said, and from them "he seems like a very nice man. ... He was very upbeat even through what he was going through. He was Catholic, and he always told my grandparents how he tried to go to church as often as he could.

"He told Grandma how good the people of France were, how they gave him food. He said he never went hungry."

Wipfli was a runner, a soldier who delivered messages by running from unit to unit. On the day he went missing, he was part of one of the most infamous battles fought by the U.S. Army.

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Officers from Fort Leonard Wood stand during the funeral service for Pfc. Gerald F. Wipfli of Nekoosa, Wis., on Saturday, Sept. 23, 2017, in Nekoosa. Wipfli was reported missing in action in 1944 during World War II. His remains were found in 2010. (Photo: Alexandra Wimley/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

In late August 1944, the Nazis had been pushed out of France. Optimism was running high, and Americans believed the war would soon be over. But the Germans held fast on the western edge of their country, and one of the central strong points of their defensive line was at the Hurtgen Forest.

The three-month campaign to take the region resulted in almost 33,000 American casualties and little tactical success. Wipfli was among 33 soldiers listed as missing in action from his company on Nov. 4, 1944. A year later, the Army declared that Wipfli was presumed dead.

Wipfli's loss meant deep and enduring pain for his family.

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A member of the military stands as officers from Fort Leonard Wood perform the ceremonial folding of the flag during the burial service for Pfc. Gerald F. Wipfli of Nekoosa, Wis., on Saturday, Sept. 23, 2017, in Nekoosa. Wipfli was reported missing in action in 1944 during World War II. His remains were found in 2010. (Photo: Alexandra Wimley/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

Roboul knew the fact that Wipfli's body was never found was hard on his mother, Anna Wipfli.

Anna Wipfli died in 1961, when Roboul was young, but she remembers her grandmother as being "a very soft-spoken lady. ... I can only imagine what it was like for her to not know what happened."

Officials believe that Wipfli likely was killed by shrapnel, Roboul said, and that it likely was an instant death.

"It's nice to know that he didn't suffer," Roboul said.

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Officers from Fort Leonard Wood walk away after performing the ceremonial folding of the flag during the burial service for Pfc. Gerald F. Wipfli of Nekoosa, Wis., on Saturday, September 23, 2017, in Nekoosa. Wipfli was reported missing in action in 1944 during World War II. His remains were found in 2010. Alexandra Wimley/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin (Photo: Alexandra Wimley/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

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