

MPD wants to do right by veteran

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS

Staff

Much of Sammy H. Clark's life is a mystery, but the Marion Police Department is confident of one fact. Clark served his country. They want to honor that truth.

The 66-year-old Clark died alone in his Marion apartment. No one even knows on exactly what day – just sometime between Nov. 29 and Dec. 2. According to Marion Police Chief John Clair, evidence suggests Clark died of a heart attack.

He was found after people realized they hadn't seen him for several days, and a Marion Housing Authority staffer went to his

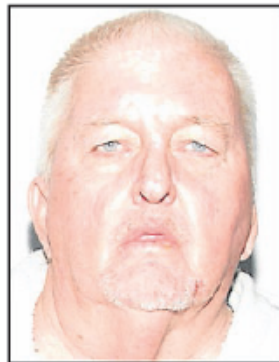
apartment.

The MPD, Clair said, immediately started trying to find Clark's next of kin. They searched his few belongings and found a letter from his ex-wife. They reached out to her and found that the couple had been separated for more than two decades. They had no children. Clark's former wife told police that he was estranged from his siblings when they were married and she never met any of his relatives.

The MPD did learn that he was born in Kingsport, Tenn., on May 21, 1953, the son of Charles William Clark, a Bristol native, and Ruth June Hill Clark, originally from Alabama. He had a brother Robert and a sis-

ter Freda. With the help of Kingsport police, the MPD tried to track down family there with no luck.

Another piece of mail helped officers learn a bit more about Clark. It was from the Veterans Administration. Clair checked with the Department of Veterans Affairs and learned that Clark was a U.S. Army veteran, serving his country from September 1970 until



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The only photo of Sammy H. Clark that police could locate was his DMV photo.

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Veteran

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May 1972.

Even the military details are scant, but, he served overseas, likely in Europe, as a medical corpsman.

When he went in the service, his home of record was Marion, N.C.

The MPD kept searching for family and information, but came up short. They pieced enough together, Clair said, to understand that recent years have been hard for Clark.

Clair observed that Clark was a Vietnam era veteran. Whether they saw combat or not, the police chief said, it was a difficult time for veterans, especially when they came home and were often greeted with disdain by the war's many opponents. "We now know so much about the trauma they experienced," Clair

said.

Clair, who also served in the U.S. Army, said, "Even though there's so much we don't know, we do know that he served his nation. For that, he deserves our best. As a vet myself, I'm particularly drawn to doing the best by him."

So the MPD is joining forces with several community partners to give Clark a proper service with military rites.

Typically, individuals who die without a loved one to claim the body are cremated and given a pauper's burial using county funds. Clair said it's not an uncommon occurrence.

First, a funeral home has to petition the court to release the individual's body. In this case, Clair said, Seaver-Brown Funeral Home is handling the legal request and has also agreed to cover the costs of Clark's burial. The town of

Marion will provide a plot, and the VA will cover the costs of a headstone.

Marion's VFW Post will provide military rites, and a local minister will officiate the service.

Clair said the MPD is sharing Clark's story to raise awareness of his death and possibly connect with family and to reach out to veterans' groups, especially those connected with the Vietnam War, in the hope that they might participate in his funeral.

Clair said a specific date for the service is yet to be determined, but he's anticipating it will be in January. An announcement and online obituary will be posted once the information is determined.

"We just want to do the right thing," Clair concluded.

Veteran's funeral service is planned

Media coverage helps find family, friends

BY STEPHANIE PORTER-NICHOLS

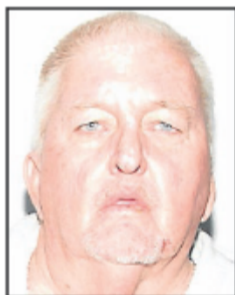
Staff

Sammy Clark died alone.

The U.S. Army veteran will not, however, go to his final resting place unaccompanied.

His life will be honored by relatives, old friends, fellow veterans, and caring strangers, who one of Clark's nieces now calls family.

Clark died sometime between Nov. 29 and Dec. 2 of an apparent heart attack in his Marion apartment. Members of the Marion Police Department wanted to notify his next of kin as soon as possible, but they kept hitting brick walls. After searching through his meager possessions, they found two pieces of mail that they hoped would connect them. One led to Clark's ex-wife, but she couldn't point them to relatives. The other communication came from the Veterans Administration. The MPD confirmed that Clark was indeed a veteran, but they still were unable to find any family.



Sammy Clark

The police agency could have stopped there and proceeded with the paperwork necessary

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Service

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to give Clark a pauper's burial, but the MPD's chief, John Clair, is also a veteran. He rallied his department, Marion's VFW post, other town officials and Seaver-Brown Funeral Home to provide Clark with a proper burial. Clair shared the story with the media in hopes that other veterans' groups would join the effort.

The poignant story did touch and rally many people, but it also did what other efforts couldn't. The coverage helped find members of Clark's family, including a brother, Robert, in Kingsport and nieces and nephews in North Carolina. The News & Messenger shared its article with The McDowell News, a sister paper that serves Marion, N.C., which was listed as Clark's home of record with the VA. There, old friends recognized their one-time classmate.

Jerry Broome saw the North Carolina newspaper's coverage and immediately thought, "This is our Sammy Clark."

Broome came to know Clark after his family moved to Marion, N.C., from Kingsport, Tenn. He and Clark were the same age and went to school together. Broome remembered Sammy being a smaller, shy boy with red hair. While he doesn't remember Sammy being bullied, he acknowledged that it takes time for a youngster to get his bearings when moving into a new community.

Still, Broome and Clark shared a love of baseball. Noting that Sammy was a Cincinnati Reds fan and he was a Pittsburgh Pirates follower, Broome said that alone gave the boys plenty of conversation fodder.

Broome's most vivid memory of Sammy was formed when both boys were 17. Sammy had left school and joined the Army. After completing basic training, he returned to Marion and paid a visit to Broome in his full dress uniform.

"He was so proud," Broome said Monday. Sammy seemed to have gained confidence and was in a good place, his old friend remembered.

The pair lost touch as a short time later Broome joined the U.S. Air Force.

While the early days of his military service filled Sammy with pride, the Vietnam era veteran seems to have not come through his service unscathed.

Clark served his coun-

"We're humbled. We're grateful. We're blessed."

Deborah Melton

One of Sammy Clark's nieces

try from September 1970 until May 1972, the Vietnam War era. It's unclear whether he served in Vietnam. His discharge papers from the Department of Veterans Affairs indicate he served in Europe, but Scott Huskins, a Marion, N.C., resident who is retired from law enforcement, knew Clark and believes he may have served a tour in Vietnam as well. Huskins remembered Monday that Clark was an air medic.

Huskins also knew Clark in more recent years. He recalled him working for a vending company and a detail shop in the '90s. By about 2000 though, Huskins had also lost touch with his distant cousin.

Deborah Melton, one of Clark's nieces, lost touch too, but she's grateful to all who helped reconnect her family with her uncle in time for his funeral. "We're humbled. We're grateful. We're blessed," she said Sunday.

The Hickory, N.C., resident knew Clark well as a youngster. With a significant age difference in their parents, Clark was close in age to his nieces and nephews. "We grew up with him. He was more like a big brother," she remembered.

His niece also recalled his warmth. "I loved seeing him smile," she said.

Melton also remembered that Clark had a special affection for his mother and was family oriented, but began drifting away after he returned from his military service. She believed he struggled with his mental health.

Chief Clair observed early on that Clark was a Vietnam era veteran. Whether they saw combat or not, the police chief said, it was a difficult time for veterans, especially when they came home and were often greeted with disdain by the war's many opponents. "We now know so much about the trauma they experienced," Clair said.

Broome agreed. He also was a veteran in that era who didn't serve in Vietnam, but recalled the disrespect and being told not to wear his uniform when he flew home. "It was a sad time in our history," he said.

Broome reflected that Clark always "seemed comfortable back in the shadows," but he is saddened to think his old friend died alone and may

have been alone more than he wanted to be.

He hopes to attend Clark's funeral.

Melton expressed gratitude repeatedly to the people of Marion, Va., for their efforts and caring. "They cared enough about him to see him as a person," she said. Words of thanks seemed inadequate to Clark's niece. "Your heart can't speak what there are no words for," she said. Marion's concern for her uncle "has touched everybody in different ways, but left us all better people."

She didn't know why Clark chose to live in Marion, but she believes "he found his way home one way or another." The people of Marion, she said, "have become family now."

Working with the family, Seaver-Brown Funeral Home has planned graveside services to be held Friday, Dec. 20, at 2 p.m. at Mountain Home National Cemetery, 215 Heroes Drive, Mountain Home, Tenn. The United States Army Honor Guard will provide military rites.

Blake Frazier, of Seaver-Brown, said that a procession will leave Marion at 12:30 p.m.

Numerous generous people have been touched by Clark's story, Frazier said. He noted that Emmett Peake, now chairman of the board of Funeral Holdings in Radford but also a 1968 Marion Senior High School graduate, provided Clark's casket.

Frazier said it's been wonderful to watch the community come together and show its concern for veterans.

Seaver-Brown's staff, Frazier said, is privileged to be handling the funeral arrangements, but he believes any of the county's funeral homes would have done the same.

Chief Clair concurred that the kindness of strangers has been inspiring. He and some of his officers will be part of Friday's procession. While he hoped to rally veterans to Clark's service, Clair is pleased that his family has been located and strangers and family can unite to accompany the veteran on his final earthly journey.

Melton hopes to hug Clair and Frazier when she meets them and express her affection to the community. "It's the way God would want us to be," she said.