

# Beat the Drums Slowly

By Chris Gibbons      Published May 26, 2013



Louis R. McGinnis: RCHS Class of 1913



McGinnis's grave at Holy Cross Cemetery

*"Then beat the drums slowly, play the fifes lowly,  
Sound the death march as you carry me along,  
And fire your muskets right over my coffin,  
For I'm a young soldier cut down in his prime"  
(The Soldier Cut Down in His Prime - old Irish ballad)*

I huddled in the cold rain with my sons, Jack and Ryan, in Yeadon's Holy Cross Cemetery and unfolded the paper that listed the burial registry information of the soldier that I was looking for. It was Easter Sunday, and many of the graves had fresh potted flowers beside them which brought a welcome respite of color among the drab gray sky and headstones. The tapping of the raindrops on the paper steadily increased, which hastened our search. "It states that he's in this section here, Section 19-Lot 48-Range 9, but I don't see any markers", I said to my boys as I surveyed the numerous headstones in front of us. "We'll have to split up, each take a row, and hope that we find him."

We searched for nearly 10 minutes before I finally saw the headstone that bears his name. "I found it!", I yelled. "He's over here." As my sons hurried over, I noticed that there were no flowers at his gravesite, and my initial feeling of satisfaction was quickly overwhelmed by an unexpected sense of sadness. Although he died in 1918, I felt that this was the grave of someone I knew.

My ongoing two-year search for the Roman Catholic High School Alumni who died in World War I led us to the cemetery that day to find the grave of Louis Robert McGinnis from the Class of 1913. Roman's records revealed that 14 alumni died during WW I, but only listed two of their names. A third name was found when a relative of that alum contacted me directly. But McGinnis was the first alum that I found through a meticulous and time-consuming process of comparing names from old Roman yearbooks to a list of Philadelphians who died during WW I.

McGinnis was born August 24, 1895, and his nickname was “Zeke”. He was one of six sons of Andrew and Anastasia McGinnis, and, like me, his paternal grandparents were Irish immigrants. He lived on 58<sup>th</sup> street in Southwest Philadelphia, and prior to that, on Snyder Ave. in South Philly. At Roman, McGinnis was a popular kid, and the 1913 yearbook eerily stated that “McGinnis will never be forgotten by the members of the Class of 1913. Not only was he popular among the fellows of his own class, but with the whole student body of R.C.H.S.” It also stated that “Lou” was on the track team, won a big race at Fairmount Park as a junior, and was a hit in the school play.

Following Roman, he went on to the University of Pennsylvania. In 1917, he joined the U.S. Army’s new Aviation Section, a forerunner to the Air Force, and achieved the rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenant before he died on August 16, 1918, just eight days shy of his 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday. The circumstances surrounding his death are unknown. Perhaps he was a fighter pilot and was shot down, or maybe his death was more mundane – during a training exercise or from the deadly 1918 flu pandemic that killed thousands of U.S. soldiers. I’m hopeful that I’ll eventually find the answers.

After we found his grave, Ryan ran back to the car and retrieved the small American flag and Roman Catholic High School Alumni plaque that we had brought with us. We fixed them in the ground and observed a moment of silence. I then realized that my search for the lost boys from Roman who died in World War I had reached a level of difficulty that I never anticipated. I had naively assumed it was simply a search for 11 missing names, but my research had revealed much more, and now Louis McGinnis was no longer just a name to me. He seemed more like an old friend or classmate, and it made for a poignant moment as three Cahillites from Roman stood at the grave of another who graduated 100 years prior. “He died a long way from home,” I said aloud as we watched the rain pelt his headstone.

We headed back to the car, and while I was proud of my sons for helping me, I certainly wasn’t surprised. Jack’s a recent Roman graduate, and Ryan is a junior there now. Our school’s motto is “Brothers for Life”, so they were as determined as I was to find his grave.

A graveyard is a changeless place, seemingly immune to the passage of time, and as we drove along the cemetery’s narrow path towards the exit, I wondered what it was like on that day in 1918 when Zeke was laid to rest. Was it a gray, rainy day like today? Were the mourners in attendance able to provide some measure of comfort to his grief-stricken family? Were his former classmates from Roman there? And did his military honor guard beat the drums slowly, play the fifes lowly, and sound the death march as they carried our brother to his grave?

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