

A bond neither war nor death could break

They grew up doors apart but didn't fall in love until he was thousands of miles away. Now, at last, they can be together.

By Mark Di Ionno
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Colleen Fay didn't know much about Pfc. Kenneth Brown when she noticed his headstone being overrun by an oak tree trunk. The cross, the words "Marine" and "World War II" and the year of his death, 1944, told her enough.

"I thought, 'Here's a guy who gave his life for his country. He deserves better,'" she said.

The odd coupling of stone and tree not only put her on a mission to get Brown a new marker, but raised her curiosity about the man buried there, and those he left behind.

This is the effect of cemetery wandering, which Fay, an orthopedic surgeon, admits she likes to do. All those names, and dates from different times, evidence of personal histories. Colleen Fay wanted to know Kenneth Brown's. It took a few years to unravel, but what she found was a love story of profound tragedy and inspiration.

"It's sad and beautiful at the same time," she said.

The trunk of the tree that embraces Brown's marker is shaped a little like a heart, a heart split in half by the stone.

It is the perfect metaphor for this story, because the broken heart belongs to the girl he left behind, the girl who loved him as she grew old alone, the girl who loved him till the day she died.

Kenny Brown was a Montclair boy so moved by the attack on Pearl Harbor he left high school in his junior year to join the Marine Corps. He was 17 when he enlisted the day before Christmas 1941.

Claire Smith was only 15 when Kenny Brown left their Wildwood Avenue neighborhood for the Corps. She was friends with his little sister,

The Star-Ledger
\$1.00 | FRIDAY, MAY 18, 2012 | N.J.COM | FINAL EDITION

JERSEY'S ROCKIN' WEEKEND
Your guide to music festival madness at Bamboozle, Electric Daisy Carnival. In Ticket

Pot bill turns jail time into a small fine
Marijuana measure in N.J. Assembly: Having fewer than 15 grams no crime
15 GRAMS OF POT IS ENOUGH FOR ABOUT 30 JOINTS

Devils are promising a heavenly windfall
Playoff games to pump cash into Newark

Donna Summer dead at 63, but her trademark beats live on in today's music

THE EXHIBIT
THE SECRET WORLD OF ESPIONAGE

Discovery
TIMES SQUARE

WE SEE ALL. NOW YOU CAN TOO.
MORE THAN A MUSEUM



JERSEY'S ROCKIN' WEEKEND

Your guide to music festival madness at Bamboozle, Electric Daisy Carnival. In Ticket

Pot bill turns jail time into a small fine
Marijuana measure in N.J. Assembly: Having fewer than 15 grams no crime
15 GRAMS OF POT IS ENOUGH FOR ABOUT 30 JOINTS

Devils are promising a heavenly windfall
Playoff games to pump cash into Newark

Donna Summer dead at 63, but her trademark beats live on in today's music

THE EXHIBIT
THE SECRET WORLD OF ESPIONAGE

Discovery
TIMES SQUARE

WE SEE ALL. NOW YOU CAN TOO.
MORE THAN A MUSEUM

The Star-Ledger
\$1.00 | FRIDAY, MAY 18, 2012 | N.J.COM | FINAL EDITION

JERSEY'S ROCKIN' WEEKEND
Your guide to music festival madness at Bamboozle, Electric Daisy Carnival. In Ticket

Pot bill turns jail time into a small fine
Marijuana measure in N.J. Assembly: Having fewer than 15 grams no crime
15 GRAMS OF POT IS ENOUGH FOR ABOUT 30 JOINTS

Devils are promising a heavenly windfall
Playoff games to pump cash into Newark

Donna Summer dead at 63, but her trademark beats live on in today's music

THE EXHIBIT
THE SECRET WORLD OF ESPIONAGE

Discovery
TIMES SQUARE

WE SEE ALL. NOW YOU CAN TOO.
MORE THAN A MUSEUM

A bond neither war nor death could break

By Mark Di Ionno
A columnist

Fay, an orthopedic surgeon, admits she likes to do. All those names, and dates from different times, evidence of personal histories. Colleen Fay wanted to know Kenneth Brown's. It took a few years to unravel, but what she found was a love story of profound tragedy and inspiration.

"It's sad and beautiful at the same time," she said.

The trunk of the tree that embraces Brown's marker is shaped a little like a heart, a heart split in half by the stone.

It is the perfect metaphor for this story, because the broken heart belongs to the girl he left behind, the girl who loved him as she grew old alone, the girl who loved him till the day she died.

Donna Summer dead at 63, but her trademark beats live on in today's music

She was called the Queen of Disco and was that crown with grace and power, according to her fans. But Donna Summer was more than a disco diva. She was a pioneer. Long after the first wave of disco passed into history, Donna Summer has remained essential listening.

Few musicians can boast that their recordings had a profound effect on the course of contemporary music. Summer, the singer, songwriter and electronic originator who succeeded in being cover priority, according to her fans, was one of those few. She was 63.

Her discography, consisting of 10 studio albums and 100 singles, was a testament to her talent and her ability to reinvent herself. Her music, characterized by its infectious grooves and her powerful voice, was a blend of soul, funk, and disco. Her recordings had a profound effect on the course of contemporary music.

letter. Maybe because it was a nice thing to do, to give him a little taste of home. Maybe she had a schoolgirl crush on him. But she wrote him, and he wrote back. Again and again. She told him about her life at Immaculate Conception High School, where she was on the basketball team and the Social Committee. She wrote about big bands, Harry James and Glenn Miller, and she told him what movies were playing in downtown Montclair.

He asked about her parents and little sister, Joan, and other people from the street.

He did not write about forcing the Japanese out of caves with flame throwers, or watching his fellow Marines die in numbers that remain shocking today, or the battles he fought at Guadalcanal, Tarawa and Saipan. The savagery, the filth, the bad food, the disease, the decomposing bodies, all was left out. He knew the letters were being read by Navy censors, who stamped each envelope once approved.

Over two years, he sent her 39 letters. In the first few, he signed off with "Fondly." By the end, the closing had changed to "All my love."

The last one was postmarked May 3, 1944. He was killed six weeks later, on June 16, 1944, the second day of the invasion of Saipan, among the first of 2,949 American dead. He was 20.

Five days earlier, Claire Smith had graduated from high school.

Within a few feet of Kenneth Brown at Immaculate Conception Cemetery in Montclair are at least 20 other military tablets. The limestone markers are the uniform, arch-white stones that stretch eternally at Arlington and other national cemeteries where war dead are brought home.

All those wars. All that life. All those left behind. All the holes in lives never filled, all the longing and grieving, finally coming to rest all these decades later for the World War II generation.

Who was left for Kenneth Brown?

Colleen Fay wanted to know, as she made efforts to preserve his headstone. She contacted legislators, veterans groups, the Boys Scouts - "I thought it might make a good Eagle Scout project," she said. Finally, her brother, a former Marine, suggested the Marine Corps League.

Commandant Timothy Daudelin of the Saddle River Detachment came out and arranged for a new headstone, which was donated by monument maker Scott Rullis, whose father was a Marine. They planned a dedication ceremony.

Fay then set out to find family members of

THE STAR LEDGER
FRIDAY, MAY 19, 2012

DiIorno

... the broken heart belongs to the girl he left behind, the girl who loved him as she grew old, the girl who loved him till the day she died.

Kenny Brown was a Montclair boy so moved by the attack on Pearl Harbor he left high school in his junior year to join the Marine Corps. He was 17 when he enlisted the day before Christmas 1941.

Claire Smith was only 15 when Kenny Brown left their Willowood Avenue neighborhood for the Corps. She was friends with his little sister, Betty Ann, and lived a few doors down.

No one knows why she wrote him that first letter. Maybe because it was a nice thing to do, to give him a little taste of home. Maybe she had a schoolgirl crush on him.

But she wrote him, and he wrote back. Again and again. She told him about her life at Immaculate Conception High School, where she was on the basketball team and the Social Committee. She wrote about big bands, Harry James and Glenn Miller, and she told him what movies were playing in downtown Montclair.

He asked about her parents and little sister, Joan, and other people from the street.

He did not write about forcing the Japanese out of caves with flame throwers, or watching his fellow Marines die in numbers that remain shocking today, or the battles he fought at Guadalcanal, Tarawa and Saipan. The savagery, the filth, the bad food, the disease, the decomposing bodies, all was left out. He knew the letters were being read by Navy censors, who stamped each envelope once approved.

Over two years, he sent her 39 letters. In the first few, he signed off with "Fondly." By the end, the closing had changed to "All my love."

The last one was postmarked May 3, 1944. He was killed six weeks later, on June 16, 1944, the second day of the invasion of Saipan, among the first of 2,949 American dead. He was 20.

Five days earlier, Claire Smith had graduated from high school.

Within a few feet of Kenneth Brown at Immaculate Conception Cemetery in Montclair are at least 20 other military tablets. The limestone markers are the uniform, arch-white stones that stretch eternally at Arlington and other national cemeteries where war dead are brought home.

All those wars. All that life. All those left behind. All the holes in lives never filled, all the longing and grieving, finally coming to rest all these decades later for the World War II generation.

Who was left for Kenneth Brown?

Colleen Fay wanted to know, as she made efforts to preserve his headstone. She contacted legislators, veterans groups, the Boys Scouts - "I

... she was very independent. Eaton said. "She lived alone and I really believe she liked it that way."

... She died last July 11, possibly in her sleep, at age 85.

... On Sunday at 5 p.m., the Marine Corps League will hold a ceremony to dedicate PFC. Kenneth Brown's new stone. It will not replace the marker in the tree, but will be laid in the ground near it.

... Claire Smith is also buried in Immaculate Conception in Kenilworth, N.J. The Marine Corps League is now planning a headstone and possibly a ceremony for her, the same as for the man she never got to marry.

... Because he gave his life to his country, and she gave a part of hers, too.

Mark DiIorno (973) 382-1728 or mdillon@starledger.com

Claire Fay left, pointing the headstone of a Marine killed in WWII being topped by a tree at Immaculate Conception Cemetery and set out to learn his story. Above, some of the many letters PFC. Kenneth Brown had sent Claire Smith while he was serving overseas.

DONATE CAR GARAGE TRUCKS BOATS OR RV'S FROM MAXIMUM 75% MARKET VALUE

HELP A CHILD WITH CANCER

1-888-788-4673

Pool Super Sale THIS WEEKEND ONLY 6000 OFF

19,499

WIN BENEFIT JUVENILE DIABETES

POOL TOWN

800-882-0152

MAKE IT THE BEST SUMMER EVER WITH UP TO

30% OFF

SERIOUSLY GREAT OUTDOOR GEAR & CLOTHING

ANNIVERSARY SALE, MAY 18-28

REI MEMBERS SAVE 20% ON ONE FULL-PRICE ITEM

| | | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| SHOP YOUR WAY | 100+ STORES | REI.COM | MOBILE |
| CARLE PLACE 96.873.8840 | EAST HANOVER 973.881.9358 | NORWALK 203.838.9358 | PARAMUS 201.261.5600 |
| | | | SONG 202.600.0908 |
| | | | YONKERS 914.800.9500 |

Brown, to invite them to the ceremony. It was then that she found out about the mystery woman.

The woman visited often, for seven decades, leaving Easter flowers and Christmas wreaths and Memorial Day flags. Sometimes she came with another woman, but mostly alone. Sometimes she spoke to cemetery caretakers, who told Fay about her.

Fay investigated. It wasn't Brown's sister. She moved away and had since died. The nieces Kenneth Brown never knew were in Florida.

It was in a conversation with a childhood friend of Kenny Brown named Stuart O'Brien she first heard the name Claire Smith.

"She spent her whole life with him in her

heart," O'Brien said.

* * *

"My sister dated other men after Kenny died, but she never found the right one," said Claire Smith's sister, Joan Eaton. "There was no doubt in my mind, if he came home, they would have gotten married. It started out as just pen pals, but by the end, they were very close. If he came home ..."

But he didn't, and Claire Smith moved through life without him. She joined the Marine Corps after the war - "I really believe she did that to somehow be closer to Kenny," Eaton said - and she had her share of adventures, once driving cross-country with a few girlfriends.

"She was very independent," Eaton said. "She lived alone and I really believe she liked it that way."

She died last July 9, peacefully, in her sleep, at age 85.

* * *

On Sunday at 4 p.m., the Marine Corps League will hold a ceremony to dedicate Pfc. Kenneth Brown's new stone. It will not replace the marker in the tree, but will be laid in the ground near it.

Claire Smith is also buried in Immaculate Conception in the same plot as her parents, a few hundred yards from Kenneth Brown. The Marine Corps League is now planning a headstone and possibly a ceremony for her, the same as for the man she never got to marry.

Because he gave his life to his country. And she gave a part of hers, too.

*Mark Di Ionno: (973) 392-1728 or
mdiionno@starledger.com*