

Accidental Discharge

Teddy Gaines was looking forward to returning home. He had been in France for a year and a half, had seen the Great War through to its end, and was anticipating a reunion with his wife and their toddler daughter. During a visit with his friend and comrade, Major H. C. Tillman, Teddy seemed “jolly” and “happy,” but within an hour, Gaines was dead.

Theodore Williams Gaines was an agriculture major and a member of Clemson’s Class of 1909. After leaving Clemson, Gaines returned to his hometown of Greenwood and took employment as a cotton buyer for the Greenwood Cotton Mill. The mill’s president, J. C. Self, described Gaines as “true blue, loyal, faithful, upright, and a friend.”



In June 1916, Gaines married Miss Wilhelmina Foell of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who was then the superintendent of the Greenwood Hospital. Their daughter was born the following summer.

When a coastal artillery company was organized in Greenwood, Gaines was elected its captain. He later resigned to devote his energies to business, but when the company was activated for federal service upon America’s entry into the World War, Gaines rejoined the outfit. The Greenwood battery was assigned to the 61st Coastal Artillery Corps at Fort Moultrie before shipping out to France.

On December 17, 1918, Gaines was killed in his quarters by the accidental discharge of his pistol. Major Tillman had visited with him only an hour earlier and noted that Teddy was looking forward to the prospect of returning home to his loved ones in Greenwood. In a letter to Teddy’s father, Tillman described the shock of Gaines’s death and its impact on the unit. “The entire regiment was if the wound had pierced each and every man. And so it had, for no man was so beloved or deserved it more. And in death as in life, I say that he was the best of us all.” Upon hearing the devastating news, Major Tillman at once sought to console Gaines’s brother, Milton, who was serving in the same battery.

A letter to Teddy’s family from Gerald Smart described the military funeral conducted in France. Gaines’s body was covered with the American flag and rested on a bier in the town square where two thousand villagers paid their respects. Smart added that “There was not a better liked man in the regiment...no one ever heard any man say evil of [Captain Gaines] who was loved by everyone.”

Teddy Gaines was survived by his wife and daughter, his parents, four sisters, and three brothers, two of whom, Milton and Newt, were then serving in France. He is memorialized at the Edgewood Cemetery in Greenwood.

