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Street honors a hero who died for his men

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NEARBY HISTORY

Tom Hall Street stretches from the heart of downtown Fort Mill along S.C. 160 all the way to U.S. 521 in Lancaster County, a distance of more than 5 miles.

The street, originally called Booth Street in honor of John Wilkes Booth (the assassin of Abraham Lincoln), was renamed in honor of Thomas Lee Hall. Hall won the nation's highest award — the Medal of Honor.

A native of Fort Mill, Tom Hall was born Jan. 8, 1895, the son of William Lee Hall and Frances Coble Hall. He had an older brother, George, and a younger sister, Lila.

Lee Hall, Tom's father, operated a grocery on Main Street and also farmed on the side while serving as mayor of Fort Mill. Tom helped out in the store until 1915, when his father gave up merchandising to manage Springfield Plantation north of town. The family moved into the historic house built in 1806 by John Springs III.

Tom was a member of Fort Mill's National Guard, Company G, in July 1916 when the unit was sent to the Mexican border to protect American citizens and property from raids by Pancho Villa and his forces. His sister later recalled, "Tom enjoyed this. There was little fighting and a relaxed atmosphere."

It was a different story when Company G, led by Lt. Col. Thomas B. Spratt, left Fort Mill to join the Old Hickory Division at Camp Sevier in Greenville during October 1917. The men knew they were on their way to World War I's bloody western front. They landed at Calais, France, on May 24, 1918.

The first combat action of the 30th Division came when the soldiers faced the German Hindenburg Line on Aug. 31, 1918. For a month they traded shots with the Germans and then on Sept. 29 the division "plowed its way with shot and shell through that series of German forts, hitherto considered impregnable."

In the next three weeks, Sept. 29-Oct. 20, the 30th Division captured 98 German officers and 3,750 enlisted men.

The worst day of the war for the Fort Mill men was Oct. 8, 1918, at Montbrehain, France. Company G started the day with 185 men. At the end, only 37 were not wounded. That was the day Sgt. Tom Hall was killed in action.

Hall's commanding officer described his actions in this way: "Sgt. Hall succeeded in knocking out several hostile machine gun posts. On one occasion while advancing his platoon, enemy machine guns were interfering seriously with the advance of his men. Sgt. Hall discovered the enemy in a nearby shell hold. Not willing to sacrifice his men, he advanced alone and wiped out the five occupants with his bayonet. Later that day, while advancing on another machine gun post, Hall was mortally wounded by machine gun fire. His skill of leadership and his conduct in the face of danger won the admiration of all ranks."

The Medal of Honor was awarded posthumously and accepted by his father in a special ceremony in Fort Mill's Confederate Park on July 20, 1919. In July 1922, Lee Hall accepted two more awards in honor of his son — the Italian Cross and the Portuguese War Cross for valor in action. Fort Jackson named its library the Tom Hall Library.

Fort Mill was justly proud of Tom Hall and 123 other Fort Mill residents who served in World War I. The small town had more commissioned officers than any other town of its size in the United States: a lieutenant colonel, three majors, six captains and five lieutenants.

Lt. James Dozier, a Rock Hill native and later a general, also served with the Fort Mill company and also won a Medal of Honor. In all of South Carolina there were five Medal of Honor winners in World War I. There were only 96 winners in the entire United States.