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Pilot's 63-year story 'part of history' now

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By Christin Nance Lazerus Post-Tribune staff writer

WESTVILLE -- The story of what happened to Harry Warnke is finally over.

The Navy had informed his sister, Myrtle Tice, and parents that the Navy ensign had disappeared while flying over the Pacific Ocean on June 15, 1944.

In 1990, historian Ted Darcy found the wreckage of Warnke's F6F-3 Hellcat on the Koolau Range on Oahu, Hawaii.

Darcy called Tice, who said she was shocked by the news. She said her parents had erected a memorial for Harry at Westville Cemetery, but she wanted to bring his remains home.

It took another 16 years before a recovery team collected Warnke's remains.

But on Friday afternoon, representatives from the Navy and the Michigan City American Legion Post provided military honors for a service to bury the Navy pilot's remains after 63 years.

Tice said she was pleased and that the ceremony has allowed her and others to find some closure.

She said she recalled him as an outgoing boy whom family members nicknamed "Bud."

Tice's daughter, Patricia Walter, was born the year before Warnke died. Her memories of Warnke consist of photos and family stories.

"There's a picture of him in his uniform, holding me at the christening," Walter said. "But I really don't remember him."

Old friends came to pay their respects as well.

Hilda Luedtke of Crown Point and Warnke were in the same confirmation class at Trinity Lutheran Church. Warnke was in the ROTC and Luedtke attended dances with their group of friends.

Robert Premil, 83, of Merrillville, said he joined the Civil Pilot Training Program with Warnke in 1942.

After obtaining their wings, Warnke chose pilot fighter jets and Premil manned four-engine transport planes.

They were stationed in different cities, but they met up one last time in the spring of 1944, in Alameda, Calif.

"We spent the day together, and he showed me his aircraft. He was very proud of it," Premil said. "That was the last I saw of him."

Premil said he was content that his friend would get a proper burial at last.

"We had a lot of good times together," Premil said. "I suppose the finality of it is what we are confronted with now and that's part of history."

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