



Posted on: Thursday, December 8, 2005

Sister given memento of WWII pilot in crash

By [James Gonser](#)
Advertiser Urban Honolulu Writer

Arizona resident Myrtle Tice got a package from Hawai'i last week but hasn't opened it.

She knows what's in the box, but won't cut the tape until her family is there to support her.

Inside is a small plaque mounted on an old section of aluminum propeller cut from the F-6F Hellcat fighter that her brother was flying when he crashed and died on June 15, 1944.

"I just don't want to do it alone," said Tice, 85, who lives in a retirement complex in Green Valley, Ariz. "I'm going to wait until my daughter comes for Christmas to open it."

What's left of the plane and the remains of Navy Ensign Harry Warnke have rested for more than 60 years in a deep ravine on the slopes of the Ko'olau Range overlooking H-3 Freeway.

Tice said the staff at the retirement complex handed her the 6-pound package over the front-desk counter. She managed to carry the box on her walker, and it has been in her small room ever since.

The Navy had planned to attempt to recover the remains of Ensign Warnke this fall, but has postponed the effort until May.

Army Maj. Rumi Nielson-Green, spokeswoman for the Joint Prisoner of War/ Missing in Action Accounting Command, said in October that the work was postponed to avoid the rainy season and for final approval of all environmental administrative requirements.

Colin Perry, a retired Air Force pilot and member of the Hawai'i Aviation Preservation Society, said the society sent the plaque because it is important for Tice to know that her brother has not been forgotten.

"Myrtle was told they were finally going to get his remains for a proper burial," Perry said. "As the official primary next of kin, anything of Harry's should go to her, and we felt that this small token of the plaque would help show that someone cares in the meantime."

In May, the Navy filed a draft environmental assessment with the state to try to recover Warnke's remains. The plan is to send a crew to the crash site and remove the remains without disturbing any of the endangered flora or fauna on the mountainside.

The Joint Prisoner of War/ Missing in Action Accounting Command will do the work. It has been mandated by Congress to recover remains of missing troops of all wars since World War II whenever possible.

Warnke was 23 and assigned to Fighting Squadron 20 that Thursday morning in 1944 when he took off from Barbers Point Naval Air Station with seven other planes on a training mission. They were practicing dive-bombing at Kapoho Point close to what is now Marine Corps Base Hawai'i near Kane'ohe. When he didn't return to base, it was presumed that he crashed.



Ensign Harry Warnke was 23 when his plane crashed into the Ko'olau slopes in 1944. His 85-year-old sister hopes his remains can be retrieved before she dies.

Warnke family photo

Two days later, his plane was found in upper Halawa Valley. The only signs of him were a shoe and a small amount of human remains, which a recovery crew buried at the scene. Warnke was listed as killed in action, body not recovered.

Tice said she has been watching the weather reports in Honolulu, hoping it is dry enough in the spring for the recovery effort to take place. Wishing to put her brother to rest before she dies, she is worried that so much time has passed, nothing will be left to find.

"I don't know what I will do if they find anything," said Tice about visiting Hawai'i for any ceremony. "But I don't have to cross that bridge yet."

Reach James Gonser at jgonser@honoluluadvertiser.com.

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