

World War II vet's remains never recovered

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By Pamela Lewis Dolan / Post-Tribune staff writer

A gravestone at Westville Cemetery bears the name of Harry Warnke. But for more than 60 years, the grave below it has remained empty.

Warnke's older sister, his only immediate family member still living, hopes this will be the year her brother's remains finally make their way back home.

The Warnke family placed the headstone at the family plot after their beloved son and brother, Navy Ensign Harry Warnke, went missing during World War II. The Gary family was told he crashed his F6F-3 Hellcat aircraft into the sea on June 15, 1944.

But in 1991, Warnke's sister, Myrtle Tice, who now lives in Arizona, got a phone call from a man named Ted Darcy, saying he found her brother's airplane in the Koolau Range on Hawaii's Oahu Island —

and Warnke's remains were still there.

"I have no idea how they found out (he was there)," said Tice. The family never questioned the information it was given, she said.

"That's the sad part," she said. Her parents went to their graves believing their only son was forever missing.

For the past 17 years, Darcy, a retired Marine and World War II historian, has been working on a comprehensive database of all World War II's missing, and the locations of their remains. Earlier this month, Darcy completed his database of 72,617 names.

His database is thought to be the most comprehensive in the world — more so even than the records held by the United States. He hopes one day the government will hire him as a consultant to help bring the men home.

When Darcy called Tice 15 years ago, he assumed she knew her brother was on the Koolau mountainside somewhere. Dozens of military records, which Darcy used for his research, told the precise story of what happened to Warnke that June morning in 1944.

That information never made it to the Warnke home in the 600 block of Carolina Street in Gary.

A young pilot

Warnke, a 1939 graduate of Emerson High School, took an interest in aviation at a young age.

He was a member of the Vulcanaires, a flying club based at the Gary Airport that prepared men for the military.

From Gary, Warnke went with the Fighting Squadron 20 Unit to the U.S. Naval Air Station at Barbers Point on Oahu for advanced flight training, the last step before deployment to the war.

At 8:50 a.m., June 15, 1944, Warnke was part of an eight-plane flight crew that left the base to practice dive angles. After the fourth dive, Warnke didn't make it back to his formation.

Back home in Gary, his family received the devastating news. Warnke was missing and presumed dead.

For the next two days, several searches were made for Warnke and the missing aircraft, according to military records.

The now-declassified documents say a group from Warnke's unit found the wreckage on June 17 on a mountain side in a ravine near the summit.

The records indicate that along with the wreckage, one of Warnke's legs and a boot were found. The war diary that describes the day's events indicate the remains were buried near the wreckage.

A letter to Warnke's mother from John Brown, the chaplain of Warnke's unit, dated Oct. 21, 1944, describes the memorial service the unit held for her son on June 20.

"The service itself was a simple one, and in order that you may know the spirit of it, I am enclosing the manuscript exactly as it was used," Brown wrote.

"Ensign Warnke was highly regarded by those who knew him, and you may certainly feel proud of so fine a son."

Two days after the service was held, Warnke's unit was shipped out aboard the USS Enterprise, leaving Warnke's body and the story of his disappearance behind.

Looking for closure

Tice isn't angry that her family never knew the truth.

"During war time, they don't tell much," she said. "That's OK."

But now that she knows the truth, she wants her brother laid to rest near his hometown. Tice just hopes that day will come before she faces the same fate as her parents — dying without closure.

Tice turned 86 on Wednesday. She lives in a retirement community in Green Valley, Ariz. She knows her health isn't the best.

She stopped flying several years ago. But she said when she finally has her brother's remains, she wants to be in Westville to give him a proper burial.

"For that, I will make a great effort," she said.

But it's been the government's lack of effort that has kept Tice waiting, say historians who also would like to see Warnke brought down from the Hawaiian mountain top.

The Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, also known as JPAC, is the agency responsible for collecting missing soldiers' remains.

Colin Perry, director of the Hawaiian Aviation Preservation Commission, has been following the efforts in recovering Warnke's body since it was first brought to his attention in the 1990s.

He said JPAC hasn't put this case high enough on its list of priorities.

The group has focused much of its efforts on recovery missions of Vietnam casualties. Perry finds this frustrating since JPAC has its headquarters in Oahu, just miles from Warnke's wreckage.

"Missions have taken them to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia. ... Here's one 5 miles from their headquarters, and they've blamed everything from environmentalists to terrain for not getting it done," Perry said.

Darcy is similarly frustrated: "They've just dragged their feet on it.

"I get really furious with these people."

According to Darcy, the agency has devoted more than 90 percent of its resources to finding Vietnam veterans' remains, of which there are an estimated 1,400. In comparison, there are 72,617 missing from World War II, Darcy said.

Darcy has identified the exact locations of enough lost soldiers to keep the agency busy for the next 20 years doing four recoveries a week.

But "(Vietnam) is where the political pressure is," he said.

According to James Pokines, JPAC forensic anthropologist, the agency hasn't gained final permission to excavate the site where Warnke died. But he hopes the permission will come in time for a July mission.

"The summer months are the dry season up there, which will allow for dependable helicopter access," Pokines said.

Pokines said it took several years to find the site after the agency learned of its existence.

Darcy notified JPAC just hours after he discovered the site in 1991 after six failed attempts. And, he said, he recorded precisely where the site was located and provided JPAC with the information.

JPAC went to the site in 1999 and recovered a piece of the airplane's propeller. A piece of it was sent to Tice in December.

Pokines said the agency also has had to develop a low-impact plan to excavate since the site is located within a natural preserve watershed area. That also caused delays.

Most JPAC missions involve the crew living at the site and sleeping in tents. But because the terrain surrounding this site is unstable, this mission will require daily helicopter commutes along with a 45-minute hike.

More disappointments?

Gregg Kakesako, a reporter for the Honolulu Star Bulletin, has been covering the Warnke saga for more than 10 years. He accompanied JPAC on its 1999 visit to the wreckage.

He's not holding out hope this will be the year for the mission to go forward.

He said he was not surprised to hear JPAC is planning a mission for this summer:

"They say that every year."

Kakesako said the newspaper decided a few years ago not to report on the matter again until the mission actually takes place. He said he found himself making annual calls to Tice to ask how she felt about her brother's remains being uncovered. It finally became clear she had nothing new to say since the story never changed.

But Tice hopes this will be the year. Her daughter, Patricia Turner, who lives in Michigan City, said she feels the same, but she "wouldn't be surprised if it didn't" happen yet.

"The way it was handled was so poor," Turner said.

Turner, who was only a year old when Warnke died, said she remembers hearing stories growing up about her uncle, whom the family referred to as "Bud."

"My grandparents always talked about him and figured he was long lost, never to be found."

Darcy said there are many stories like the Warnkes'.

While it seems telling a family their loved one's remains have been found would be a happy part of his job, "It's actually the hardest," Darcy said.

"As soon as you bring it up, they start grieving again because they never had closure," he said.

While Tice has waited more than 60 years for it, her expectations aren't high that JPAC will find much.

"There won't be any body left," she said bluntly.

Turner hopes that perhaps some remains other than body tissue will be found, such as a ring or clothing.

Perry thinks there will be more than Tice expects.

In the mountainous conditions, "It's been our experience that human remains, such as teeth and bones, actually last longer than metal pieces."

JPAC's Pokines agreed that the soil conditions at the crash site are much less harsh than places such as Vietnam and Laos, "where we routinely recover identifiable remains."

"I'm certain there are human remains there," Perry reiterated. "They'll bring them back."

And it's about time, he said.

"Sixty-two years left behind is unacceptable."

