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56 years later, story of lost B-24 crew can end

By AMY ELLIS NUTT
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

They squint into the sun, smiling and relaxed. Buddies. Crewmates. Unaware time is slipping by. In the photograph they are paused forever - there in the front row, the dapper engineer with his pants rolled up, revealing stylish loafers; next to him, the gunner without his flight jacket because he had given it to a girl in a bar the night before; and at the far right, Staff Sgt. William A. Drager, the tail gunner from Hackettstown who carries a photo of his 6-month-old son in his wallet

and is teased by his colleagues because he writes home to his wife, Betty, nearly every day.

In two weeks they will all be ghosts. Orphaned from their futures by a war, bad weather and bad luck. Swallowed up by a mountain that will not yield its secret for 52 years.

Yesterday, in a centuries-old cemetery on Schooley's Mountain in Hackettstown, a part of the mystery that was B-24 bomber J-40831, lost in action Aug. 31, 1944, on its very first mission over China, was finally laid to rest.

As gray clouds rolled across an autumn blue sky, the remains that were Staff Sgt. William A. Drager were buried with full military honors, including a flyover by a World War II AT-6 Texan advanced trainer. Among the 200 under a tent behind Pleasant Grove Presbyterian Church for the brief service were Betty, 78, and her husband of the past 52 years, Bob Kastenhuber, as well as Drager's sister, Margaret Drager Riccoboni, 80, of New Canaan, Conn.

Also sitting next to Betty Kastenhuber was James Drager, 56, the son who followed the father he never knew onto an obscure and inhospitable mountain in China, and who helped bring him home.

There are 78,000 men still missing in action from World War II. Every year, like a door blown open by a sudden gust of wind, the past yields up another wayward soldier. From a cave on Okinawa, beneath a bucolic German pasture, in a shallow stream in Belgium, the dead reach out to the living, pieces of them – a bone, a ring, a canteen – rising up, unexpectedly.

In early 1997, with the coordination of the Chinese and U.S. governments, a team of forensic anthropologists from the United States went to Mao-er Shan Mountain in southern China to reclaim 10 of the war dead.

At 7,028 feet, Mao-er Shan is the highest peak in southern China, just a third the size of Alaska's Mount McKinley. Located in Guangxi Province, about 300 miles north of Hanoi and 400 miles west of Hong Kong, Mao-er Shan is anonymous enough: shrouded in fog, its rugged face hidden in thick jungle. Much of Mao-er Shan has never been seen by man, much less explored, and only because two Chinese farmers lost their way in October 1996 while looking for medicinal herbs did they stumble across some jagged pieces of metal that eventually would be identified as the remains of crew No. 566, Fourteenth U.S. Air Force, 308th Bomber Group, 375th squadron.

Bad weather cut short the first visit to the crash site, in January 1997, and it would take two more trips – one in October of that year and another in October 1999 – for hundreds of bone fragments, as well as dog tags and other personal effects, to be carried out of the jungle.

Jim Drager, a former Navy flier, accompanied the search-and-recovery team in 1997 and placed a plaque at the site of the crash in memory of the downed crew.

Drager was 3 months old when his father left New Jersey for the last time. That day, Bill Drager said goodbye to his wife, then went into his little boy's bedroom, picked him up, kissed him and laid him back in his crib. Then, without looking back, he walked out the door and went to war.

When Jim Drager, vice president of shipbuilding for Carnival Cruise Lines in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., heard about his father's plane being found, he knew he had to go to China. "That picture of the crew in front of their plane always haunted me, like they were looking at me," says Drager, who is married with twin daughters and a son. "Those guys were there for 50 years, and I was in a position to go and bring them back. . . I was the last one to see my father alive, and the last one to see him on that mountain."

From the time the last group of bone fragments was taken from the crash site, three years would pass before the Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Honolulu positively identified all 10 members of the B-24 crew.

Since its inception in 1976, the lab had been able to identify and return the remains of 203 World War II servicemen. William Drager's remains were the 204th.

'GUNNERS LIKE ME'

Betty Allen met Drager at a square dance when she was 19. They were married in 1942, and within a year he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. Although he was missing part of his right index finger from an accident chopping wood, Drager, 24 at the time, not only passed the physical, he volunteered to be a tail gunner on the B-24 bomber, the most widely produced military plane in U.S. history.

It would be two years before Drager and the rest of his crew made it overseas. In July 1944, the war was entering its last phase in Europe, and in the South Pacific the army was bombing Japanese harbors. Drager's crew was based in Liuzhou, southern China, near Hong Kong, and the 10-man crew, including fellow New Jerseyan George Ward, the bombardier from Woodbridge, was both eager and anxious to see action.

Their first mission was scheduled for Thursday night, Aug. 31, 1944. They would be one of a dozen B-24 crews to fly east toward Takao Harbor in Formosa, now Taiwan, to lay mines and drop bombs on Japanese ships.

A week before the crew left Langley for China, Drager had written home to reassure his wife:

"Our pilot is really good. He has been flying for over a year and he really knows what he is doing.

"I know darn well if we ever get in a tight spot he can get us out as long as he has a couple of good men as gunners like me."

It was 4:30 in the afternoon when the B-24s took off from Liuzhou, four minutes apart. The Liberator was a heavy, noisy plane, with no pressurization and two open gun windows on either side of the fuselage. Fliers called it the Whistling Outhouse.

One of the B-24s turned back with engine trouble; the rest flew east for three hours in clear weather. When they reached Takao Harbor, it was twilight. One by one, the planes descended to begin their bombing run. Within an hour, amid heavy ground fire, they dropped their payloads, turned and headed home.

The maps issued by the Army were of little use, drawn up by the French in 1860. Like explorers of centuries past, each navigator guided his plane back by way of the stars.

The ride back, like the ride out, was routine – until they reached Liuzhou.

"The gunners mostly slept in their turrets on top of their parachutes," says Robison McClure, 81, who lives in Mobile, Ala., and who was a navigator in another plane on the mission. "It was sunny and calm when we left base, but it doesn't take long to get into bad weather up there, and we did. Couldn't see above or below. It was chance, really, who got back and who didn't."

As they reached Liuzhou, the bombers received word that their base was under attack. They were diverted north to another airstrip, but the weather was getting uglier by the minute: rain, wind, and fog, which meant the navigators couldn't "shoot" the stars. They would have to rely on instruments, and a lot of luck, to make it down out of the turbid darkness. By 2:30 in the morning of Sept. 1, nine of the B-24 Liberators had safely found terra firma. One had not. It was B-24 J-40831.

"They just got lost," says Jim Drager. "They were 50 miles north of Giulini, their secondary landing site, when they radioed asking someone to take a fix on their transmission. It was the last anyone heard of them. They didn't even see the mountain, probably."

THE TELEGRAM

On the other side of the earth, 8,000 miles away, Betty Drager was giving 6-month-old Jimmy his noon bottle when her husband's plane shattered against the side of Mao-er Shan Mountain, just 200 feet short of the peak. She was giving him a bottle two weeks later when a taxi pulled up outside the little cottage on Stephensburg Road in Hackettstown with a telegram in a yellow envelope.

"I saw them coming and I knew what it was right away," she recalls. "I just started shaking. I hadn't received a letter in a while and he wrote every day, so I was worried already."

Betty waited two years, hoping Drager might still find his way back home. She remembered what Bill had written to her just a month before his death – that "the army makes a lot of mistakes, so if you get a letter . . . don't let it hit you too hard, for where we are going a lot of ships (planes) have been lost a month or two at a time before they find the crew sitting on some little old island having the time of their life."

But the Army did not make a mistake. Decade after decade would pass, 20,000 days, and three more wars. Parents would die, a wife would remarry, a son would grow up.

Betty now lives in Lexington, S.C., with her second husband.

Jim Drager has always called Bob Kastenhuber "dad." It is devotion that binds him to the man who raised him well. It is blood that binds him to his real father and to the past.

It was a sense of responsibility that compelled him to help bring the crew of B-24 J-40831 out of the jungle and back home.

All have now been laid to rest: six, including Ward, at Arlington National Cemetery in August, the others in their hometowns, beside wives and parents. William Drager, his ashes now buried between his own father and mother on a sloping hill on Schooley's Mountain, is the last.

If time is the longest distance between two places, as Tennessee Williams wrote, then it can also be the shortest. Yesterday, Staff Sgt. William A. Drager finally came home – father to son, mountain to mountain.