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Crash discovery solves 63-year-old mystery involving Vermont airmen

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On Jan. 25, 1944, 1st Lt. Irwin "Zipper" Zaetz of Burlington climbed into a B-24 bomber nicknamed "Hot as Hell" in Kunming, China.

The plane's mission was to fly over the eastern end of the Himalayas to Chabua, India, pick up weaponry and other supplies, and fly back to Kunming. Zaetz, 26, was a last-minute addition to the eight-man crew, replacing the regular navigator, who was ill.

The plane never made it to Chabua, and for 63 years nobody knew what happened to Zaetz and the other "Hot as Hell" crew members, including Capt. William A. Swanson of Proctor, the plane's pilot.

"After a year or so, I started to give up hope," said Irwin Zaetz's younger brother, Larry Zaetz, a longtime Burlington resident now living in Florida. "But we never had a service acknowledging his death because we didn't want Mother to be without hope."

Now the mystery of the doomed flight has been solved. Earlier this year, Larry Zaetz and the crew's other living relatives learned a mountain climber from Arizona had found the B-24's crash site near Damrah, a remote village of 200 in northeast India.

"I was so elated," Larry Zaetz said about hearing the news. "To suddenly know that my brother's remains were within human reach, I just went through the ceiling."

That joy, however, was short-lived. Zaetz and other relatives of the lost plane's crew say they are frustrated by the Defense Department's unwillingness to send a team to India to retrieve the crew's remains and close the book on this painful story once and for all.

Maj. Brian DeSantis, a spokesman for Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, or JPAC, in Hawaii, acknowledged in an interview that a search team is unlikely to be dispatched to Damrah in the near future.

DeSantis blamed the delay on political instability in the region and lack of approvals for the trip from various governmental ministries in India. He said the approvals were requested nearly a year ago, but none has been forthcoming.

"Once the area is deemed safe and we have the permissions, we'll follow up on this pretty quickly," DeSantis said.

Zaetz disputed JPAC's explanation, saying India was a U.S. ally and that the reports of instability in the region near Damrah were dated.

"I thought our motto was 'Leave no one behind,'" Zaetz said. "How can you treat military personnel like this? It's unbelievable. This is not to be accepted."

War looms in Burlington

Larry and Irwin Zaetz, along with another brother and sister, grew up on Loomis Street in Burlington, the children of Russian immigrants.

Larry Zaetz said his older brother was a gifted athlete who got the nickname "Zipper" because of the way he could zip past opponents on the football field and basketball court.

"Because he was an athlete, he was very popular," said Ethel Wolfe, who lived around the corner from the Zaetzes and became Irwin's girlfriend at age 13. "Everybody liked him. He was a three-star athlete with a terrific sense of humor."

Wolfe said growing up in the late 1930s meant knowing that trouble was brewing overseas. She remembers going jitterbugging with Irwin Zaetz on Saturday nights and having the dances interrupted by radio reports about "Hitler invading another country."

Within a month of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Irwin Zaetz had decided to sign up with the Army Air Corps rather than wait to be drafted.

He and Wolfe, who was in graduate school, were married in 1942. By early 1943, he was a flight navigator based in China, part of a crew on another B-24 with its own nickname, the "Chug-a-lug."

Making bombing runs aboard the "Chug-a-lug" was dangerous business. By August 1943, Zaetz had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, his second such award, for his bravery during bombing missions over China and Burma.

In November, he and his crew were shot down over China. The crew parachuted to safety and survived in the jungle for days before finding their way back to safety. Larry Zaetz said his brother and crew were soon assigned another aircraft, the "Chug-a-lug Junior," and were back in the skies.

Wolfe said Irwin Zaetz wrote her after his November brush with death and told her he wasn't going to fly anymore, that he was planning on taking a "slow boat home" to the United States.

"He told me to go buy some new clothes, that when he got home that we'd go on a real honeymoon," she said. Wolfe said she promptly dropped out of graduate school at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania to prepare to join her husband in California.

The letter would be the last one she received from him. Irwin Zaetz agreed to fill in for the sick navigator on the "Hot as Hell" crew, and the plane took off in bad weather on Jan. 25, 1944, for the flight over the eastern "hump" of the Himalayas to India.

Larry Zaetz said he was in the Navy and stationed in the Marshall Islands in the South Pacific when he was told his brother was missing.

"Here I was on this little island in the middle of nowhere," Larry Zaetz said. "I was overcome. My brother was my idol."

He said his father, proprietor of the Vermont Mattress and Furniture Co., took the news stoically, but his mother was inconsolable.

"She was a wonderful singer," he said. "But she never sang or hummed from that morning on."

Wolfe said when Army representatives informed her in January 1944 that Irwin Zaetz's plane had gone missing, her world "collapsed."

She said she stopped eating for a month, watched her weight drop to 84 pounds, then suffered a burst appendix and complications from emergency surgery that nearly killed her.

"It really affected my life," she said of her grief during a telephone interview from her New York City apartment. "I wanted to die."

Wolfe said she carried that last letter from her husband with her for years afterward. She did remarry 10 years later and went on to become a professor and then a provost at Brooklyn College.

An unlikely find

Larry Zaetz's son, Gary, said he was "Googling" on the Internet one night in June when he decided to punch in the name of his uncle, Irwin Zaetz. Up popped a Web site run by Clayton Kuhles of Prescott, Ariz., called miarecoveries.org.

"He reported he had discovered a plane wreck," Gary Zaetz said. "He'd also done some heavy-duty documentary research on the aircraft so we knew it had to be the one that belonged to the crew that included my uncle."

Kuhles' Web site included 16 pictures of debris from the plane, which apparently had slammed into the side of a mountain about 9,000 feet above sea level.

Kuhles had discovered the plane Dec. 7, 2006 -- Pearl Harbor Day -- and had told JPAC about the find in January, but hadn't figured out how to contact surviving family members so many years after the crash itself took place.

"I knew I couldn't rely on the U.S. government to put the information out, so I put it up on my Web site," Kuhles said. "I was hoping some relatives of the crew members would discover the Web site, and bingo -- that's what happened."

Kuhles, a businessman who said he climbs mountains as a hobby, started investigating World War II plane wrecks in Southeast Asia after searching for and finding a lost C-47 wreck in Burma. He said he received a tip about the "Hot as Hell" site from a hunter guide in the region.

"It took a couple of days to reach the site," he said. "The paths in this region are unrecognizable to most people. They're like two inches wide. You and I would completely miss them. I had to totally depend on the hunter's expertise."

He said when he came upon the wreckage, a wing portion was lying against a tree. He shined a flashlight on the underside of the wing and saw a hand-painted number on it. Later, the guide showed him a piece of aluminum with the same identifying number on it.

He said he saw no human remains.

"The hunter told me that on a previous visit, he had seen human bones, but that was before there was snow cover," Kuhles said. He said it was unlikely any human remains had been touched because people in the area are "very superstitious about bones."

Gary Zaetz said he took it upon himself to track down relatives for every one of the "Hot as Hell" crew members, which he said was no easy task. Finding people related to Swanson, the pilot from Vermont, was a particular challenge because Swanson's only siblings were two sisters, now quite elderly.

Through a nephew living in South Africa, Gary Zaetz was able to locate a stateside contact, Shaundra Santos, a great niece of Swanson's living in Mesa, Ariz.

Santos, in turn, was able to add another piece to the "Hot as Hell" puzzle: Her great uncle was promoted to captain just before he piloted the fateful flight.

"He was described as this really awesome man," Santos said in an interview. "He had an aura about him. Everyone liked to be around him."

The last step

Unknown to each other until six months ago, the relatives of the "Hot as Hell" crew appear to have banded together in their effort to pressure the U.S. government to send a team to India to look for human remains at the crash site.

Gary Zaetz said different families have contacted members of their states' congressional delegations, hoping to get them to lean on the Defense Department to make the case a higher priority.

He singled out Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., for showing particular interest in the issue.

"He's been extremely supportive and cooperative," Gary Zaetz said. "He stands out among all the Congress members we've contacted in terms of how much energy he and his staff have put into the effort."

Sanders wrote a letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Oct. 5, complaining that the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii has not aggressively pursued sending a team to India to recover the crew's remains.

"JPAC has recovered remains in extremely challenging locations all over the globe, from cliffs in Papua, New Guinea, to 16,000-foot peaks in the Himalayas," Sanders' letter to Gates said. "How is it then, that the Department of Defense cannot send a recovery team to an ally's country to recover the remains of American servicemen?"

The group of relatives has also sent letters to American consulate officials in India, and Indian government officials.

"We are currently working with our colleagues at the embassy in New Delhi to facilitate the cooperation of the Indian authorities," Deborah Miller of the U.S. Consulate in Calcutta, India, wrote to Larry Zaetz on Nov. 15.

DeSantis said JPAC can only do so much. He said the command does between 46 and 50 recoveries a year and plans which ones to do a year in advance.

"There are 88,000 people still missing from different wars," he said. "We can't go to all the places at once. We make decisions based on the best information we have."

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