

Pocatello airman honored in Austria: Sgt. McCurdy murdered during WWII

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When Sgt. William James McCurdy bailed out of a damaged B-17 over Austria on a cold November day in 1944 his fate would remain a mystery to his Pocatello family for years.

An unarmed McCurdy was shot and killed while bundling up his parachute, and the two Austrian militia members who killed him, Anton Taurer and Franz Wilker, were eventually convicted of murder.

But the fact McCurdy's sacrifice in the war against Nazi Germany has become part of a memorial to Austrian resistance fighters and the victims of Nazi war crimes was unknown to his surviving family until a few weeks ago. His name is the lone American listed on the memorial in the Drau Valley where McCurdy was murdered.

The deceased airman's namesake nephew, Idaho State University philosophy teacher William James McCurdy, was at home on a Sunday when his phone rang.

It was history calling. McCurdy's uncle had been dead for nearly 69 years, but the call brought him back to life.

A historian of Austrian descent living in San Francisco had made the call. He had news for the younger William McCurdy that came as a shock. His uncle's name was on a memorial to Austrian resistance fighters in a valley surrounded by mountains.

"This was the most emotional phone call in my life," McCurdy said. "It was like a ghost from the past."

Before the younger Bill McCurdy was born, his uncle joined the U.S. Army immediately after graduating from Pocatello High School in 1941. He was following his brother Dean's footsteps into the Army Air Corps. Dean was Bill McCurdy's father, and he died last October. Another brother, Charles, had joined the Navy. All three men were sons to C.B. and Erma McCurdy of Pocatello.

Bill's father spent much of the war stationed in England where he became a second lieutenant in the Army Air Corps. Uncle Bill became a flight engineer aboard B-17 bombers and flew missions out of Italy to attack Germany — a lot of missions.

According to his nephew, Sgt. McCurdy was just a couple flights shy of reaching the magic 50-mission mark that would have taken him off the front lines of action. During WWII, bomber crews flying out of England could reach the mission maximum at 25 because they faced heavier flak and more fighter attacks than their counterparts in Italy, according to the

younger McCurdy.

His uncle's bomber wing was not scheduled to fly the November day that would prove to be his last on earth. The 24-year-old airman volunteered.

According to McCurdy, the pilot of another bomber was asking for help because his flight engineer had suffered an injury. The sergeant from Pocatello agreed to fill in on a mission to bomb Munich, Germany. The bomber reached its target and dropped its load, but it took on heavy damage from anti-aircraft fire.

Planes flying out of the American air base near Bari, Italy, had to skirt around the Alps, and a wounded plane would make this a nearly impossible task. McCurdy said the pilot asked seven of his crew members to bail out over southern Austria and they did. All of them expected to be taken captive as prisoners of war and await a victory over Germany that they knew was not far off.

For six of them that was what happened. McCurdy wasn't so lucky.

Apparently the militia members who found him had been instructed by the Nazis to kill any American survivors, his nephew said. Transcripts from the war crimes trial of the two men who killed McCurdy spell out that bleak moment on a snow-covered field in Austria.

"At the time of the shot, the American was facing the accused with his arms raised in surrender," the trial record states.

McCurdy's body was originally buried in the Drau Valley. He would be listed as missing in action until 1946 when his father and mother received word that his remains had been recovered and buried at a U.S. military cemetery in France.

But young Bill McCurdy said the family already knew about the missing son's fate. His grandmother had told him the story of her missing son coming into her bedroom one night to comfort her.

"My grandmother grieved pretty hard," Bill said. "She had already lost two sons — one was stillborn and the other died at nine months."

Dealing with the likely loss of William who was now listed as missing and presumed dead was hard on Erma McCurdy. Then one morning she told the family that William had come into her room and told her to stop grieving.

"He told her it wouldn't do any good, and that he was in a better place," Bill recalls the story his grandmother shared.

The remains of Tech. Sgt. McCurdy did finally come home. He was buried in Basalt Cemetery north of Firth with other family members. As time passed, he was joined by his parents.

Time washed over the toll of World War II on the McCurdy family. At least it had until Bill received that phone call on June 23.

The ensuing efforts have unearthed newspaper stories about the trial of his uncle's killers in Austria, documents from the Austrian committee that erected the monument in the Drau Valley and old framed photos of William J. McCurdy that had almost been forgotten.

Bill said his only regret is that his father isn't here to share the good news about his brother.

Bill is hoping to visit the memorial next spring.

Next to the names engraved at the memorial are little drawers into which visitors can put items. The ISU philosophy teacher will be leaving something behind that helps tell the story of his uncle to other visitors. It will be a record of a Pocatello man who once played bass violin for the high school band and Gene Burton's Big Band. Strangers will know McCurdy nicknamed that instrument, Blondie, because of its lighter wood.

And they will know the McCurdy family appreciates that William is part of a memorial in the shadow of the Alps.

Bill plans to put these lines from Pericles' Funeral Oration in that drawer:

“For heroes have the whole earth for their tomb; and in lands far from their own, where the column with its epitaph declares it, there is enshrined in every breast a record unwritten with no tablet to preserve it, except that of the heart.”