

## WWII Army air crew laid to rest

by Sharon Walker

WASHINGTON (Army News Service, Aug. 23, 2000) -- A crew of 10 young Army aviators returned to a friendly base this week and were laid to rest in Arlington National Cemetery almost 56 years to the day after they set out on their World War II mission.

Second Lt. George H. Pierpont and 2nd Lt. Franklin A. Tomenendale piloted the B-24 "Liberator," a heavy bomber aircraft capable of long operating ranges. After taking off from an airfield in Liuchow, China, Aug. 31, 1944 to bomb enemy ships, according to a military report, "The aircraft never returned to a friendly base."

Along with pilot and co-pilot, the flight manifest included 2nd Lt. Robert Deming, 2nd Lt. George A. Ward, Staff Sgt. Anthony DeLucia, Staff Sgt. William A. Drager, Sgt. Robert L. Kearsy, Sgt. Ellsworth V. Kelley, Pvt. Fred P. Buckley and Pvt. Vincent J. Netherwood. Pierpont, the pilot, was promoted to first lieutenant Sept. 1, 1944, the day after he was reported missing.

Family members and acquaintances - young and old - gathered Aug. 21 at the Fort Myer Post Chapel for a group funeral service. There, Chaplain (Lt. Col.) James E. May said that 56 years cannot diminish the memory nor the service given by the 10 men.

"We can consecrate this moment in time," May said, "and give thanks for the impact their brief lives have on us all. We can give thanks for their noble service."

"They touched our lives," said Chaplain (1st Lt.) Boguslaw A. Augustyn, "and we pray for their peace and happiness today, tomorrow and the day after."

The Protestant and Catholic chaplains each read from the Old and New Testaments, from Psalms 139: 1-12 and 23-24, and from Romans 8: 31-39.

Six of the soldiers were interred at ANC immediately following the chapel service. In addition to the six burial vaults holding the remains of the men, there is a seventh vault to represent and memorialize the entire crew. It bears the inscription "Ever to remember, August 31, 1944."

The 3rd U.S. Infantry (The Old Guard) performed full military honors, and a B-52 bomber from the 5th Bomber Wing, Minot, N.D., flew over the gravesite.

In 1948, four years after the B-24's fateful flight, the Department of the Army amended the crew's status from "Missing in Action" to "Killed in Action, Remains Not Recoverable." No evidence of the aircraft was found during or after the war until sometime in the fall of 1996 when two Chinese farmers discovered the crash site.

In November 1996, People's Republic of China President Jiang Zemin presented President Bill Clinton with five identification tags recovered from an aircraft crash site in Guangxi Province. The names on the military dog tags included those of Buckley, Kelley, Netherwood, Tomenendale and Ward.

A team from the Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii launched a search in January 1997, recovering "...human remains and artifacts from the site..." according to a CILHI report. The team also documented aircraft wreckage bearing the stenciled numbers "40783," the serial number that identified the aircraft of Pierpont and crew.

Bad weather limited the CILHI team to late summer and early fall excavations, and they returned in 1998 and 1999, each time recovering more evidence of the downed crew including dog tags, personal effects and human remains. During August and September 1999, U.S. and Chinese authorities teamed up to complete the excavation.

A copy of an aged photograph was one of the sole pieces of present-day evidence of these men's connection to one another. The crew had gathered in front of their aircraft. Decked out in flight jackets, they were all smiles.

But the evidence of their connection was also apparent in the gentle pats on the back of one family member to another, strangers before the ceremony. And it was apparent in the teenage grandchildren and older nephews and nieces who heard the stories and knew they had a hero in their lineage.

(Editor's note: Sharon Walker is the command information officer for the Fort Myer Military Community, Va.)