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Newport: ***Relentless Pursuit The Untold Story of the U.S. Air Force's 39<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron***, written by author and playwright Ken Dooley. will be released at a book signing on Aug. 10 (V-J Day) at the Mainstay Hotel in Newport at 2 p.m.

Former **Secretary of the Navy J. William Middendorf**, who wrote the epilogue for the book, and **Dr. Patrick T. Conley**, Historian Laureate of RI, who wrote the Foreword, will be attending, along with other dignitaries.

On Dec. 7, 1941, the United States was pathetically unprepared for war. The battle fleet intended to keep the Pacific Ocean an American lake lay in smoking ruins at Pearl Harbor. At the time, U.S. air power was inferior even to our now crippled sea power. Thousands of men, many of them too young to vote, were selected and trained to defeat an enemy who flew faster, more maneuverable airplanes.

This book is about the men of the 39<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron of the Fifth Air Force who flew under the command of General George C. Kenney. Rushed through training and flying planes greatly inferior to those flown by experienced Japanese pilots, they held their own with raw courage, determination and unflinching patriotism. As they received better airplanes, they pushed the Japanese back, but always at terrible cost.

It took great courage to climb into those cockpits. Pilots lost over the sea and jungles were rarely found. Those captured by the Japanese were routinely tortured and beheaded. For these young American pilots, the war was conducted over a largely unmapped area with steaming jungles, glaciers and towering thunderheads. They encountered new types of illnesses (malaria and dengue), a new type of civilian (non-combatant stone-age men, women and children) and a new type of enemy (barbarians with modern equipment.)

The book describes how these pilots remained staunchly committed to their military oaths, even when captured, tortured and facing execution. Then, unlike other books about the Pacific air war, it traces the consequences of Japanese war crimes in the immediate postwar period.

Most significantly, it explores how justice was meted out for those who had been captured and executed by the Japanese. Much has been written about the trials and convictions of the Class A war criminals, such as Generals Tojo and Homma. Less is known about the treatment of lower-level officers who inflicted ceremonial executions on helpless prisoners under their "Spirit Warrior code."

Dooley was drawn to the story by his childhood friend, Gill Thorpe, whose brother, Lt. Robert E. Thorpe, a P-47 pilot with the 39<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron, failed to return

home following a mission against Wewak, a Japanese base in New Guinea. No trace was found of him, and he was officially listed as missing in action on May 27, 1944.

On June 22, 1948, an article appeared in *The Providence Journal*, describing one of the most revolting crimes uncovered by war crimes investigators. Five Japanese officers admitted beating Lt. Thorpe, using him for target practice, beheading him, and desecrating his body on Kairiru Island, New Guinea, on May 28, 1944.

On July 6, 1948, three Japanese officers were sentenced to life imprisonment, while a fourth received a 20-year sentence. Lt. Commander Kaoru Okuma, the officer in charge of the execution, was hanged at Sugamo Prison in Japan on May 27, 1949. The other four officers were paroled four years later.

Walter Thorpe, Lt. Thorpe's father, never stopped in his efforts to have his son's remains returned to Rhode Island, even though he was told repeatedly that they were unrecoverable. The trial records were classified as secret under the direct orders of General Douglas MacArthur. Walter Thorpe died in 1977 without achieving his goal of having his son's remains returned to Rhode Island.

Bob Kerr, a columnist for *The Providence Journal*, wrote a column in 2007 about the efforts of Gill Thorpe to locate his brother's remains. The column attracted the attention of Dooley, living in Manhattan at the time, and he agreed to recover the court martial records under the Freedom of Information Act and to write a book about the life and death of Bob Thorpe.

Dooley started on a seven-year journey through squadron mission reports, interviews with surviving pilots, letters, diaries, photographs, telegrams and records of war crimes trials. The journey was not always easy, especially when reading about the deaths of men George Morgan, Tom Lynch and Dick Bong, and uncovering the brutal executions of Bob Thorpe, Gene Duncan and James Steele.

After interviewing pilots who flew with Bob Thorpe, some on the mission when he was lost, Dooley changed his focus to the entire 39<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron. As he began to trace the history of the 39<sup>th</sup>, many people came forward with information, starting with Lt. John Dunbar and the daily diary he kept during his time as a pilot with the 39<sup>th</sup>.

The interviews Dooley had with Fred Tobi, Thorpe's roommate in New Guinea, Lew Lockhart, Jack Frost, Chuck Sullivan, Roy Seher and Frank Royal, CO of the 39<sup>th</sup> when the squadron arrived in Australia in 1942, were especially meaningful. Lew Lockhart introduced Dooley to Mary Morgan Martin, daughter of Captain George Morgan and Mary Scott Morgan, an American nurse who had met her husband while serving in Australia as a nurse. She was three months pregnant with Mary when Capt. George Morgan was killed in the Battle of the Philippines. Mary Martin sent Dooley her father's wartime love letters, photos, clippings and daily squadron

reports. She painstakingly restored all of the photos in this book, some of them more than seventy years old.

Fred Tobi, John Dunbar, Roy Seher and Chuck Sullivan died while Dooley was still conducting research. Lew Lockhart and Jack Frost are both 94 and plan to attend the ceremony on Aug. 10<sup>th</sup>. Linne Haddock will stand in for her father, Frank Royal who recently turned 100. A former president of the 39<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron Association, she made significant contributions to the book.

A memorial service for Lt. Thorpe was conducted at Rhode Island Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Exeter, RI on June 12, and a memorial stone was placed in the section of the cemetery dedicated to those who are missing in action or whose remains could not be brought home.

Plans for the memorial began on May 27, 2013, when State Rep. Peter Martin of Newport introduced a resolution honoring Lt. Robert E. Thorpe. Martin made major contributions to the book and also served as its graphic designer.