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VETERANS DAY

The gruesome details of Robert Thorpe's capture and beheading are chronicled in a new book, "Relentless Pursuit: The Untold Story of the U.S. 5th Air Force's 39th Fighter Squadron," written by Ken Dooley, with help from Thorpe and former Rhode Island state Rep. Peter Martin. The book reveals the story of the trial of the officers who tortured and killed Thorpe, and eventually were punished for their misdeeds.

'Relentless Pursuit'

Gill Thorpe tells the story of his brother's capture and beheading by the Japanese in WWII

By Jacqueline Tempera Journal Staff Writer

It took a decades-long fight for Gill Thorpe to find out what happened to his brother Bobby, but when a thick packet revealing the details of his death was handed to him he could barely look. Second Lt. Robert Thorpe was a pilot with the Fifth Air Force's 39th Fighter Squadron in World War II, but Gill said he remembered his brother, eight years his senior, setting up a Lionel train set on Christmas morning and, to the envy of many kids in their Cranston neighborhood, reinforcing his kite so it wouldn't bend in the wind. And he recalled sitting by his brother's side, watching P-47 Thunderbolts soar over Narragansett Bay. His eyes welled with tears, thinking of the day Bobby left for the Pacific in 1943, his playful smile stretching over his angular face as he waved goodbye from the train platform. He never thought the image of Bobby saluting from the platform, dressed in gabardine trousers and shiny brown shoes, would be his last.

In the years after the news of Bobby's disappearance traveled to Cranston, Thorpe made hundreds of phone calls to lawyers, politicians, military officials and soldiers. He filed multiple Freedom of Information Act requests and was denied. He cut through red tape to obtain military reports and knocked on many doors, pleading, to know the truth.

In 2007, he got his answer in the form of a 1,300-page court-martial document from the trial of Japanese officers. After his lifelong search for answers, he said he was afraid of what he might find.

"I had my brother locked in a box," said Thorpe. "I was emotionally stable, until I opened that box."

Thorpe said his life is split in two — before and after. He was 13 in 1944 when an Army Jeep pulled up to his family's house in Cranston and uniformed officers asked to speak with his parents. They weren't home.

With reluctance, the officers handed him a telegraph, making him promise not to open it until his parents returned. He shut the door, and immediately read the message that would turn his world upside down.

"It said 'missing,' just 'missing,'" recalled Thorpe, now 84. "I was numb."

Thorpe then had to deliver the news to his parents: their eldest son was missing in action. "After that, there was a pall over our house, like a black cloud," he said. His sister was listless, ulcers wore away his mother's stomach and his father's fingers grew tired from dialing the phone so many times, reaching out to learn what happened to his boy.

In 1948, years after Bobby had been presumed dead, the truth seeped out. The story of Robert Thorpe's beheading, and the five Japanese officers that were charged with the crime, landed on the front pages of newspapers nationwide.

Ken Dooley, a neighbor and friend of Gill Thorpe's, described a discomfort that fell over the entire neighborhood.

"It was a pure sadness," said Dooley, 84. "Everyone loved Bobby. We didn't know what to do. So we never talked about it."

Thorpe suppressed his sorrow. He worked long hours as a pharmacist, married and had three children. In 2002, Thorpe was retired and said he felt compelled to find out what happened. He knew the bare minimum: Robert Thorpe was captured by the Japanese, interrogated and beheaded. But he needed more.

"I was old enough," said Thorpe. "I needed closure."

The first break

After two years of searching, he found his first break — an Australian World War II buff had a copy of his brother's missing air crew report, just unsealed after 50 years. "I just sat and cried," said Thorpe.

Armed with these additional details, Thorpe continued to search for his brother's remains, calling politicians and speaking out. Dooley heard the story and got involved.

It had been nearly 40 years since Dooley and Thorpe had spoken when Dooley called and offered his help to Thorpe. He had worked in journalism, was familiar with the Freedom of Information Act. He was confident he could get additional details.

After months of requests and door knocks, Dooley received the 1,300-page court-martial report from the trial. Gill Thorpe finally had his answer.

Robert Thorpe, 20, was a fighter pilot in a May 1944 air attack on the Japanese Wewak airfield complex in New Guinea. His fighter was struck by ground fire, and he was forced to ditch into the Pacific Ocean. Thorpe grabbed onto a tree stump floating by and swam to shore, where he was captured by a patrol. Thorpe, thirsty and overheated, was brought to a Japanese officer for questioning. With bound hands, he was then dragged on a 6-mile journey over rugged mountain trails, according to the report.

He was tied to a post and interrogated. But when officers wanted to know about his base and squadron, Thorpe remained tight-lipped, the records show.

Commander Kaoru Okuma asked him if he thought his country would win the war, to which he responded, "My country has too many resources to lose." Okuma became enraged and ordered at least a dozen soldiers to beat him, saying he insulted the emperor. Okuma ordered his execution for 3 p.m.

Okuma and the other officers used Robert Thorpe's body, alive and bloodied, "for target practice," splashing bullets into his legs. Before a gathered crowd, one officer knocked Thorpe into a shallow grave and beheaded him, killing him. A medical technician jumped into the grave, and cut his abdomen open, removing his liver, according to the records.

At the trial before U.S. officers after the war, in Yokohama, Japan, Okuma described Robert Thorpe's stony, silent, disposition as "magnificent." And reading it in the trial transcript years later, Gill Thorpe agreed.

Though he said he will never have closure, Thorpe says he feels he's completed his task. Before nailing down the specifics, he couldn't discuss his brother without, "having serious emotional distress."

With the help of Martin and Dooley, he tracked down some of his brother's colleagues from the fighter squadron, and spoke with them.

The search has led to many honors: in May 2013, Robert Thorpe was posthumously awarded Rhode Island's highest military honor — The Rhode Island Star. In the ceremony at the Rhode Island State House chambers, then-Rep. Peter Martin spoke.

"After 69 years of silence, it's time for us to do something to honor this heroic young man," Martin said to those gathered.

In June 2015, a ceremony was held at Veterans Memorial Cemetery to dedicate a marker to Robert Thorpe. Gill Thorpe had agreed to abandon his lifelong search for his brother's physical remains, and honor him with the plaque.

Last week, Thorpe sat at Martin's kitchen table in Newport, nursing a cup of coffee. His eyes lit up as he told the story of his "life-changing" investigation. The search is over; he is at peace. "When I started this, the whole thing seemed like a personal attack on me," Thorpe said. "Now I realize that nothing too abnormal happened to Bob. He is representative of all of the Americans captured during that time, of everyone that didn't come home."

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