

FEATURE

China Remembers a Flying Tiger

US veteran who helped China during WWII laid to rest

chinadaily.com.cn | Updated: 2017-06-12 11:20
http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-06/12/content_29710979.htm

At 7:40 am on Jan 25, 1944, 24-year-old Robert Eugene Oxford and seven other crew members were on a routine supply mission on their B-24 Liberator heavy bomber from Kunming in Southwest China to Chabua, India.

They never reached their destination.

Oxford's plane, nicknamed Hot as Hell, was one of the five bombers from the 308th

Bombardment Group, 425th Squadron of the 14th Air Force that took off that morning from their base at Kunming to fly over the Hump, a treacherous stretch of peaks in the Himalayan mountains, according to US military documents.

At 10:45 am, the formation at 15,000 feet was forced to break up due to extreme weather conditions. Clouds obscured the mountains' tree lines; visibility was less than a mile.

Each aircraft was on its own, trying to land safely in valleys or at the nearest airstrip. All five bombers went down.

Crews parachuted out of two aircraft and survived. A third bomber crashed, with two survivors. The fourth and fifth B-24s — Hot as Hell and Halley's Comet — disappeared. Their crews were later presumed dead.



World War II veteran Robert Eugene Oxford's funeral was held in Concord, Georgia of the US on June 11, 2017.

[Photo provided to chinadaily.com.cn]

After the plane crashed 73 years ago, no one went looking for it because military officials had no way of pinpointing where it went down.

All signs of the mission were lost until 2006, when a hiker in northeast India saw a wing and panel sign inscribed with the bomber's name. The Pentagon investigated the crash site in 2015 and found the remains of First Lieutenant Oxford. DNA analysis of his remains matched his niece and nephew.

On Sunday afternoon, a funeral and burial ceremony was held in Oxford's hometown of Concord, Georgia. Concord has a population of 375 and land area of 0.8 square mile, according to the 2010 US Census.

His remains were buried with full military honors alongside those of his parents, Charles and Bessie Oxford, who had placed a memorial marker for their lost son at

the gravesite after his plane went missing seven decades ago.

Photos of the seven fellow crewmen on the mission, none of whom were found, were laid beside the coffin and then placed inside for burial at the Magnolia Cemetery in Concord.

The other seven crew members included First Lieutenant William A. Swanson (pilot), F/O Sheldon L. Chambers (co-pilot), First Lieutenant Irwin Zaetz (navigator), Staff Sergeant Charles D. Ginn (engineer), Staff Sergeant Harry B. Queen (radio operator), Sergeant James A. Hinson (gunner) and Sergeant Alfred H. Gerrans Jr. (gunner).

Sherri Moody from the Moody-Daniel Funeral Home in Zebulon, Georgia, told China Daily after the funeral that some 300 to 400 people attended on Sunday afternoon, more than half of them ethnic Chinese, with some coming from as far as New York and Philadelphia.

"I think it went well," said Moody, who gave away 700 yellow ribbons Sunday afternoon.

Oxford's remains landed at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport on Thursday afternoon, with full military honors. Some 20 relatives who had never seen Oxford in person also gathered.

"We were ecstatic that Eugene was found, but we feel guilty there are seven other men on that mountaintop," said Merrill Roan, the wife of Oxford's nephew.

"So we are honoring the other seven. ... We have to honor them as well, because they may never get any closure," she said.

The hearse carrying his casket then went on a 50-mile trip from the airport to Concord, accompanied by State Patrol, Patriot Guard and the local Pike County Sheriff's Office.

Oxford's parents, siblings and any other relatives who saw him depart for World War II have all passed away since he went

missing. His fiancée, Susan Brown Parham, who waited decades to marry another, died in 2011.

Oxford volunteered to become a part of the armed forces when he graduated from high school. He graduated from Midland Army Flying School in Texas on Aug 13, 1942, and joined the war effort after that.

More than 3,000 American airmen made trips across the Himalayan Mountains during World War II. Many were lost.

More than 650,000 tons of equipment was ferried to China to support the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. The Chinese contribution to the war was considered highly valuable.

An article posted on June 9 on the Atlanta Chinese Life website said all Chinese should go and attend the Sunday funeral.

Indeed, China and US were allies during World War II. US soldiers who helped China during the war are well remembered and highly respected among the Chinese population.

The most notable were probably the Flying Tigers, or officially known as the First American Volunteer Group of the Chinese Air Force. It was composed of US pilots recruited under the presidential authority and commanded by Claire Lee Chennault, known to Chinese as Chen Nade.

In March 2015, the Flying Tigers Heritage Park was built on the site of the Yangtang Airfield, the command base of the Flying Tigers, in Guilin of Southwest China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

In March this year, the park received a Douglas C-47 Skytrain that were used by the Flying Tigers to fly the Hump. It was donated by the California-based Flying Tiger Historical Organization.

Joseph Stilwell, a US Army general and a head of the China Burma India Theater during World War II, is also a household name in China.

The Pike County Times, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
and the Associated Press contributed to this story.

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