

FEATURE

Flying Tiger Oxford

Bringing 1st Lt. Robert Eugene Oxford Home - A Celebration of A Hero from Two Cultures

By Editor Becky Watts

Pike County Times, Zebulon, GA

CONCORD - It took 73 long years, but the Concord community was finally able to honor a hometown hero, 1st Lt. Robert Eugene Oxford. Eugene and the entire crew of the B-24J Liberator named "Hot as Hell" flew their final flight on The Hump on January 25, 1944. When their plane didn't arrive, they were declared in Missing in Action and then Killed in Action with no word of what happened to them for 63 years. Eugene was engaged to be married, and most of his immediate family passed away without knowing what had happened to him.

A memorial service for Eugene and his crew mates was held on Sunday June 11, 2017 in Zebulon, and he was finally laid to rest in his beloved Concord at Magnolia Cemetery. Many in his family never thought that the day would ever come that America would bring him home, but it happened. The Oxford Family celebrated his life and mourned a man that they only knew from a picture or stories from others.

The family also asked that the remaining members of "Hot as Hell" and others lost who are missing in action be brought home to their loved ones. 73 years was a hard burden for their family to bear.

It Takes a Good Neighbor to Be a Good Neighbor

The day of the funeral began with a trip to Concord to scout out where I was going to set up my camera to film and take pictures of funeral procession as it came through in a couple of



*The auditorium was probably close to 3/4 capacity with many Chinese who joined with our community to pay their respects. In this photo, Tim Daniel from Moody-Daniel Funeral Home is seating everyone in the audience after the family has entered and is seated.
Photo courtesy of Arielle Watts.*

hours. I was in awe of the tremendous amount of yellow ribbons and flags that I had seen already in Zebulon. But even that did not prepare me for the sight that waited in Concord.

Hand-painted and lettered signs, yellow ribbons, and flags both large and small decorated the roadside all of the way to Concord. I saw a home in Hatchettville with people decorating for the parade and pulled in to get a photo. Scottie and Tina Hatchett stopped preparing long enough for me to take a picture of them with their son Jackson and to talk for a few minutes. [Note from the Editor: Hatchettville is where a lot of Hatchett live in the Concord area.]

Actually, all of Hatchettville seemed to be getting ready for the return of 1st Lt. Robert Eugene Oxford. Jimmy and Billy Hatchett even joined us riding in a golf cart with American Flags on it. They were preparing for the homecoming as well. He said that the Oxfords are related to many in Pike County and that Jimmy had known the Oxford family.

"They were good people," he said as he told me that Oxfords had been his neighbors since

they moved there in 1950. "It takes a good neighbor to be a good neighbor," he said. From the number of bows and flags that I saw along the way, I believed him! The excitement for a hometown hero was real even before the funeral began.

By Thursday of this week, Moody-Daniel Funeral Home had given out more than 700 yellow ribbons and flags. A volunteer from the community made the ribbons that adorned the fence posts and road signs in Zebulon and Concord. The visit to Magnolia Cemetery showed freshly painted fences lined with American flags. Even Mayor John Strickland worked with the staff at Magnolia Farms to get ready for the return of Concord's hometown hero by painting fences at the horse farm. As I rode back to Zebulon, I thought I was ready too. But the day was full of surprises even though I had some prior knowledge of what was to come.

The Chinese people remember that America helped their country during WWII when their relatives were being killed by the Japanese. The Chinese community came from near and far to show honor and respect to 1st Lt. Robert Eugene Oxford and his family during the Saturday night visitation and Sunday during the funeral.

What began with a small talk at a real estate closing in April turned into an amazing show of respect at Lt. Oxford's funeral. Frankie Flanders mentioned to a close Chinese friend that Pike County had a hometown hero who had been identified and was finally coming home to Concord after 70 years after dying during a mission that carried supplies to China by flying the Hump across Burma. Frankie began sending updates to his friend like "Bringing 1st Lt. Robert Eugene Oxford Home – Part I and Part II" and

other updates about this homecoming as I posted them on Pike County Times.

During a conversation the week of the funeral, she lamented to Frankie that she liked the articles and was sorry that she had missed the funeral. When Frankie explained that she had not missed the funeral, she asked permission to attend and bring ten friends. This conversation led Frankie to reach out to me because I had written the articles.

At that time, Frankie and I did not know each other, and the conversation occurred while I was riding with Walter and Susan Smith in the Oxford funeral procession from Atlanta to Zebulon on Thursday. The family said that they would be honored for Frankie's close friend and anyone who wanted to attend with her to come to the funeral.

I was also asked and gave permission to have my articles translated and reprinted on the Atlanta Chinese Life website, a Chinese news outlet in the Atlanta area. Information from the first article was translated and uploaded as a call



Courtesy of Frank Liu

to action on June 9, 2017. The introduction read as follows (translated by my computer): "His name is American soldier Robert Eugene,

Georgia. For the Chinese anti-Japanese, he gave his precious life. In 1944 he left Kunming, disappeared in the "hump route" ... today (June 9, 2017) he finally went home. For this moment, he waited for 73 years ... this old beautiful funeral, the Chinese people should go!"

The writer told others about the funeral and said, "I feel as a Chinese, we should go." Credit was given at the bottom of each of three articles to Becky Watts and Pike County Times. Before long, calls to attend the funeral and send donations to Clayton Kuhles at www.MIARecoveries.org went out by Twitter,

WeChat and Weixin which are networking apps for the Chinese community. “Eugene’s story | the old funeral, the Chinese people should go!” was viewed and shared many times in the Chinese community.

It started out small because the Chinese community did not want to draw attention to themselves, but as word went out through social media, many wanted to show their respect and honor to an American airman who had died helping their country remain free during WWII. By Saturday night, some had come to the funeral home to pay their respects to 1st Lt. Oxford and the number who wanted to attend the funeral had grown to 40. No problem. The auditorium contains seating for 700. By Sunday morning—the day of the funeral—the number of those attending had grown to 150.

By the time that the funeral began, there were over 250 Chinese in attendance from the greater Atlanta area, and some flew into Atlanta from Philadelphia and New York to attend the funeral. Not one of these visitors to our community knew Eugene person-ally, but they came to show their respect and honor to a man who had given his life not only for our freedom, but for theirs.

“Thank you for coming” was a common greeting between strangers at the funeral and at the graveside. Many shook hands and even hugged as they met. Photos were taken with flags and new friends and even Patriot Guard members to remember this moment in his-tory. A few from the media were there for this momentous occasion, but most had declined to attend and missed out on a unique opportunity. I have been told repeatedly that the Chinese are very private and do not often come out as a group like what happened here in Zebulon on Sunday. The story of an airman who had waited 73 years to come home was an opportunity to honor this soldier who fought for both countries brought two cultures together that day.

The family extends their thanks to the Chinese com-munity for honoring their Uncle

Eugene as he was finally returned to Concord, Georgia.

And the family extends a special thank you to Clayton Kuhles and MIA Recoveries for finding this crash site in 2006 and documenting it so that their Uncle Eugene could finally come home. However, the job isn’t finished.

Donations can be made to
www.MIARecoveries.org.

Please hash tag your photos and videos with
#1stltroberteugeneoxford

We remember and honor the entire crew of
“Hot As Hell” and mourn their loss for their families:

Pilot 1st Lt. William A. Swanson, O-728935
(MIA /KIA) Proctor, VT

Co-Pilot F/O Sheldon L. Chambers, T-
000291 (MIA /KIA) Altoona, PA

Navigator 1st Lt. Irwin G. “Zipper” Zaetz, O-
791661 (MIA / KIA) Burlington, VT

Bombardier 1st Lt. Robert E. Oxford, O-
663308 (MIA / KIA, BR) Concord, GA

Engineer SSgt Charles D. Ginn, 15084114
(MIA / KIA) Crete, IL

Radio SSgt Harry B. Queen, 11021096 (MIA /
KIA) Onset, MA

Gunner Sgt James A. Hinson, 14188472 (MIA
/ KIA) Greensboro, NC

and Gunner Sgt Alfred H. Gerrans, Jr.,
34315848 (MIA / KIA) Kinston, NC.