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Return flight

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A heroic Norwood aviator's exploits saved from obscurity

By Michele Morgan Bolton, Globe Correspondent | November 9, 2008

Fifty-four years after the death of Colonel George T. Lee, the heroic Norwood fighter pilot who flew hundreds of combat missions during World War II is the star of a documentary debuting today inspired by forgotten film footage shot from the nose of his P-47 Thunderbolt.

The grainy, 13-minute films at the heart of this historic tale were stacked in canisters in a Norwood High School audio-visual closet, overlooked for more than four decades, until Jack Tolman, the station manager for Norwood Public Access Television, found them in 2001.

It would be three years, though, before the faint labels on the dark-green canisters - "Lee," "Pisa, Italy" and "1945" - would begin to mean something for Tolman, and another three years before the film would be finished.

"It started as a fluke and just kind of snowballed," said Tolman. "When I learned about [Lee's] accomplishments and realized I had the film, my background kicked in. I wanted to tell the story."

The 75-minute film premieres today during a special screening for Veterans Day at 1 p.m. in the high school auditorium. Admission is free.

Tolman had looked at the films briefly as he was looking for old football footage for a show he was doing. He watched just a few seconds, assumed they were part of an old social studies project, and promptly forgot them. But when he happened to watch them a second time, he realized he was onto something special.

The films capture battle scenes from the fighter pilot's point of view: chasing down a Nazi plane; blasting supply trains in the Italian countryside; shooting trucks and other vehicles crawling along rural roads. The documentary intersperses the battle footage with interviews and photos.

In making the film, Tolman called on town veterans agent Ted Mulvehill, an Air Force veteran and the son of a WWII aviator, for expert advice. The two assembled information, old photos, and remembrances from Lee's relatives and surviving friends.

But it wasn't until Tolman was seated in a Brimfield living room listening to Lee family members tell stories about "Uncle Georgie" that the saga became real. "What struck me is that every town in the country has a World War II hero," he said. "This is Norwood's, but it could be Anywhere, USA."

George Lee was one of seven children of Thomas and Mary Lee, of Rock Street. A member of Norwood High's Class of 1937, Lee was working as a butcher at the Walpole A&P on Dec. 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. When he tried to enlist, though, he was too skinny, recalled his nephew, Alan Lee, now a Foxborough dentist. "So he ate seven pounds of bananas and cream and bulk-loaded," he said. "And when he weighed in, he made it by a pound."

A natural aviator, George Lee rose rapidly up the ranks in the Army Air Corps and made full colonel by age 25, eventually becoming commander of the 86th Fighter Group. He flew a remarkable 258 combat missions over North Africa and Europe, targeting enemy supply lines. He earned the Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the British Distinguished Flying Cross, and the Croix de Guerre, among others, but no one knows where they are, Alan Lee said.

After the war ended, George Lee opened up a nightclub with his brother Tom, but he was called back to active duty in 1948. He took part in the Berlin Airlift in 1949. In 1954, he was inspector general of the Air Force Central Air Defense Command and had been recommended for promotion to brigadier general when he died while on a training exercise in Missouri, officials and family members said.

In assembling the film, Tolman tracked down people across the country who had known Lee. In Fort Walton Beach, Fla., he found Lee's best friend and fellow pilot Bill Colgan.

Now almost 88, Colgan wrote "World War II Fighter-Bomber Pilot" in 1985. The cover features a group shot - Lee included - of pilots who flew a total of 1,000 missions.

Lee and Colgan met in Sicily in August 1943 and grew close as war raged in Italy, France, and into Germany. "I stayed the rest of the war with him," Colgan said. "We flew the same missions. And I came home [to Norwood] on a short leave with him."

That visit is captured in a photo taken on May 18, 1944, which will be on display at today's screening. The two pilots are surrounded by well-wishers of all ages during a festive parade. Colgan joked that Lee had a whole town come out for him when he returned home, while Colgan only had his wife.

"He was the closest individual friend I've had in my life," said Colgan. "On the surface you would think George was quiet. He was really anything but."

Alan Lee attests to that, describing his uncle as a fun-loving daredevil who didn't drive his yellow Cadillac El Dorado convertible around town, "he flew it. . . . And he'd fly his plane upside down along Washington Street to let Ma Lee know he was home," Lee said. "Let's face it, he was the pride and joy of the family."

On a stormy Labor Day in 1954, after a visit to the family's Dennisport summer home, Colonel Lee was being driven back to his plane at Otis Air Force Base when family members asked him if the fierce wind and rain were a concern. The pilot's response was no, Alan Lee recounted: "It's the lightning he said he didn't like."

Weeks later, George Lee, 35, lost his life when his plane crashed after being struck by lightning.

"I was in seventh grade," Alan Lee recalled. "And an altar boy. I was to serve at Mass that day, and I remember when the priest came over and knocked on the door."

During today's screening, the original films will be returned to the Lee family.

Mulvehill wonders where Lee's career could have gone had he lived. "He had achieved a high level of respect," he said. "For someone to fly 258 missions in a one-seater when most people did 70, well, this is history. He relied on his own talent, his skill, and his nerve. It provides a glimpse into a way of life that has come and gone."

Although most of George Lee's contemporaries are dead, there are many older town residents who remember him, and who will be thrilled to see the film, Mulvehill said.

"Here's a kid who did Norwood proud. Believe me, he hasn't been forgotten."

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