

It is amazing how a little search that started on the internet five years ago can end with such an unforgettable experience! Thanks to the amazing initial search of Don Jordan, ten fallen heroes from World War II now finally have an honorable and permanent resting place in Arlington National Cemetery.

The events of the last few days began on April 9, 1944, when a B-24D crashed in the Mojave Desert. One of the crew members was my uncle Sgt. Michael Rudich of Charleston, South Carolina. My family knew that he had been killed on a training mission with nine others; however, we never knew the details of the crash. On July 28, 2005, I was watching a show on The History Channel about aircraft crashes in WWII. This broadcast brought to mind my uncle for whom I was named, and I wondered if there might be anything at all on the internet about the crash. I did a search for his name and the date of the crash, never really expecting to find any specific information. To my total shock and amazement, I found an article which a wreck chaser named Don Jordan had posted listing the names of the ten crew members. There was a link at the bottom of the page to contact Don, and I immediately wrote him asking for more information. Since my questions were numerous, I couldn't type fast enough and asked if we could speak to each other. Don willingly agreed to talk to me and filled me in on where the crash was located and how he had initially located it a couple of years prior to my call. (Since Don has the utmost respect for such war graves, he did not publicize the location of the crash site so it would not be looted for profit by scavengers.) As we were finishing our conversation, I asked Don if he would go to the site and get some sand so that I could sprinkle it on my uncle's grave in Charleston, S.C. Don then asked if there was anything else which I might want since some wreckage was still in the desert. I was completely flabbergasted and said that I would love

to have anything associated with the radio operator's position since that was my uncle's job. Don informed me that at the time of the crash, the military did investigate and remove all of the human remains which they could find at that time. The official report stated that two crew members had not been accounted for.

A few weeks later, Don called to inform me that an individual had been sent to the site by Pat Macha, another wreck chaser, to search for items. If this person had not begun his search, none of the subsequent events would have ever occurred. In retrieving these items, some bones had also been found. At first, it was thought that this was a crime scene, and the bones were not related to the 1944 B-24 crash. It was thought that these were the remains of one individual, perhaps a murder victim. A later search led to the discovery of many human remains and personal items. Soon it was discovered that there were too many of the same type of bones for it to be only one person since what was found represented at least three people. Then when a military dog tag was unearthed and Don identified the name on it as that of a crew member on the B-24, all work stopped. The decision was made to notify the military, and it was decided that the site needed to be searched by a team from JPAC (Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command) in Hawaii; due to their busy schedule, JPAC could not begin this excavation and recovery mission until the spring of 2006. Unfortunately, when the coroner's representatives came out, the local newspapers were notified of a possible crime scene. Due to the publication of several articles, some "treasure seekers" came to the site and started digging to find anything of value. Upon hearing of the unauthorized digging that was going on, JPAC decided to rearrange its schedule and search the site as soon as possible. The excavation began in May 2006. On the first day of work by JPAC, grid lines were laid out to mark off the site in a

pattern; equipment was set up in preparation for the work. During that first night, someone again came to the site and removed the grid lines in order to dig more holes. It was then decided to have an individual actually camp on the site to prevent further looting. In addition to bones, teeth, and personal jewelry, two sets of dog tags were found. Over time, most of the larger items from the wreckage have been removed by either the military or scavengers. When JPAC did its excavation for the recovery, they removed several very large crates of wreckage and dumped them in the local trash dump. There were too many pieces for any one person to take and store, and there are still many, many smaller pieces still remaining near the site of the crash.

After a three-year period of time, JPAC compiled its report and tried to locate the next-of-kin of the ten crew members. Private investigators were even hired to find some of the relatives since so many years had passed. The government was successful in finding family members of eight of the ten men who had died in the crash, and the Department of the Army promised that there would be a group burial before the end of 2009. However, the year passed by without any other information. In the spring of 2010, I called the Department of the Army to find out why nothing had been done concerning the group burial. I was told that the government had changed its mind since all of the bodies had been returned and buried in 1944. I told the representative that I didn't think this was accurate information because I had the original article that stated two bodies had never been recovered. I also explained that the two sets of dog tags probably belonged to the two crew members whose bodies had never been recovered. It was so obvious that all of the bodies could not have possibly been buried in 1944, and these men deserved better.

After writing letters to President Barack Obama and to my Senator Lindsey Graham, we received a phone call that the Department of the Army had changed its mind! A group burial would be held on October 29, 2010. Well, we just returned from Washington and were completely overwhelmed by the events of the last few days! The government was able to locate the next-of-kin for eight of the ten crew members and paid for them to fly and stay in Washington. We arrived late in the afternoon on Wednesday, October 27, 2010. Since I had already been in touch with Don Tries (the son of Donald J. Orth) and Dick Beck (the brother of George Beck), I immediately wanted to meet them in person. We had a nice time comparing stories and photos and knew that all of the families would get together for the first time at a chapel service the following day. However, never in our wildest dreams did any of us imagine what we would experience.

The next night from 6:00-8:00 at Murphy Funeral Home, the families met for the very first time. There were about 100 people in attendance, and all of us signed the ten guest books for each of the ten families. The service began with government representatives who then told us the majority of the service would include family members speaking about their loved ones. Many, many family members shared stories about these men: Lt. Frank A. Gurley (pilot); Lt. James W. Shrum (co-pilot); Lt. William H. Dethorn (Bombardier); Lt. Donald J. Orth (Navigator); Sgt. George W. Beck (Engineer;); Sgt. Michael Rudich (Radio Operator); Sgt. William C. Mahan (Gunner); M/Sgt. Jesse H. Church (Asst. Engineer) ; Cpl. Thomas V. Perry (Asst. Radio Operator); and Cpl. Morris J. Youngblood (Gunner). We heard from a widow, a son, brothers and a sister, nieces and nephews, and cousins. We laughed and cried and felt like one big family. We had a connection, and now this wasn't just a story about the crew but a story about all of us.

At 8:45 AM on Friday, October 29, 2010, the chapel service began with an opening prayer and eulogy by Chaplain Godfrey. Prayers from the Old and New Testament were read by Rabbi Bash and Father Gabriel. As Chaplain Godfrey so eloquently stated: These men represented various “the breadth of American and religious faiths...They knew the value of teamwork...This is the earthly resting place for these precious, recently found remains. It is here we come to remember them.” At the conclusion of the chapel service, the casket containing the group remains was loaded onto a caisson and headed for its final resting place. It was followed by many people who walked and by eight limousines filled with those who were not able to do so. The Army Band played “Taps,” and there was a twenty-one gun salute. Even though many tears fell as these men were laid to rest, there was a true feeling of peace. Now after sixty-six long years in the desert, these ten heroes are together again in our nation’s most sacred cemetery.

The families have vowed to stay in touch and exchanged e-mails. None of us wanted to leave Washington because we didn’t want this experience to end. We hope that next year all of us will all be able to return to Arlington National Cemetery to see the headstone in person. All of the families owe a debt of gratitude to Don Jordan and Pat Macha for their determination not to let these men die unnoticed. Now these men of the B-24D will be remembered forever!!