



WWII death has life of its own

Unlikely events link Pa. to Netherlands

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By Michael A. Fuoco, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

From the Netherlands to New Castle, from 1945 to 2005, the death of Army Pfc. Hugh R. McCormick in World War II continues to edify, educate, illuminate.

"To me, there's something spiritual going on," his niece, Betty DiRisio, offered.

She'll get no argument from Johanna Stoel, of the Netherlands, the 83-year-old Catholic nun and former teacher whose faith and perseverance nearly 25 years after McCormick's death in February 1945 in Holland forever connected the Dutch woman with the slain American GI.

Nor from KRO, a Netherlands Christian television channel that on July 31 broadcast the linkage of McCormick's death with Stoel's life on its program "Wonderen Basteen," or "Miracles Exist."

And certainly not from DiRisio's cousins, sisters Ella Dugan, 65, and Kathy Arblaster, 57, who traveled with DiRisio to Holland to participate in the KRO show. The women, all New Castle residents, went there for their uncle's memory but returned with a heretofore unknown emotional connection to all who gave the ultimate sacrifice during a war that officially ended 60 years tomorrow with V-J Day, or Victory in Japan Day.

"Everything about it gives you the chills. It's another miracle of sorts in that he is not going to be forgotten." DiRisio, 50, said of her uncle, who died 10 years before she was born.

"He continues to come back and bring people together to remember him. It's been a remarkable, awesome, unforgettable experience."

Death in Holland

The story begins with a tragic end.

The date was Feb. 26, 1945. McCormick, 25, single and the youngest of 13 children in a New Castle family, had spent 20 months serving with the 289th Infantry in Iceland, Belgium, England and France. Now, he found himself with other GIs on a boat crossing the Maas River between Blerick and Venlo in southern Holland. They were on a mission to



Pfc. Hugh McCormick

capture a German soldier from the other side of the river.

They never made it. A Defense Department report said that at 9:30 p.m., German machine guns fired upon the boat as it was three-fourths of the way across the river. McCormick was struck in the stomach and died in the arms of a comrade. And then the boat hit a bridge and capsized. All of the soldiers were accounted for with the exception of McCormick.

McCormick became one of the 1,723 American servicemen listed on the "Tablets of the Missing" at Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial at Margarten. Also in the cemetery, which includes the graves of 8,301 American soldiers, is a statue of "The Mourning Woman," a mother grieving the loss of her son.

In New Castle, the McCormick family grieved. The Catholic family's pain at the report of his death was exacerbated by the fact they couldn't provide him a proper burial.

Fast forward to July 27, 1969. Two boys from Lomm, south of Venlo, were fishing in the Maas River, whose depth had been dramatically lowered because authorities were inspecting dikes and bridges. One of the boys saw what he thought was a ball. He pulled it out the muddy water. It was a human skull.

The boys ran to Stoel's nearby home. Stoel, then 47, their teacher, sometimes mounted archeological digs for war remains. Stoel and authorities searched the area for a week, finding more human bones, a U.S. Army boot and a sheath containing gun-cleaning supplies and a small cross.

What they didn't find was crucial -- dog tags that would have provided an identity. Stoel prayed she would find the dog tags so the remains could be returned to the deceased's family. She continued to search for another week after the Dutch authorities gave up. And then she learned that the maintenance work had been completed and the river was going to be flooded to its usual depth.

She stood on the river bank. It was raining. The river was rising. She cried to God, "Why? Why can't I find the tags?"

The rain abruptly stopped. The sun appeared. Rays pierced the water and Stoel's gaze was drawn to a reflection. She reached into the river and withdrew her hand with two pieces of metal -- dog tags. On them was written "McCormick, Hugh R."

Records research and scientific processing at the U.S. Army Mortuary in Frankfurt, Germany, positively identified the remains as McCormick. The remains were returned to New Castle. A military funeral was held in April 1970 and McCormick was buried in St. Mary's Cemetery.



Darrell Sapp, Post-Gazette

Kathy Arblaster, above left, Ella Dugan, center, and Betty DiRisio are nieces of New Castle native Army PFC Hugh McCormick, who died in 1945 during World War II. McCormick, right, was listed as Missing In Action until 1969. His dog tags were found by a woman in Holland and a search was conducted for his remains. His nieces flew to Holland and were part of a Dutch television show called "Miracles Exist."

Among the mourners were McCormick's nieces Dugan, DiRisio and Arblaster.

Precious memories

Dugan, who was 3 years old when McCormick shipped out, was in her New Castle home July 7 when the phone rang. It was the New Castle Public Library, which had received a call from a KRO reporter in Holland looking for relatives of Hugh McCormick for their miracle story.

"I was there when my mother got a call about his remains being found 25 years later," she said in amazement, "and now, 35 years after that, I receive a call about him."

Dugan contacted DiRisio, the family historian. Indeed, a week earlier she had been archiving photos of McCormick.

DiRisio contacted the reporter in Amsterdam and was shocked to learn the details of the how the remains had been found. The Defense Department report had indicated they were discovered by a "Dutch female" and provided no specifics.

DiRisio provided photographs and other assistance for the show. KRO offered to pay for two family members to travel to Holland to be part of the broadcast. The three nieces, raised together when DiRisio's mother died when she was 2, accepted the offer and paid for the third fare.

They arrived in Amsterdam on July 22. The next day KRO took them to the cemetery in Margarten. The women were overcome with emotion when they came upon the more than 8,000 American graves marked with white crosses that the Dutch clean and maintain in honor of the GIs who lost their lives in saving them.

"I've been to his grave here; I was at his funeral," DiRisio said, "but when we got there it was a bigger picture. World War II wasn't just a chapter in a book anymore.

"We stood on what was once territory taken over by Hitler ... and to think that land is free now because of people like my uncle. You look at these crosses and you realize these are the men who served with him, men like him who had families like us, men who never made it home."

Stoel hadn't been told McCormick's family members would be there. The cameras capture Stoel placing flowers beneath McCormick's name. The nieces approach her, identify themselves and express their gratitude.

They present her with a shadow box containing pictures of McCormick -- Stoel never had seen his photo before -- along with pictures of DiRisio's mother, Virginia, and Dugan and Arblaster's mother, Catherine, McCormick's sisters. Also included was a silk handkerchief McCormick sent to Catherine in 1943.

A short time later, off camera, an elderly Dutch man approached DiRisio. In halting English he said he heard they were relatives of Pfc. McCormick. With tears in his eyes, he grabbed her hand and thanked her and her family for the sacrifice of losing a loved one.

"And then he said that if it weren't for Hugh and people like him Pfc. Hugh McCormick that

he and his family would not be alive, that he owed us such gratitude," DiRisio said. "I just lost it. It was so emotional."

Later that day the women visited the site where their uncle's remains had been recovered. They stayed in Holland for two more days, but all they could talk about when they returned to America, Dugan said, "was that one day, that precious day, that emotional day."

"The experience was overwhelming," Arblaster said. "Just the thought of meeting this lady. My thoughts on her were like she was on a mission from God to make this all happen."

"She just brought closure to our family and provided memories [we] will pass down. It's hard for us to even grasp what has happened. We're just so thankful."

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