

This week



Find John Ackley's Passing Time column on page 10 this week.

Life Style

STANDARD PRESS

THINK about it

The phrase, "the whole nine yards" originated from World War II B-17 sidegunners who had a string of bullets that fed into their guns that measured nine yards long.

Jim Weiler's plane was blown out of the sky.

There were no remains, his family thought – until more than 20 years later.

The silver bracelet

By Mark Dudzik
STAFF WRITER

Jim Weiler's plane was blown out of the sky.

It happened Aug. 29, 1944, while he was on a bombing mission during World War II.

The 22-year-old Burlington native's plane went down in a remote area near the border between Czechoslovakia and Slovakia, falling from an altitude of 25,000 feet.

There were no known remains.

But then, more than 20 years later, a silver bracelet that was found amidst the wreckage was returned to Jim Weiler's family. The bracelet had been given to Jim by his parents upon his graduation from flight school in 1943.

The story of the silver bracelet and its improbable return to the Weiler family is chronicled in a presentation put on by Jim's nephew, Todd Weiler of Milwaukee.

The presentation, which outlines the coincidences that resulted in the return of the flight bracelet to the Weiler family, has become somewhat of a passion for Todd, who himself is awed by how the mystery has unraveled after all these years.

"The story has always been about people being in the right place at the right time and, if just one little cog of the wheel had been out of synch, the whole story would have been lost," he said.

The only explanation Todd can offer for how the story unfolded is that it's as if his uncle is orchestrating it from beyond the grave.

"I think Jim is speaking through certain ways that I could never fathom to

understand," he said.

The Weiler family learned a resident of Czechoslovakia named Antonin Kaspavec recovered the bracelet from the crash site.

Kaspavec attempted to contact the Red Cross to return the bracelet, but a language barrier precluded the message from getting through.

"At the end of the war in May of 1945, he contacted the Red Cross to try and return it to them," Todd said. "It turned out that the Red Cross (people) only spoke English and French, so he had no way to communicate with them."

As a result, Kaspavec filed the silver bracelet in a desk drawer and, according to Weiler, largely forgot about it.

Nearly two decades later – in 1966 – Kaspavec sent the bracelet with a friend, Miloslav Holub, who was taking a trip to a film festival in Canada.

Given Canada's proximity to the United States, Todd said Kaspavec believed that giving the bracelet to his friend would give it a better chance of being returned to the rightful owner.

During the trip, Holub was seated next to a woman named Marie Spelina whose husband, Jozka, worked within the operations section of the International Civil Aviation Organization and he subsequently turned the bracelet over to her.

She, in turn, had her husband work through channels that included the Pentagon, in the hopes of returning the bracelet to the Weiler family.

Jozka Spelina ultimately contacted the Pentagon seeking Jim Weiler's next-of-kin, but even Pentagon

officials were unable to help Spelina locate an address because they advised him erroneously to contact the Air Force.

"Jim was in the Army Air Corps," Todd said.

It wasn't until the request was sent to Randolph, Texas – where the Army records are kept – that an address for Jim's mother was found.

Although she had moved, a postman familiar with the Weiler family delivered the bracelet to her new address.

"They sent the bracelet back, along with a letter containing all the details of the battle and mission as best as they knew it," Todd said.

The story of the improbable return of the bracelet sparked a passion in Todd for uncovering all he could about his uncle's death.

Todd learned his uncle was killed just five minutes outside of his bombing run destination of an oil refinery near the Czechoslovakian border.

A 20-millimeter ammunition round most likely pierced the cockpit of the plane, instantly killing Jim and ultimately his crew of nine on board.

Since Todd began delving into the history behind his uncle's crash, information poured in that includes everything from old photos of Jim and his flight crew to pieces of his uncle's plane that were recovered and donated to him on a plaque by a dignitary in Czechoslovakia.

Todd also obtained one of Jim's sketches in which his uncle drew – several years before he even became a pilot – a military plane that had the exact same tail markings as those on

the B-17 in which he was ultimately shot down – something beyond Todd's explanation.

Todd visited the Czech Republic in 2004 during a 60th anniversary ceremony held at the memorial that marks the crash site.

In addition, he met people from the region who saw the squadron fly overhead and visited various museums where artifacts from various crashes of American planes have been collected.

Todd was amazed by the reverence eastern Europeans show – especially the youth – for the sacrifices made that allowed their countries to escape the clutches of Adolph Hitler and the Nazis.

That reverence, Todd said, often puts our country to shame.

"It's embarrassing to some degree because when Veteran's Day comes around, you'll see TVs and washers go on sale and that's how we (honor) it," he said. "Whereas these folks (in Europe) shut down a town and everybody goes to the gravesite to pay their respect."

Todd is willing to put on the hour-long presentation of the story behind the silver bracelet free-of-charge to service clubs or other groups interested in learning about its rich history.

The presentations, he said, are meant to ensure the legacy of the men who sacrificed so much.

"They (the veterans) went through hell and all we have to do is try and remember it," he said.

For information, contact Todd Weiler directly at (414) 688-6401 or via e-mail at tjweil@pobox.com.



SUBMITTED PHOTO Standard Press



SUBMITTED PHOTO Standard Press

Known as a comic who could crack a joke before the crack of dawn, the late Jim Weiler jokes around while wearing full flying regalia outside his Burlington home.



SUBMITTED PHOTO Standard Press

Todd Weiler, whose uncle was killed in a plane crash over Czechoslovakia, received a plaque bearing pieces of his uncle's plane from a Czech dignitary near the memorial erected at the site of the crash.

“I think Jim is speaking through certain ways that I could never fathom to understand.”

– Todd Weiler, nephew



SUBMITTED PHOTO Standard Press

A German fighter pilot named Nowak (first name unknown) who shot Jim Weiler's B-17 out of the sky back on Aug. 29, 1944, poses near the wreckage of the crash site while proudly telling a Czech photographer who took the picture, "This is my work."