

Home at Last



BY BRUCE M. PETTY

Lieutenant Woodie McVay's Hellcat went down on Saipan in 1944, but 65 years would pass before his remains made it home.

On 13 July 2009, Lieutenant Woodie Lackland McVay Jr., U.S. Naval Reserve, was laid to rest next to his parents in the Pine Crest Cemetery in Mobile, Alabama. In attendance were his wife—the former Annie Ruth Heidelberg—and his granddaughter—Elizabeth Huff. This event would not be considered out of the ordinary—except for the fact that Lieutenant McVay's funeral was held 65 years after he went missing in the Mariana Islands in February 1944.

By early 1944, the campaign in the Central Pacific under Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific

Command, was well under way. In the Gilbert Islands, the 2d Marine Division had taken Tarawa in November 1943 after three days of terrible fighting and unforeseen obstacles. As bloody as Tarawa was, it originally had been billed as a rehearsal for the main event, the seizing of the Marshall Islands.

Vice Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, commanding officer of the 5th Fleet, was confident he could take the designated atolls in the Marshalls—Kwajalein and Majuro, and later Eniwetok—but was concerned about a possible Japanese attempt to either retake them or cut his lines of communication. He didn't have the men, ships, or time to

Lieutenant (junior grade) Woodie Lackland McVay Jr. in the cockpit of his F6F on board the USS *Yorktown* in September 1943, a month before he made full lieutenant and became a division leader in Navy Fighting Squadron (VF) 5. He was fated to join the all-too lengthy roster of those missing in action—but sometimes even old mysteries are solved.

capture all of the Japanese-held Marshall Islands, which covered more than 400,000 square miles of ocean. He was especially concerned that Japanese planes operating from bypassed islands in the Marshalls and even farther afield might attack his ships and disrupt the landings. His solution was to neutralize the bypassed islands using air power, both land-based and carrier-launched. Task Force 58, led by one of the early pioneers in U.S. naval aviation, Rear Admiral Marc Mitscher, would carry out some of the mission while the land-based heavy bombers, flying mostly out of the Gilbert Islands, would carry out the rest.

On 29 January 1944, several days before U.S. Marine and Army forces began landing in the Marshalls, Mitscher's carriers with their 700 aircraft attacked designated Japanese air bases in the island chain, specifically Taroa Airfield on Malaelap Atoll, and then Kwajalein, where the Marines were to come ashore. As a result, Japanese air power was neutralized in the area, and U.S. casualties were far fewer than had been experienced on Tarawa just three months earlier.

The final phase of the Marshall Islands operation was the taking of Eniwetok Island, a little more than 500 miles northwest of Kwajalein, one of the original objectives of Operation Flintlock. D-day was set for 17 February 1944.

The large Japanese naval base at Truk in the Western Caroline Islands was just 660 miles to the southeast, and to keep Japanese aircraft from disrupting the operation, Task Force 58 would launch an attack there—Operation Hailstone. It came as an almost complete surprise to the Japanese, and even though some of the larger combat ships managed to escape destruction, more than 200 enemy aircraft were reported destroyed, along with 40 ships either sunk or badly damaged (see “Two Birds with One Hailstone,” February 2014, pp. 16–21). However, a few days earlier,

on 12 February, a number of Japanese flying boats operating out of Saipan had bombed the Marines on Roi-Namur, one of the islets that make up Kwajalein Atoll, causing considerable damage to a supply dump and killing or wounding more than 150 Marines.

The Mariana Islands—primarily Guam, Rota, Tinian, and Saipan—had been left untouched. That was all about to change, however. Almost as an afterthought, Admiral Nimitz from his headquarters in Hawaii suggested to Admiral Spruance a strike against these islands prior to returning to the newly acquired bases in the Marshalls. Spruance and Mitscher discussed the idea and agreed it could be done. Spruance, confident that Mitscher and his aviators could handle the job, turned the carriers loose.

Task Force 58 refueled and headed for the Marianas, where U.S. Marines and Army troops would land four months later in June 1944. More than 100 Japanese planes were reported as destroyed, several small noncombatant ships were sunk, and installations on Saipan were strafed and bombed during the one-day hit-and-run carrier operation on 22 February.

The first raid against the Japanese-held Marianas was a success. “Only” six U.S. planes were lost in the operation, according to Admiral Mitscher. (According to Ted Darcy of the MIA-searching WFI Research Group, however, a seventh plane, an F6F, was struck from the Navy inventory due to damage suffered during the raid.)

Among the raid's missing fliers was Lieutenant Woodie Lackland McVay Jr. of Mobile, Alabama. In March 1943



On 15 January 1944 McVay received the Air Medal in an award presentation on the deck of the *Yorktown*. Five weeks later, he would disappear during a raid in the Marianas.



NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NAVAL AVIATION

F6F Hellcats of McVay's Fighting Squadron (VF) 5 and TBF Avengers of Torpedo Squadron (VT) 5 are spotted for launch from the *Yorktown* in 1943. During his time serving on board "the Fighting Lady" in the Pacific, McVay was credited with three kills.

he had joined Navy Fighting Squadron (VF) 5 on board the USS *Yorktown* (CV-10), a recently commissioned *Essex*-class fast carrier. In October 1943 he was promoted to lieutenant and made a division leader in his squadron, which was equipped with the new F6F-3 Hellcats. During *Yorktown* operations in the Pacific, McVay was credited with three kills. His third was in the Caroline Islands on 17 February 1944. However, five days later, on 22 February, while making a strafing run near the Japanese seaplane base on the west coast of Saipan, he was either shot down or involved in a midair collision with his wingman, Lieutenant Arthur Davis. To this day nobody seems to know for sure.

James Campbell, another F6F pilot who often sat next to McVay in the ready room, was the one who packed up McVay's belongings and sent them home to his grieving family. Jim Pickard, another one of his squadron mates, wrote in his diary as it appears in the book *The Fighting Lady*: "this is the worst day of my life, McVay and Davis, my team leader and wingman both gone on one hop. I guess it's just luck or fate. It's a hell of a life. I'd almost like to quit flying." McVay's family back in Alabama was notified that he was missing in action—one of the 74,201 Americans still listed as such from World War II alone.

In June 1944, having secured the Marshall Islands, Admiral Nimitz's Central Pacific command advanced the timetable for Operation Forager—the invasion of

Saipan in the Marianas. Backed by more than 500 ships, including more than a dozen aircraft carriers, two U.S. Marine Corps divisions—the 2d and the 4th—began landing on the southwest coast of Saipan on 15 June; the U.S. Army's 27th Infantry Division began landing the following day. It would take almost three weeks and cost almost 15,000 U.S. casualties before the island was declared secure.

On 17 June, after the 2d Marine Division secured the outskirts of the main village of Garapan, members of Forward Echelon, U.S. Army Garrison Force—Colonel Elliot G. Colby and Lieutenant Colonel Richard C. Wadsworth—were directed by locals to a nearby Catholic cemetery. It was purported that a U.S. Navy flier had been interred there either on 23 or 24 February. This was the first of three unknown bodies to be recovered in that general area. The other two were found on the grounds of the nearby jail.

Colby and Wadsworth were accompanied by Major Warren R. Durham, eight locals, an interpreter, and a stenographer to the autopsy that was to be performed. The remains were removed to the 369th Station Hospital, where the autopsy took place and the following findings were made:

The body was clothed in a one-piece, greenish-khaki coverall type of uniform (Exhibit No. 1), the buttons on the uniform bearing the words "U.S. Navy". . . . A plane [sic] silver ring was found on the left hand.

. . . Nothing was found in the pockets. A pair of badly deteriorated undershorts, bearing the name “W.L. McVay” in two places, was worn. . . . Shoes and socks were found on the bones of the feet. . . . Decomposition had progressed to such an extent that practically no soft tissue remained.

The right arm had been broken at the juncture of the middle and lower third of the humerus. Both bones of the lower legs have been broken at approximately the juncture of the middle and lower thirds.

The skull is covered with the remains of medium brown hair. There appears to have been severe trauma in the region of the nose, maxilla, and ethnoids.

The autopsy continues in great detail, concluding: “The cause of death in this case was trauma, multiple, extreme (fractured skull, fractured bones of face, fractured left humerus and both right and left tibia and fibula). All of the above fractures, due to their severity, were probably compound.”

According to the WFI Research Group’s Ted Darcy: “Had the autopsy findings been reported to the Navy, the body could have easily been identified. There were only three sailors with the surname McVay lost during the war and the other two bodies had been recovered.”

That is not the end of the story, however. Instead of notifying next of kin, the remains of Lieutenant Woodie Lackland McVay were buried in the 27th Division Cemetery on Saipan as an “unknown.”


There were 69 unknowns recovered from Saipan after the war. Seven were moved to the National Cemetery of the Pacific in Hawaii, while McVay and 61 others were taken to the American Battle Monuments Cemetery at Fort McKinley in Manila.

Fifty-eight years later, in May 2006, McVay’s family was contacted by WFI with the information available from the autopsy report, and responded with an overwhelming yes to having his body returned. At that point the research began in earnest to gather the records needed to request his disinterment and identification.

By June 2008—two years later—Darcy had concluded that the remains of Saipan unknown X-35 from the 27th Division Cemetery matched the physical and dental characteristics of Lieutenant McVay. That same month the results were forwarded to Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) in Hawaii. JPAC agreed with Darcy’s findings and gave its approval for the remains to be disinterred.

However, said Darcy:

The biggest problem we had was with the Army Human Resources Command, getting the IDPFs—Individual Deceased Personnel File. Once we got those, we sent them to JPAC, and 90 days later had the letter recommending disinterment. I believe there was a six-month delay before they actually did the disinterment, but it was handled by Army Mortuary, not JPAC. Then DPMO—Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Person Office—failed to do a press release.

On 22 May 2009, McVay’s granddaughter, Elizabeth Daly Huff, was notified that X-35 had been positively identified as her grandfather. Dorothy, Woodie McVay’s only surviving sibling, was excited about her brother finally coming home, but sadly died in January 2009, seven months before his remains were returned for reburial. However, McVay’s granddaughter Elizabeth and her cousin were there, along with his 90-year-old widow and several U.S. Navy and Marine Corps personnel, when his flag-covered coffin was removed from the plane. 

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COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

**From a nameless grave 7,000 miles from home (directional)
to a fitting resting place alongside his parents (directional):**

**Though many years
would pass, Lieutenant
Woodie McVay’s story
ultimately came with
some sense of closure.**

