

The Bakers Creek Air Crash: **How Genealogists Helped Honor the Casualties** **Of a Forgotten World War II Plane Crash**

Washington, D.C. Daughters joined the 62nd Anniversary Commemoration ceremony for the Bakers Creek Air Crash, an airplane accident that took the lives of 40 American servicemen in Australia during World War II. The Bakers Creek Memorial Association (BCMA), whose members include families and friends of the servicemen killed in the crash, organized the ceremony. The Mary Washington Chapter, Washington, D.C., co-sponsored the event, which was held at the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., on June 14, 2005. Chapter members gathered with 22 casualty family members in front of the memorial's Pacific Pavilion to place a wreath in memory of those forgotten heroes of World War II.

The incident proved to be the worst plane crash in the Southwest Pacific war. Although the Bakers Creek Air Crash is widely known in Australia, its history was only recently uncovered in America. In 1958, the Department of Defense finally declassified details of the crash that had been kept a military secret for wartime security reasons, but many facts remained missing. For more than 60 years after a converted B-17C Flying Fortress airplane crashed at Bakers Creek, near Mackay, Queensland, Australia, on June 14, 1943, the families of the victims still did not know how or where their loved ones died in the war.

That changed in 1996, when retired U.S. Air Force Major Robert S. Cutler found references to the B-17 crash in his father's wartime diary. Fascinated by the revelation and by the lack of information he found elsewhere about the incident, he began a research project that would consume nearly a decade and take him to Australia.

Maj. Cutler learned that retired Chief Master Sergeant Teddy W. Hanks, of Wichita Falls, Texas, a wartime buddy of four of the crash victims, had also investigated the crash. The two met a few months later to compile a list of the casualties and begin looking for the victims' families. By June 12, 2003, when an article about

their research was published in *The Washington Post*, they had located 19 families. Shortly thereafter, they heard from two retired Army genealogy experts, Lieutenant Colonel C.K. Gailey of Springfield, Va., and Lieutenant Colonel Arvon Staats of Oklahoma City, Okla. Working together, these military veterans were able to locate 17 more casualty families using the 1930 Census database, the Internet and genealogy software. The BCMA assisted in researching, locating and contacting the victims' families.

Six of the 40 crash victims came from Pennsylvania, while Illinois, Kentucky, West Virginia and Texas claimed three casualties each. In virtually all cases, these families knew nothing about the cause of their loved ones' deaths. All were overwhelmed with emotion and gratitude. Most were surprised that after all the years since the war someone would care to search them out and tell them about their loved one's death in World War II.

The guest speaker for the ceremony was Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, U.S. Congresswoman from West Virginia, who has introduced legislation calling for a special memorial marker in Arlington National Cemetery "to honor the sacrifices made by the 40 American servicemen lost at Bakers Creek in Australia, on that day."

Acting Ambassador Peter Baxter, Embassy of Australia, reminded those attending the ceremony that the Japanese enemy nearly invaded Australia during the early part of the Second World War. He said, "The year 1943 was a pivotal time in Australia's history. The Americans helped the Australians reverse the Japanese advance, and together, they changed the course of the war. Australians were honored to host the 40 American servicemen whom we commemorate today."

The Bakers Creek commemoration ceremony provided casualty family members an historic place for personal closure on American soil. They realize, too, that the true burden of war often is borne by the servicemen's families, who remember the loved ones they either loved and lost—or never had the chance to know.

The BCMA wants to provide each casualty family with the details lacking in the original death notice their family received during the war. The group is actively searching for the families of Private First Class Frederic W. Sweet of Detroit; Private First Class Norman J. Goetz of Chicago; and Private First Class Vernon Johnson of Newark, N.J.

If any Daughters would like to help locate the remaining three casualty families, or want more information about the crash, visit the BCMA Web Site: www.home.earthlink.net/~bakerscreek.



U.S. Ambassador to Australia Peter Baxter and Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Robert Appleby place a wreath at the World War II Memorial.