

Chapter 26 - The Request for Assistance

The coffee shop was packed with the usual summer tourists and some of the Newport regulars as author Ken Dooley greeted Representative Peter Martin. They were there to celebrate the successful pardoning of Irish immigrant John Gordon, a man who had been hanged in 1845 for the murder of Amasa Sprague, a wealthy Cranston, Rhode Island mill owner.

Dooley had written a play, "The Murder Trial of John Gordon" which Representative Martin attended in 2011 at the Park Theatre in Cranston, Rhode Island.

After attending the first performance, Martin introduced himself to Dooley. "You did a good job of proving the unfair treatment of John Gordon," Martin said. "Now what?"

"It's a little late for a stay of execution," Dooley said. "Gordon was executed in 1845."

"It's not too late to clear his name," Martin replied. He then introduced a bill that led to the pardon of John Gordon by Governor Lincoln Chafee 166 years after his execution.

Dooley had invited Martin to the coffee shop to thank him for his efforts.

As they were talking about the Gordon case, Dooley asked Martin "If you could do this for an Irish immigrant, what do you think you could do for a Rhode Island pilot who was shot down, executed by the Japanese in World War II and buried on a lonely beach in New Guinea where he still lies today?"

"I don't know. Tell me the story," Martin replied

Dooley went on to tell the story of growing up in Cranston, Rhode Island as a neighbor of Lt. Robert Thorpe who was captured by the Japanese on May 27, 1944. The Japanese officers involved in his execution were tried at Yokohama in 1948.

Dooley described the attempts by Thorpe's family, especially his brother, Gill, to have Bob Thorpe's remains returned to RI for burial in the family plot.

"Why haven't his remains been returned?" Martin asked.

"Walter Thorpe, Bob's father, was told by military authorities that the remains were unrecoverable and the court martial records were classified as secret," Dooley said. "In 2007, I got the trial records under the Freedom of Information Act. The records included a detailed map showing Bob Thorpe's burial spot on Kiriru Island, New Guinea."

"Was the grave exhumed then?" Martin asked.

"For the next six years officials in charge of locating missing American servicemen came up with a number of excuses, including weather and finances, to explain why no efforts were made to go to the burial site. Two years ago, the grave was finally opened and no remains were found."

Representative Martin, a member of the Rhode Island House Committee on Veterans Affairs, immediately took interest in this case. While recovery of Bob's Thorpe's remains was no longer feasible, he felt it would be appropriate to provide some posthumous recognition of Bob Thorpe's sacrifice for the remaining members of the Thorpe family.

As Martin drove away from the coffee shop, he realized he knew little about military awards and less about proper military protocol. Two years of the Army ROTC at Providence College fifty years earlier hardly qualified him to know where to start.

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He wondered how he could go about creating such recognition. He immediately thought of his friend, Sgt. Major Ed Kane (U.S. Army retired). Ed had recently volunteered to serve on the Rhode Island House Veterans Advisory Council. He also knew that Ed had a reputation for getting things done.

The HVAC Committee Meeting

It wasn't long after that meeting that Dooley was invited to make a presentation of the Thorpe case to members of the House of Veterans Advisory Council. At the end of the presentation, the council members agreed to provide a ceremony that would recognize the sacrifice of 2nd Lt. Robert Thorpe.

Planning the House Celebration

Once this project was supported by the HVAC, did not take long for Sgt. Maj. Ed Kane to take the lead in formulating this celebration. He enlisted the support of the Honors subcommittee of the House Veterans Advisory Council and the United Veterans Council.

Working with Jerry Squatritro, and the staff of the House Veterans Advisory Committee, a celebration was scheduled for May 17, 2013 and was announced by the Rhode Island House of Representatives:

Cranston Pilot to be Honored for WWII Heroism

Warwick, RI. A Cranston native, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe, who was executed by the Japanese in 1944, will be honored at ceremonies in the RI House Chambers, May 17, at 1 P.M.

State Rep. Peter Martin (75th District, Newport) made the announcement at the annual meeting of the DAV at the Crown Prince Hotel in Warwick. Martin was honored by the Disabled American Veterans as "Legislator of the Year" for his work in veteran affairs.

"After 69 years of silence, it's time for us to do something to honor this heroic young man," Martin said.

Martin said he introduced a resolution to honor Thorpe at the request of playwright and author Ken Dooley, who grew up as a close friend of Bob Thorpe's brother, Gill, in Edgewood.

"Dooley and Martin are united again in a good cause," Martin said. After seeing Dooley's play, "The Murder Trial of John Gordon," Martin introduced legislation that resulted in Gov. Lincoln Chafee signing a pardon for a man who was executed in 1845.

Gill Thorpe asked for Dooley's help in trying to recover the remains of his brother who had to ditch in the waters off of Kairu Island, New Guinea, after his P-47 was struck by small arms fire during a strafing run on Wewak, a Japanese naval base.

Dooley got access to 1,200 pages of court martial testimony and was able to reconstruct the events that led to Thorpe's torture and execution. Thorpe was interrogated by Lt. Commander Kaoru Okuma who became enraged when the prisoner refused to provide any information beyond name, rank and serial

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number. Okuma struck Thorpe unmercifully, then invited Japanese personnel to join in the beatings.

An execution detail under the direction of Okuma led Thorpe to a nearby beach where he was used for target practice prior to his execution. Thorpe remained standing even as he was struck in both legs.

He was then dragged to a shallow grave, forced to kneel, and, after enduring an elaborate "Bushido" ceremony, was beheaded by Warrant Officer Yutaka Odazawa. Lt. Naotada Fujihira, one of the officers who shot the prisoner in the leg, described Thorpe's behavior as "magnificent" during court martial testimony.

The five Japanese officers involved in the execution went on trial on June 22, 1948 at Yokohama, Japan. Four of the officers received life sentences, while Kariu Okuma was hanged at Sugamo Prison. All four men were paroled within five years.

Captain Lewis Lockhart, a P-47 fighter pilot and close friend of Bob Thorpe, will attend the ceremony on May 17. Lockhart was on the mission when Thorpe was shot down during a strafing mission at Wewak, New Guinea, a Japanese naval base during WWII.

Lockhart and the late 2nd Lt. Fred Tobi broke orders and went looking for Thorpe when he failed to return. Now 93, Lockhart will journey from Franklin, TN to honor his friend and comrade. Bob Thorpe's brother, Gill and his sister Nancy will also attend.

"The ceremony is open to the public, and I urge everyone to attend and honor this man who gave his life for his country," Martin said.

Resolution Honoring Robert Thorpe

In preparation for this event, Representative Martin and others introduced a resolution honoring 2nd Lt. Robert Thorpe for his sacrifice. It resulted in Rhode Island House of Representatives Resolution 6114.

HOUSE RESOLUTION - HONORING 2nd LT. ROBERT E. THORPE FOR HIS HEROISM DURING WWII

2013 -- H 6114 - 5/14/2013 Introduced By: Representatives Martin, Gallison, Abney, Newberry, and Fox

Date Introduced: May 14, 2013

WHEREAS, In the words of famed newscaster Tom Brokaw, "When the United States entered World War II, the U.S. government turned to ordinary Americans and asked of them extraordinary service, sacrifice, and heroics"; and

WHEREAS, World War II was the most destructive conflict in history. It cost more money, damaged more property, killed more people, and caused more far-reaching changes than any other war in history; and

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WHEREAS, A resident of Cranston, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe enlisted in September of 1942, shortly after graduating from Cranston High School. He was commissioned on August 30th of 1943, and became a World War II pilot. He had flown 17 missions during his first month in action before being captured when his P-47D Thunderbolt was hit by small arms fire during a strafing run on the Japanese garrison at Wewak on May 27, 1944; and

WHEREAS, Managing to survive by using a drifting log to get to shore after ditching his failing plane in the waters off Kairiru Island, New Guinea, 2nd Lt. Thorpe was captured by a Formosan civilian unit and marched across the island to the 27th Japanese Special Naval Base Force, which was under the command of Rear Admiral Shiro Sato; and

WHEREAS, The unit commander ordered his senior staff officer, Captain Kiyohisa Noto, to take charge of the prisoner, who in turn instructed Lt. Commander Kaoru Okuma to interrogate 2nd Lt. Thorpe; and

WHEREAS, Despite the 1929 Geneva Convention agreement, which provided for humane treatment of prisoners of war, atrocities still occurred. Prisoners were instructed to give captors only their name, rank, and military serial number. According to the Geneva Convention agreement, captors were allowed to question prisoners but were not allowed to use force or brutality to extract military information; and

WHEREAS, Following Military Law to the letter, 2nd Lt. Thorpe refused to provide his captors with any information beyond his name, rank, and service number. This infuriated Lt. Commander Okuma; and

WHEREAS, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe endured multiple beatings, physical and mental torture, and multiple gun shots, and was finally mutilated and beheaded by his captors. Months later the Providence Journal described the execution of 2nd Lt. Thorpe as “one of the most revolting crimes uncovered by the war crimes investigators.” The article further stated that “Assassins of Local Flyer Now on Trial in Japan”; and

WHEREAS, After the war had ended, the five officers involved in the execution of 2nd Lt. Thorpe went on trial on June 22, 1948, in Yokohama, Japan. Four of the officers were sentenced to life in prison while Lt. Commander Okuma was sentenced to hang. Only one of the original sentences received by the five convicted war criminals, Lt. Commander Okuma's execution, was ever carried out; and

WHEREAS, In the aftermath of the trial, transcripts describing the horrible truth about the brutalities surrounding the death and the location of the burial site of 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe were sealed and remained secret as Walter Thorpe, his father, began a campaign to have his son's remains returned to Rhode Island; and

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WHEREAS, Sadly, wars often necessitate the unnatural act of a parent burying their child. Even more heart-wrenching is when a parent cannot carry out or find any peace through this final act of closure and love. Walter and Nora Thorpe, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe's parents, died believing that their son's remains were unrecoverable and all records pertaining to the search and recovery of their son were closed; and

WHEREAS, Through the Freedom of Information Act in 2007, Ken Dooley, an author, and a close friend of 2nd Lt. Thorpe's brother, Gill, obtained a record of the court martial. Although the facts brought out during the trial of 2nd Lt. Thorpe's captors produced descriptive details of where the 2nd Lt. was buried, to this day, his remains lie unclaimed in an unmarked gravesite on Kairiru Island; and

WHEREAS, Throughout American history our nation has been propitiously blessed with so many of her citizenry willing to serve their country at moments of great peril. These brave soldiers were and are prepared to risk all and many have made the ultimate sacrifice in order to protect our precious freedoms and liberties; and

WHEREAS, The heroism of the World War II generation embodies the personification of what makes our country so glorious. In return for their honorable service, we, as individuals and as a country, have a debt and an obligation to fulfill to the men and women serving in our military. We owe this young man, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe, who gave so much to his country and received so little in return, our gratitude, our acknowledgement of his sacrifice, and our best efforts to bring him home to his family and his country; now, therefore be it

RESOLVED, That this House of Representatives of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations hereby respectfully requests the Governor to honor 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe posthumously with the Rhode Island Star for his extraordinary heroism in the service of our nation during WWII; and be it further

RESOLVED, That this House hereby urges the Graves Record Administration to re-investigate and bring the remains of 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe home; and be it further

RESOLVED, That the Secretary of State be and hereby is authorized and directed to transmit duly certified copies of this resolution to The Honorable Lincoln Chafee, the Rhode Island Congressional Delegation, Maj. Gen. Kelly K. McKeague, Commander of the Joint/POW/MIA Accounting Command, the Providence Regional Office of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and Nancy and Gill Thorpe.

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Captain Lew Lockhart

Representative Martin was proud of the resolution that had been prepared for the House of Representatives ceremony. He met with Dooley to show him a copy of it and the press release.

Dooley told Martin there would be a “special guest” at the ceremony - Captain Lewis Lockhart, a then 93-year-old resident of Franklin, TN., who had flown with Bob Thorpe as a member of the 39th Fighter Squadron in New Guinea.

Capt. Lockhart was at his home in Tennessee when he received a call from Ken Dooley. Dooley told him about the plans to recognize the ultimate sacrifice of Robert Thorpe.

Lockhart agreed to honor his friend by coming to Rhode Island and speaking at the commemoration ceremony. Doug Hale, his nephew and a Franklin attorney, escorted him.

The ceremony had special meaning for Lew Lockhart, who had flown 149 combat missions with the 39th FS in New Guinea. He was in charge of the orientation flight when Bob Thorpe joined the 39th Fighter Squadron at Gusap, New Guinea in January of 1944.

Lockhart also flew on Bob Thorpe’s last mission on May 27, 1944. The 39th FS was grounded for weather the day after Bob Thorpe was listed as missing. Lockhart broke regulations and took off in search of his friend.

Although they had only flown together as pilots for a short time, Lew Lockhart had never forgotten his friend, Robert Thorpe and the mission on which he was lost.

It was only a few years earlier that Lockhart has learned about Thorpe having been murdered by his Japanese captors.

A related article published in the *Tennessean* quoted Lockhart as saying “Bob Thorpe was an excellent pilot and a real hero as far as I’m concerned.”

The article provided some background information:

“An East Tennessee native, Lockhart was a student at Middle Tennessee State College when Pearl Harbor was attacked on Dec. 7, 1941. On Jan. 2, 1942, he became an aviation cadet at Berry Field and went through pilot training in Florida and Alabama. On Oct. 9, Lockhart, who didn’t have any flight experience prior to enlisting, earned his wings in Dothan, Ala.

From there, Lockhart shipped overseas to Australia and then Papua New Guinea, where he joined the squadron on March 23, 1943, flying his P-38 to escort other planes such as B-24s and B-25s. By December of that year, he began flying a P-47 on dive bombing and strafing missions.

“I flew many missions and had a lot of close calls,” he said. Going by the call sign “Blue 2,” Lockhart completed 171 combat missions.”

Resolution in Honor of Captain Lew Lockhart

In preparation for Lockhart’s visit, Martin introduced a resolution on the House floor honoring Captain Lew Lockhart for his efforts to locate 2nd Lt. Thorpe at the time of his loss and his ongoing efforts to keep Thorpe’s memory alive.

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HOUSE RESOLUTION - HONORING CAPTAIN LEWIS LOCKHART FOR HIS HEROISM DURING WWII - 2013 - H 6118 5/15/2013

WHEREAS, Captain Lewis Lockhart joined the 39th Fighter Squadron in New Guinea, a group that was formed in WWI by flyers such as Jimmy Doolittle and Eddie Rickenbacker; and

WHEREAS, Captain Lockhart endangered his life daily by flying through the 13,000 foot peaks of the Owen Stanley Mountains in New Guinea to bomb and strafe the Japanese 9th Fleet headquarters on Kairiru Island; and,

WHEREAS, the 39th Fighter Squadron cut off transport ships from mainland Japan and totally destroyed Japanese planes and ships at Wewak, New Guinea; and

WHEREAS, conditions became so bad for Japanese soldiers and sailors stationed on Kairiru Island that they fantasized about food and painted chickens green to camouflage them from the repeated air attacks by the 39th Fighter Squadron; and

WHEREAS, Captain Lockhart flew combat cover missions to Hollandia and Rabaul; and,

WHEREAS, Captain Lockhart had to make an emergency landing in his P-38 after one of his engines was destroyed in a combat mission over Rabaul; and

WHEREAS, Captain Lockhart flew as flight leader when the 39th covered a major parachute drop in the Markham Valley, New Guinea; and

WHEREAS, Captain Lockhart led the bombing and strafing mission on May 27, 1944, when 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe was reported missing; and

WHEREAS, Captain Lockhart and 2nd Lt. Fred Tobi went looking for Lt. Thorpe in hazardous flying conditions when the entire squadron was grounded; and

WHEREAS, Captain Lockhart flew as wingman when his squadron leader had to bail out and escape from hostile natives in New Guinea, a story that was captured in a documentary "Injury Slight,;" and

WHEREAS, Captain Lockhart flew a total of 171 combat missions in the P-38 and the P-47; and

WHEREAS, the 39th Fighter Squadron, together with other units of the 5th Air Force, is credited with preventing New Guinea, and probably Australia, from falling into Japanese hands during the early years of the war in the Pacific; and be it further

RESOLVED, That his House of Representatives of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations hereby respectfully requests the Governor to honor Captain Lewis Lockhart for his extraordinary heroism in the service of our nation during WWII and in particular for his efforts to save 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe, a Rhode Island hero who lost his life after flying a combat mission for the 39th Fighter Squadron.