

## Chapter 27 – The Ceremonies

On May 17, 2013, 2nd Lt. Robert Thorpe was finally given recognition at a ceremony that was held in the House of Representatives chamber in the Rhode Island State House.

Family members attending included Thorpe's brother, Gill; Gill's daughter and son-in-law, Susan and Richard Waterman; Gill's grandsons, Richard and Sam Waterman; Gill's daughter Janet Thorpe; daughter Gill's cousin Neil Ganz and his wife, Caroline

Representative Raymond Gallison, the then Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, hosted the ceremony and recognized all of the family, military and elected officials in attendance.

Governor Lincoln B. Chafee acknowledged Robert Thorpe's sacrifice by saying "despite brutal treatment he did not cower, he went to his death bravely and defiantly."

Brigadier General Petrarca - RI Army National Guard spoke in tribute to Thorpe and the members of the American World War II armed forces.

Rhode Island House of Representatives ! Resolution 6114

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

Introduced By: Representatives Martin, Gallison, Abney, Newberry, and Fox. Date Introduced: May 14, 2013.

Referred To: House read and passed May 13, 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

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

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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 Yokahama, 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

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

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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 Lockhart was introduced and escorted to the dais. The audience was very moved that this 92 year old veteran, who had travelled from Tennessee, was able to make express his memories of Thorpe with a speech that was short and to the point.

*"I think it is a great privilege for me to be here in order to honor Bob. I flew with Bob on many missions before the one where he went down. Although I was on a flight that same day, Bob was on another flight.*

*We didn't know what happened to him when he didn't return to the base the next day for the debriefing. Bob's closest friend and tent mate, Fred Tobi and I were on a search mission for him the next day. Of course we found no remains.*

*It was only many, many years later that we found out what happened to him through the efforts of Ken Dooley. I think it is only proper that Bob gets the recognition today that he deserves as a true American hero."*

Author Ken Dooley spoke about his attempts over many years of researching what actually happened to Thorpe, the post-war trial of the five Japanese soldiers who were tried and found guilty of Thorpe's murder.

Franklin attorney Doug Hale, Lockhart's nephew by marriage who had accompanied him from Franklin, Tennessee, was introduced. Hale had been quoted in an article that appeared in their local newspaper, *The Tennessean*, two days earlier, as saying:

*"That generation is tough as nails, the whole group of them. They didn't wait to get drafted. They are truly great Americans. People don't need to forget what they did. The people of Rhode Island sure didn't."*

Alan Fung, the mayor from the Thorpe hometown of Cranston, read a citation honoring him.

The House reading clerk, Francis McCabe then read a resolution honoring Captain Lockhart.

**HOUSE RESOLUTION – HONORING CAPTAIN LEWIS LOCKHART FOR HIS HEROISM DURING WWII**

Introduced By: Representatives Martin, Gallison, Abney, Newberry, and Fox  
Date Introduced: May 15, 2013

Referred To: House read and passed

WHEREAS, While in New Guinea during World War II, Captain Lewis Lockhart joined the 39th Fighter Squadron, 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,

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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, As a testimony to Captain Lockhart’s heroic service to our nation during World War II, he received the Air Medal with Two Oak Leaf Clusters; 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 this House of Representatives of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations hereby expresses our gratitude to Captain Lewis Lockhart for his service to our nation during the darkest days of World War II; and be it further

RESOLVED, That this House respectfully requests the Governor to honor Captain Lewis Lockhart for his extraordinary heroism in the service of our nation, in particular for his efforts to save 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe, a

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Rhode Island hero who lost his life after flying a combat mission for the 39th Fighter Squadron; 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 Governor Lincoln Chafee and Captain Lewis Lockhart.

John Gallo - Chief Master Sgt - President of the HVAC - and members were recognized.

Also recognized were the attending veterans' organizations including the Disabled American Veterans, the Rhode Island Veterans Council, and the Patriot Guard Riders,

Chaplain Ron Martin Minnich of the RI Army National Guard gave the closing blessing and Army Sgt Clifford Soares played Taps to end the ceremony.

After the formal ceremony, Capitol TV announcer, Dave Barber interviewed Rep. Martin, Ken Dooley, Lew Lockhart and Gil Thorpe. During the interviews, Barber quoted General Patton as saying - "Live for something rather than die for nothing."

As he walked out of the House chamber, Martin, who had never heard that quote before started to think - should it really be "Die for something rather than live for nothing."

2nd Lt. Robert did not die for nothing.