

FRANKLIN — The last anyone saw of **2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe**, a 20-year-old Rhode Island native, was May 27, 1944, as his P-47 was ditching into the waters off Papua New Guinea after being hit with anti-aircraft fire.

But it wasn't until just a few years ago that **Capt. Lewis Lockhart**, now a 93-year-old Franklin resident, heard the details of Thorpe's death at the hands of his Japanese captors.

"He was an excellent pilot and a real hero as far as I'm concerned," said Lockhart, one of the last men still alive who flew with Thorpe on that mission.

The World War II veteran will travel to Thorpe's home state to take part in a ceremony Friday at the Rhode Island State House that will memorialize the young pilot for his bravery. The ceremony also aims to honor Lockhart for his military service.

Lost pilot had been wing man

Both men flew as part of the **39th Fighter Squadron, 35th Group, 5th Air Force**. Thorpe was Lockhart's wing man on several missions but wasn't in that position on his final run.

"The next day after the mission, Bob's tent mate, **Fred Toby**, and I launched a (flight) search mission to find him. We went back to the site where he went down, but didn't find anything at all," Lockhart said.

It wasn't until many decades later that the Franklin man found out the truth about Thorpe's final days from author **Ken Dooley**, who will include the incident in an upcoming book. According to Dooley's research, Thorpe, who joined the squadron on January 1944, made it to shore but was captured and sent to a Japanese naval base on the island. When asked for secret intelligence by Japanese officers, Thorpe would only give his name, age, rank and serial number. He was beaten for his stubbornness.

"That's what makes him a true hero. He didn't give out any information. That's why they tortured him," Lockhart said.

From there, Thorpe was taken to a beach where he was used as target practice for a Japanese officer, shot and finally beheaded, according to Dooley, who reviewed the case file in war crime trial transcripts. Thorpe's remains have never been recovered.

Cadet at Berry Field

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.

After Lockhart left the service in April 1946, he moved to Georgia and became a chemist specializing in research and development. Then 19 years ago, he married a Franklin woman and moved back to Middle Tennessee.

Lockhart never forgot those "honorable" men such as Bob Thorpe who never had a happy homecoming with their loved ones.

"That generation is tough as nails, the whole group of them," said Lockhart's nephew by marriage, Franklin attorney Doug Hale. "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."

<http://www.tennessean.com/article/20130515/WILLIAMSON01/305150147/WWII-veteran-from-Franklin-honor-fallen-pilot-ceremony>