

House resolution honors RI WWII pilot

Lt. Robert Thorpe captured, tortured, killed by Japanese forces

STATE HOUSE – When his P-47 was hit by anti-aircraft fire during a strafing run on the Japanese garrison at Wewak, New Guinea, on May 27, 1944, 2nd Lt. Robert E. Thorpe of Cranston, RI, ditched in the waters off Kairiru Island, just off the coast. Captured by a Formosan civilian unit, he was delivered to a Japanese naval base force. Following an interrogation, during which he refused to divulge any information, Lt. Thorpe was marched to a nearby beach, shot in the knee and leg, beheaded and buried in a shallow grave.

The five Japanese officers involved in Thorpe's execution were charged at the Yokohama war trials in 1948, but a campaign of lies and misinformation followed in the aftermath of the war.

The truth began to emerge only when Lt. Thorpe's father, Walter, started a campaign to have his son's remains returned to Rhode Island. Walter had no knowledge that the Japanese officers involved had provided a detailed sketch of the burial site because Japanese court martial records were classified. Nor did he receive much help from U.S. officials to whom he turned; the American Graves Registration Service informed him that his son's remains were unrecoverable and to this day have not provided Lt. Thorpe's remaining relatives – a younger brother, Gill, and a sister, Nancy – with any information as to when or if their brother's remains will be recovered.

In a book he is completing, *Broken Trust*, based on thousands of pages of military courtroom testimony and personal interviews, Rhode Island author Ken Dooley tells the story of Lt. Thorpe, whom he calls "an authentic American Hero."

Rep. Peter F. Martin (D-Dist. 75, Newport) has seen the Dooley manuscript and agrees with that assessment. Today, he introduced a Resolution on the House floor – unanimously supported by the chamber – honoring Lt. Robert E. Thorpe.

"Lt. Thorpe is a hero in every sense of the word," said Representative Martin. "He probably could have escaped some of the brutality inflicted upon him if he had been willing to cooperate with his captors. Instead, he went to his death bravely and defiantly."

According to Dooley, Lt. Thorpe was 20 when he died. He had struggled to reach the minimum weight required to enlist in the Army Air Corps and then to build the upper body strength needed to fly the huge and rugged P-47. After grueling flight training, he volunteered for the most hazardous duty in one of the most dangerous theaters of the war.

In addition to the Resolution passed today on the House floor, Lt. Thorpe will be honored at a ceremony to be held Friday, May 17, in the House of Representatives chamber in the State House, beginning at 1 p.m. On hand will

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be Lt. Thorpe's brother and sister as well as Capt. Lewis Lockhart, a WWII fighter pilot who Lt. Thorpe's commander and friend. Other veterans' organization dignitaries will also be in attendance.