Quad City Times article

Family honors soldier's memory for 40 years
Quad City Times
By Melissa Regennitter | Sunday, December 28, 2008

MUSCATINE, Iowa — This Christmas marked 40 years since a U.S. Air Force soldier from Muscatine was lost during a rescue mission in the Vietnam War.

The family of Charles Douglas King laid a wreath at the soldier's plot in Greenwood Cemetery, where a white headstone serves as a memorial for a body that was never recovered.

"We want people to remember the sacrifice of my brother and everyone else, including all of those people who came back," Jeff King said.

King, 56, remembers when his brother, whom everybody called Doug, enlisted in the Air Force and went through rigorous training to earn a maroon beret and become the Air Force equivalent of a Navy Seal.

Jeff said his brother was one of the most popular kids in high school and he held huge parties on the family farm just outside of Muscatine.

Doug was a part of a Special Forces Pararescue unit and had completed more than 75 missions so he wasn't required to do any more, according to military regulations. But on Christmas morning in 1968, an Air Force pilot went down in Laos, a country next to Vietnam.

"Doug's crew was radioed that the pilot had been hit, and Doug took the mission," Jeff said. "My brother parachuted down to get him."

According to stories the family was told by men who were there and a written account in the U.S. Air Force Crew Loss log, Doug landed and told his crew that the pilot, Maj. Charles R. Brownlee, who was hanging from a tree by his parachute, was not moving. A stretcher was sent down to him on a cable. As King began to put the pilot on the stretcher, he was struck by enemy fire. As he radioed his crew to tell them he had been shot, firing continued, forcing the copter to pull straight up. In the process, the cable was severed and King and Brownlee fell to the ground.

King reportedly radioed the crew to "get out of here," and the crew could see enemy troops swarm King and Brownlee.

Years after the incident, many people who were stationed with Doug, and some of the men who were on the helicopter, have contacted the King family to tell stories of his heroism.

Doug, who would have been 60 this year, is also survived by another sister and half-brother, Sherry King and Barry Mills, both of Muscatine.

On Tuesday, Barry Mills and his daughters, Mandy Mills, 18, and Caroline Mills, 21, visited the

headstone memorial for Doug and placed a large wreath with a photo and banner that reads “CMST Charles “Douglas” King, Killed in Action 12-25-68 So that others may live!”

“We were just talking about what it would have been like if he would have survived,” Mandy Mills said. “It’s just really sad that it was Christmas when it happened.”

Jeff King said the family hoped for years that Doug would be found. But he was officially declared dead on May 15, 1978.

“We all knew how strong he was and how much willpower he had,” Jeff said. “We thought maybe he’d get out if he was put in a prison camp. We thought he might have survived because of his inner strength and physical strength.”

During his missing status, Doug was promoted from airman 1st class to chief master sergeant. He received the Air Medal on July 4, 1968. He was awarded the Air Force Cross, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Silver Star, the Purple Heart and the Air Medal (First Oak Leaf Cluster) posthumously for his heroism.

Doug King was also honored for his professional dedication, courage and valor by the Air Force when it named a dormitory for him — King Manor at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C. — on June 12, 1979. At Scott Air Force Base near Belleville, Ill., First Street was renamed King Street in his honor on June 28, 1979.

On Feb. 27, 1990, another dormitory — King Manor at March Air Force Base in California — was named in his honor, and on Nov. 15, 1996, at Hickham Air Force Base in Hawaii, Building 1856 was dedicated to his memory.

“Doug was our big brother and our hero even before he went to Vietnam,” Jeff King said.

BROTHER'S FINAL MISSION SPARKS SISTER'S MEMORIES

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Christmas was more than a holiday to Sherry King of Muscatine.

It was 30 years ago on Christmas Day that her brother, Doug, was presumably killed in Laos while attempting to rescue a downed Air Force pilot.

Doug King is one of nearly 40 servicemen from Iowa still unaccounted for in Southeast Asia.

"I always think about this more around the holidays," King said.

On Christmas Day 1968, King volunteered for what officials say was his final mission. But it wasn't until 1993 that King realized she would never see her brother again.

That's when US officials were allowed into the Central Army Museum in Hanoi, where personal items from American casualties were kept.

They found an identification card with Doug's name, rank, service number and date of birth and an envelope with a card inside containing the same information, plus Vietnamese writing that indicated when he had been killed.

"In some respects, it gives me closure," King said. "If you can believe the information we got, he probably wasn't a prisoner of war."

Doug King was a student at Iowa State University in 1966 when he enlisted in the Air Force. He was 24 when he disappeared.

Besides the Air Force Cross, King was awarded the Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal and Purple Heart.

"He was in a fraternity at Iowa State," his sister said. "He was kind of a fun-loving person who enjoyed life and was liked by everyone. He was one of the good guys."

King said she is searching to discover how the card and the information made its way to the museum.

About eight years ago, she said, a Vietnamese immigrant recounted to authorities an event that King believes was the last moments of her brother's life.

"He said a pilot was pulling up another pilot to the helicopter when the cable broke," King said. "He gave the location and time and everything. "

She has placed a wreath at the All War Memorial at the Muscatine Courthouse Square.

"In some ways, it hasn't ended for us," she said. "We are still looking for a full account. We know someone, somewhere, has a full account of where he was buried."