

March 28, 2014

70 years in the making: WWII soldier to be honored

Imagine three boys, orphaned in the midst of the Great Depression, moving from Minnesota to an adjacent state to live with extended family. How hard it would be to lose both parents and, then, have to move away and take up a new life in a strange town.

Yet, such was the case for Louis Longman and his two brothers, who came to Clinton in the 1930s to live at 2804 Garfield with their maternal grandfather, John Cleary, and an aunt, Lorette Cleary. Details concerning the boys' arrival and early life elude us.

A sister, Mrs. Henry Oak, is documented as living at 3010 N. Second St. in 1943.

Louis L. Longman graduated from St. Mary's High School with the class of 1936. Who knew him? Who were his friends? We can scarcely find people, annuals and facts from that long ago. He played basketball, was a class officer, was in dramatics, worked on the school newspaper and was all-state honorable mention in football.

Apparently, he was a handsome and accomplished young man who joined the military service during the war and became a P-38 "Lightning" fighter pilot. He enlisted in the U.S. Army on Feb. 19, 1942, transferring to the U.S. Army Air Corps in June 1942.

He received his pilot wings on April 12, 1943, and was sent overseas in July of that year. Longman served in the southwest Pacific from Aug. 17 until Oct. 29, 1943, as a member of the 5th Air Force (433rd Fighter Squadron, 475th Fighter Group); he was awarded the air medal for meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flights there.

Awarding the medal, Lt. Gen. George Kenney wrote Longman's sister, Mrs. Henry Oak, that Longman took part in 25 missions, during which hostile contact was probable and expected, including interception missions against enemy fighters and bombing planes.

"I am genuinely proud to have such men as your brother in my command," he said.

Lt. Longman, 26, was killed when his Lockheed P-38 "Lightning" aircraft crashed in the jungle that fateful day. His unit had been flying in protection of B-25 bombers when, attempting to return to base, they broke up in a severe storm. April 16, 1944 was later called "Black Sunday," owing to the 5th Air Force loss of 53 pilots and crewmen that day.

Longman was officially declared dead not quite two years later (Feb. 27, 1946). However, his plane and his remains lay in that jungle for more than 60 years and were found by chance in 2007. Collecting and examining the evidence took years. Identification was especially difficult, as dental remains and serial numbers of plane parts needed to be used, after so many years.

Longman's brother, Richard T., became a navigator on a Flying Fortress in England before being shot down and taken prisoner by the Germans. So, when the Clearys received the dreaded "We regret to inform you..." telegram about Louis, they were already heartsick from having been informed that brother Richard was missing in action.

Richard Longman was a P.O.W, for 14 months at Stalag Luft 1 near Barth, Germany. He was liberated in May 1945.

We're told a third brother also served in the military during WWII, and a niece still lives in the area. Anyone having further information may forward it to Col. Greg Hapsgood, Iowa National Guard Public Affairs officer.

Ultimately, the entire Longman family was impacted by the war...not uncommon in those days. America's "Greatest Generation" waged what was surely a righteous war, but the freedom they bequeathed us wasn't free.

The interment of Lt. Louis Longman will take place at 1 p.m. Saturday, April 12, at the Rock Island Arsenal National Cemetery with full military honors, and the public is invited. Wait at the entrance for the arrival of the hearse. I will be there also. It presents a fine opportunity to visit the graves of other loved ones.