

World War II vet brings fallen enemy's keepsake on long journey home

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

PORTLAND — Marvin Strombo was behind Japanese enemy lines on a Pacific island during World War II when he realized the other five men in his squadron had moved on without him.

The young U.S. Marine, part of an elite scout-sniper platoon fighting a 1944 battle on Saipan, nervously scanned the terrain. He spotted a body on the ground, a dead Japanese soldier lying on his left side. The young man looked peaceful, as if asleep, and something white poked out from his jacket.

Strombo knelt and pulled out a silk flag, all the space around the bright red emperor's sun filled with elegant calligraphy. He hesitated, then took the flag and scrambled to reunite with his squadron as they entered the Japanese-held town of Garapan.

More than 70 years later, Strombo is returning the Japanese flag to his fallen enemy's family.

The 93-year-old arrived Friday in Tokyo, the first stop in a 10,000-mile journey into the remote mountainside to bring the keepsake back to the man's home village — back to a brother and two sisters who could never say goodbye.

He was met by Japanese news media, who gathered around his wheelchair to interview him.

"I realized there were no bullets or shrapnel wounds, so I knew he was killed by the blast of a mortar," Strombo recalled in Portland this week before boarding a flight to Japan.

Then, quietly: "I think that soldier wanted me to find him for some reason."

The flags were a good-luck charm that linked Japanese soldiers to their loved ones and their call for duty. Some were signed by hundreds of classmates, neighbors and relatives.

Allied troops frequently took them from the bodies of their enemies as souvenirs. They have a deep significance because most Japanese families never learned how their loved ones died and never received remains.

For Strombo, the flag hung in a glass-fronted gun cabinet in his home in Montana for years, a topic of conversation for visitors and a curiosity for his four children.

He never spoke about his role in the battles of Saipan, Tarawa and Tinian, which chipped away at Japan's control of islands in the Pacific and paved the way for U.S. victory.



AP Photo/Don Ryan

In this Aug. 7 photo, WWII veteran Marvin Strombo, right, and Obon Society executives director Rex Zika hold up a Japanese flag with names written on it in Portland.

"I think the soldier wanted me to find him for some reason."

— Marvin Strombo, World War II veteran

He wrote letters to find out more about the flag but eventually put it aside. He knew no Japanese and, in an era before the internet, making any headway was difficult.

Then, in 2012, the son of his former commanding officer contacted him about a book he was writing on the platoon.

Through him, Strombo reached out to the Obon Society, a nonprofit in Oregon that helps U.S. veterans and their descendants return Japanese flags to the families of fallen soldiers.

Within a week, researchers found it belonged to Yasue Sadao by reading the script on the flag. They traced the corporal to a tea-growing village of about 2,400 people in the mountains roughly 200 miles west of Tokyo.

The calligraphy turned out to be the signatures of 180 friends and neighbors who saw Yasue off to war in Higashi Shirakawa, including 42 of his relatives. Seven of the original signatories are still alive, including Yasue's 89-year-old brother and two sisters.

When researchers contacted Yasue's brother by phone, he asked if the person who had his brother's flag was the same one who found it so many years ago, said Rex Ziak, who co-founded the Obon Society with his Japanese wife, Keiko.

"There was just silence on the line and then he asked, 'Do you imagine he knows how my brother died and where he died?'" Ziak recounted. "And that's when we realized that this person is very much alive in that family and this mystery of what happened to him is very much alive."

Strombo is the only person who can provide those answers. He can roughly show where he found Yasue's body on the outskirts of Garapan and can tell the siblings that their brother likely died of a concussion from a mortar round.

"I knew he was young because I could see his profile as I bent over him. He was laying on his back, kind of on his left side," he said.

The Obon Society has returned about 125 flags and gets about five inquiries a day from aging soldiers who regret their actions and want to return the flags before they die.

The group believes thousands of similar flags are likely hidden in attics across the U.S. that could give answers to countless other families. Strombo will be the first World War II veteran to return a flag in person to a Japanese family through the Obon Society.

The trip is a journey of forgiveness and closure as he finishes the final chapter of his life.

Only two other men in his platoon of 40 are still alive and he knows the humid islands where he fought for weeks are now a footnote in the war's larger history.

"It got so I kind of wanted to meet the family, you know," he said, his voice growing raspy. "I know it means so much to them."

BRIEFLY

Quake hits Pacific Ocean off coast of California, Oregon

BROOKINGS (AP) — The US Geologic Survey has recorded a 4.6-magnitude earthquake in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Northern California and Oregon.

The temblor struck Thursday about 115 miles northwest of Eureka, California.

KTVL-TV reports there were no injuries or damages caused by the earthquake.

Authorities: Oregon father killed wife, kids

SALEM (AP) — Authorities have finished their seven-month investigation into the deaths of five members of an Oregon family, confirming initial findings that a man killed his wife and children before fatally shooting himself in the head.

The five members of the Kroeker family were found dead Jan. 4 in a burned home near the western Oregon town of Hubbard.

Marion County deputy district attorneys Brendan Murphy and Melodie Dickey said Friday that 43-year-old Keith Kroeker was solely responsible for the deaths.

Autopsies of the severely burned victims showed wife Erin Kroeker died of blunt-force trauma to the head and the children — two 10-year-old boys and a 7-year-old girl — were shot to death. All were in their bed clothes.

The prosecutors say the fires were intentionally set, with ignition points in the home, a barn and a detached garage.

More than 250 Oregon residents mark 'X' gender on licenses

EUGENE (AP) — An Oregon rule change allowing people who don't identify with their gender to

instead mark "X" on their driver's licenses or state ID cards has been used by more than 250 people since the change enacted on July 3.

The Register-Guard reported Friday that the Oregon Transportation Commission approved the rule change.

It simplifies the process for people who in the past have had to go through tedious court procedures to change their gender on their licenses.

Oregon residents can go into any state motor vehicles office during business hours to obtain the "X" designation.

The District of Columbia implemented the same option on June 26 and is the only other place in the U.S. where the designation is available.

Jail guard charged, accused of performing sex act on inmate

VANCOUVER, Wash. (AP) — Prosecutors tacked aggravating factors on to the charges against a Clark County corrections deputy, which means the man who is accused of performing a sex act in the presence of a female inmate is eligible for an extended sentence if convicted.

The Columbian reports 29-year-old Christopher A. North pleaded not guilty on Thursday to second-degree custodial sexual misconduct and indecent liberties with forcible compulsion.

The prosecution filed aggravating factors with the indecent liberties charge for a vulnerable victim and violating a position of trust.

Charging documents accuse North of performing the sex act on the inmate after locking her in a changing area. The woman reported the incident after she was transferred to Clackamas County.

North turned himself in July 26. He was arraigned the next day, during which he told the judge he's "ready to be a man about what happened."



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<p>Thursday, May 18th at 2:00 p.m. Brain Fitness for Seniors <i>Brain exercises are important to keep the mind sharp.</i> It is important to encourage memory exercises when you are a senior caregiver. Asking your loved one to share a favorite memory or stories about their lives can bring their joy, strengthen their memory and increase their brain function. Learn about a variety of techniques you can use to encourage brain fitness.</p>	<p>Thursday, June 15th at 2:00 p.m. Managing Chronic Conditions <i>Self-management support provides tools to improve health.</i> In the U.S., statistics reveal that one in four seniors over the age of 65 are challenged with managing one or more chronic medical conditions. Self-management support tools can help you and your loved one better understand how to manage their illness day-to-day and encourage them to take an active role in their health care.</p>
<p>Thursday, July 20th at 2:00 p.m. Senior Finances, How to Help <i>Employ strategies to protect the finances of your loved ones.</i> As our parents and loved ones age they may lose the ability to fully track their finances. When seniors are unable to manage their daily finances they may become susceptible to financial abuse, lose their home or risk having their utilities turned off. Learn how you can make arrangements for financial assistance to protect your loved one.</p>	<p>Thursday, August 17th at 2:00 p.m. Effectively Manage Chronic Pain <i>Pain management is a crucial component to caring for seniors.</i> As a caregiver, it can be difficult to know how to help a senior minimize and manage chronic pain. Older adults often encounter chronic pain as their muscles and joints become stiff and they become less agile. We'll provide tips to understand the various medications used to treat pain and potential side effects.</p>

Location: Classes are held at St. Anthony Hospital, conference room #1: 2801 St. Anthony Way, Pendleton, OR 97801

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