

VETERANS DAY

WWII pilot from Mason City 'a true hero of the war'

Mary Pieper for the Globe Gazette of Mason City, Iowa

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Lt. Robert "Bob" Cookman's grave is located in the Field of Honor at Memorial Park Cemetery in Mason City.

Lt. Robert "Bob" Cookman of Mason City, a World War II pilot, is remembered for saving the lives of his crew members by sacrificing his own in a recently published book titled, "From One War to Another."

"He was a true hero of the war," said the book's author, John Lanza of New Jersey.

Lanza told the Globe Gazette he learned about Cookman and his brothers and cousins from Mason City who also served in World War II while doing research for the book.

"From One War to Another" analyzes how World War I and World War II were started, fought and ended.

The initial inspiration for the book was John Cooney of Long Island, New York, one of Cookman's surviving crew members, who told Lanza the story of how their plane developed engine trouble and went down over Italy on Oct. 23, 1944. Cookman told the other crew members to parachute to safety while he remained on board, according to Cooney.

"He told me he (Cookman) made the supreme sacrifice for his fellow crew members," Lanza said.

Lanza also received a lot of information from another surviving crew member, Meyer Osofsky.

"Meyer said that Bob Cookman was a wonderful and courageous man with premature grey hair," Lanza said.

Osofsky also told Lanza that Cookman kidded him and another crew member about their Queens and Brooklyn accents.

"They kidded around with each other," Lanza said. "You have to have some levity when you are going on dangerous missions."

Cookman, who was only 24 when he died, flew three missions during the war. His third and final mission was to bomb a BMW plant in Munich that was manufacturing airplane engines for the German war effort.

While flying over the Adriatic Sea, Cookman's plane encountered engine trouble about 150 miles from its home base. Unable to keep up with the formation, the plane dropped out headed back toward the base.

Osofsky recalled that Cookman told the crew to do everything they could to lighten the load. They released the bombs into the sea and threw out guns and ammunition. They did not want to ditch the plane at sea, so they kept going until they reached the coast of Italy. That portion of the country was already in Allied hands.

If they had ditched at sea, the entire crew might have died, Lanza said.

Cookman was still hoping to save the aircraft, so he stayed on even after the others parachuted out, according to Lanza. The plane exploded on impact.

Cooney and other crew members went to the crash site to look for Cookman. They found him about 500 feet away from the plane and carried his body up a hill on a ladder to a truck.

Three days later, he was buried in a temporary grave pending a final determination of his resting place by his family.

The crew later learned Cookman was able to parachute out, but it was at too low an altitude for the parachute to open enough to save his life, according to Lanza.

Bob's personal effects were sent to his wife, Marianne. Each of the crew members chipped in \$50 to send her along with the condolences.

In 1945, Cookman was posthumously awarded an Air Medal for "meritorious achievement in aerial flight while participating in sustained operational activities against the enemy."

After his body was sent home in 1948, he was buried in the Field of Honor in Memorial Park Cemetery in Mason City with full military honors.

Lanza found a lot about Cookman and his family from the Globe Gazette archives and old Mason City High School yearbooks.

Cookman had two brothers and several male cousins who also lived in Mason City.

"They used to play together all the time," Lanza said.

Bob Cookman was the quarterback of the Mason City High School football team that won the state championship in 1938. One of his cousins, Jim Cookman, was the end he threw to.

Bob and Jim went on to play on the Mason City Junior College football team. Bob later worked for Jacob E. Decker and Sons, a meat packing plant in Mason City.

Then the United States entered World War II, and Bob, Jim, and Jim's brothers Willie and Dan Cookman left Mason City to serve their country. Bob and Dan joined the Army Air Forces, Willie joined the Army and Jim joined the Navy. Bob's uncle John, his father Harvey's younger brother, was in the Navy.

"They were a very patriotic family," he said. "The Cookmans served their country well."

Dan, Willie and Jim were all part of the invasion of Normandy in June 1944.

"Dan was saying he was worried about his brothers because he was in the sky dropping bombs and one brother was below him in the water and the other was below him on land," Lanza said.

Willie survived Normandy but was killed in action in Germany on Oct. 15, 1944. Just one week later, the already grieving Cookman extended family learned about Bob's death.

Lanza said he was able to interview another of Bob's cousins, Harry "Joe" Cookman, before he died in 2018. He was 17 at the time of Bob and Willie's deaths and would enter the U.S. Army a few months later.

"He remembered that time as one of mourning for the family," Lanza said.

Although Lanza started the book with the intent to tell the story of Cooney and his crew members, he expanded it to include the history of World War I and World War II and what happened between the wars.

"One thing I say in the book is, 'Powerful leaders start wars, but citizens fight them and experience the horror,'" he said.



Cookman (courtesy photo)

https://globegazette.com/news/local/bob-cookman-mason-city-war-hero/article_e03512a8-7cda-11ef-a8f2-6392150f17d7.html#tncms-source=login