

INTO THE WILD

ETMC Athens pharmacist connects with late father at WWII crash site

On the sixtieth anniversary of his father's death, Bob Geatches found himself in the Alaskan wilderness, searching for the tail section of the B-24 Bomber in which his father died during World War II. But he was seeking more than part of a plane. He was seeking closure.

Bob Geatches, director of the pharmacy at ETMC Athens, had already pieced together the facts of his father's death. He has photos of his father, a tall, narrow-faced young man, and newspaper clippings about what happened.

On Sept. 4, 1944, 2nd Lt. Robert Geatches was piloting a B-24 southwest from Anchorage to Adak Station, his coastal home base. With him were nine other members of his Army Air Force crew and two other soldiers. The plane, used on 24-hour bombing missions to Japan, needed frequent service.

"About 150 miles from Anchorage, the engine caught fire," Geatches said.

All hands immediately put on parachutes. All, that is, except the pilot.

"According to information from talking to survivors, my dad ordered everyone to put on their parachutes before going into a dive from 20,000 feet to try to extinguish the flame," said Geatches. "Once they started the dive, the plane exploded."

In the fire and confusion over Mount Iliamna, anyone who could bailed out.

"The copilot was barely able to squeeze out of the cockpit," Geatches said. "My father never had a chance."

Sgt. Martin Woogen, the first to bail out, landed on top of the mountain. The five other survivors came down closer to the valley floor and found each other relatively quickly. Woogen caught up with them three days later.

They followed a river downstream, Woogen nearly drowning in it at one point. Exhausted

and hungry, the group of six finally decided to let the two strongest members continue on.

Those two reached a small village and found a bush pilot, Leon "Babe" Alsworth, who flew back and rescued the remaining four. Twelve men had flown out from Anchorage; 13 days later, six had survived.

FATEFUL PHONE CALL

Like so many children of wartime, Bob Geatches never had the opportunity to know his father. He said, "I was nine months old when he died. This is what I had growing up: dog tags, a bracelet, a picture of the plane and him. My mom didn't really talk a lot about it."

He said it hit him only later, in his adulthood:

"When I was raising my own children, I realized what I had missed."

A fateful phone call spurred him to act.

"I probably would have gone through life never knowing any more until the night of my surprise 60th birthday

party," said Geatches. "When I got back from the party, there was a message from a pilot and fishing guide in Alaska named John Erickson. He was interested in Alaskan history, and the locals had told him about the crash. He'd talked to Babe Alsworth, who had rescued those men. And he was trying to locate someone related to a Robert Geatches."

He called Erickson back immediately.

"He told me he was flying out the next morning to take pictures of any wreckage he could spot. He got pictures of the tail section and the valley



where they went down, and he sent them to me. He said he would like to visit the crash site himself.

"When I got those pictures, there wasn't any doubt in my mind: I was going there."

Geatches contacted his half-brother, Randy Braswell, an avid outdoorsman, and the two of them began to plan the trip along with Erickson. They even decided when they wanted to reach the tail section.

"We wanted to make it happen on the anniversary of his father's death," recalled Braswell. "I think that was important to Bob. And we did. We were standing on the side of the mountain overlooking the crash site area at that precise time."

TO ALASKA

Geatches, Braswell, and Erickson were flown to a mountaintop lake near the crash site. Fittingly, Babe Alsworth's son, Glen Alsworth, piloted them there. They planned on a three-day hike to find the plane and return to the lake.

"The going was more difficult than we had anticipated," said Braswell. "We'd done some research for the trip, but we really didn't know what we were getting into until we stepped off the float plane. And the growth in the valley was extremely thick. We had a machete and cut our way through it or waded down streams. We were in tall grasses and brush the rest of the way."

After a trek that included scaring off a brown bear, they found the decades-old wreckage.

"I think goose bumps came over all of us when we walked up to the tail section and put our hands on the plane," said Braswell. "You could still read the numbers. It was a solemn moment for all of us. When he touched the plane, my brother was very emotional and obviously touched."

Both Geatches and Erickson secured plaques at the site commemorating the 12 servicemen who had been aboard the bomber, with Geatches' plaque specifically honoring his father.

Back at camp, something remarkable happened.

Braswell recalls: "We had just gotten back to camp and built a fire preparing for the evening meal. We were all three around the campfire, and this rainbow appeared out on our right side and slowly arched over this glacial-swept valley. The left side came down right over the crash site.

"I'll never forget, John (Erickson) looked over at Bob, and he said, 'Bob, that rainbow is for you.' That was quite a moment."

Geatches describes the rainbow's appearance as "spiritual." "We all felt it," he said. "I felt a connection. It brought closure."

Now, Geatches has more of his father than dog tags and old photos. He has something finer and intangible.