

Petaluma soldier laid to rest -- 68 years late

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Saturday, April 23, 2011 at 3:00 a.m.

Scores of military veterans carrying American flags and three elderly, white-haired women who knew Mervyn Earl Sims decades ago in Petaluma turned out Friday for the funeral for long-lost World War II soldier at the hometown cemetery where his relatives are interred.

Sims, a 23-year-old Army private, died with four other crewmen aboard a military cargo plane that crashed high in the Himalayas on April 24, 1943.

His homecoming was delayed 68 years because the wreckage and soldiers' remains, from one of nearly 600 aircraft lost in a high-risk wartime airlift over the world's highest mountains, lay undiscovered until 2003.

"I'm glad to see him back here, buried with his family," said Lily Krulevitch, 91, of Petaluma. "That makes sense."

Krulevitch and her friend, Bette Barlas Kiser, 91, of Healdsburg, were classmates of Sims, graduating with him from Petaluma High School in June, 1938.

"This is so great that everybody's come around," Kiser said. "He's up there watching us."

Sims, whose cremated bones were buried in a small urn on a grassy slope at Cypress Hill Memorial Park, received a funeral with full military honors, including a 21-gun salute and two bagpipers playing "Amazing Grace."

"It's been a long journey home for Mervyn Sims," said Sharon Roloff of Folsom, his niece, who came to the funeral with four of her relatives.

Roloff, who was born five years after her uncle died, received a phone call in February from Army officials confirming that Sims' remains had been identified, using a DNA sample provided by Roloff's late mother in 2007.

His remains, transported from Hawaii by an Army sergeant, arrived at the Charles M. Schulz-Sonoma County Airport on Wednesday and were escorted to the Petaluma cemetery by military veterans on motorcycles.

His return lifted "the darkness and emotional storm" that had lingered over Sims' family for seven decades, said Mark O'Sullivan, a Placer County law enforcement chaplain who conducted the funeral service. "His future in this soil is now his family's reward."

"We respect his life, his sacrifice and his recovery — and now his eternal rest," O'Sullivan said.

Gary Medvigy, an Army Reserve brigadier general and a Sonoma County judge, said the importance of paying respects to fallen soldiers was noted by George Washington.

“It's very meaningful to each and every one of us in uniform and those who may be in uniform in future generations,” said Medvigy, wearing his Army dress blues. “It shows that the community does not forget.”

Sims' parents, sister, an aunt and uncle are buried at Cypress Hills. After visiting the cemetery twice, Roloff said, “We knew for sure this is the right place for him to come.”

Sims, who enlisted in the Army Air Force in 1942, perished aboard a cargo plane flying the Hump, a 500-mile route from Allied bases in India that ferried supplies over the Himalayas to Chinese forces fighting Japanese invaders.

The route, over wind-whipped ridges up to 15,000 feet high, became known as the “aluminum trail” for the hundreds of aircraft wrecks along the way.

Clayton Kuhles, the Arizona mountaineer who found the site of Sims' crash, attended the funeral and was applauded by the crowd after recounting the discovery.

Kiser, the soldier's classmate, brought an enlarged copy of the photograph of the first and second grade class at Cinnabar School in 1928, with her in the second row and Sims in the third row.

“I'm so glad I have this for him,” she said. “He fought and died for us.”

Evelyn Ransom, 91, of Petaluma said Sims was briefly her boyfriend in high school, and they went to movies and the beach. “He was a wonderful guy, a nice date,” she said.

Roloff concluded the 40-minute funeral, calling Sonoma County's response to her uncle amazing.

“He's actually home here, and with all of you present,” she said.





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