

Remembering a Fallen Airman

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The email came to our family website from a stranger in Australia: did we know why an abandoned World War II airfield in New Guinea is called Durand Field? Was it named after a relative? After checking our family genealogy we answered, No, at first glance we don't find a connection. A cousin survived the Bataan Death March and endured three years in a POW labor camp in Japan, but we have never heard of Durand Field. However, with hundreds of Durand relatives living in Wisconsin and Minnesota you never know. Perhaps if we do some digging....

Thus began a quest for information that uncovered the story of Lt. Edward Durand, born and raised in Stevens Point...and not a relative, but a fallen airman whose story is rich with heroism and heartbreak. As we honor the sacrifices of those in uniform on Memorial Day his story is worth sharing. Perhaps then I'll be able to let it go.

Edward David Durand

Edward David Durand was born February 4, 1918, the only child of Edward and Addie Durand, who lived at 741 Strongs Avenue, a house later renumbered as 2164 Strongs Avenue. He attended St. Stephens parochial school and Stevens Point High School before entering Central State Teacher's College, today's University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point. After his graduation in 1940 he enlisted in the Army Air Force. He received his wings in May 1941, six months before Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor prompted America's entry into the war. Durand was a lieutenant with the 35th Squadron of the 8th Pursuit Group when his unit was ordered to the Pacific Theatre just ten days later.



A Hurry-up Marriage

As the 35th prepared to leave its Mitchell Field base on Long Island, Lt. Durand persuaded his college sweetheart to make a quick trip east to marry him. A former classmate at Central State, Dorothy Mullarkey was a teacher at Stevens Point's Emerson elementary school. They were married December 27, 1941 in New York. Perhaps Dorothy rode the train with her new husband and his unit across the continent to San Francisco. In any event, their time together was brief. After Durand and his unit shipped out in late January aboard a converted cattle boat, the *Maui*, Dorothy never saw him again.

The Crisis in the Pacific

Following its earlier occupation of China and Mongolia, Japan had recently moved into Indochina, invaded the Philippines, Malaya, and Indonesia, and was steadily advancing east. If Japanese forces grabbed New Guinea they would have close access across the narrow Torres Strait for an invasion of Australia. Japanese planes had already bombed Australia's northernmost city of Darwin. Farther east bombing raids over Cape York were becoming more frequent. The Japanese had to be stopped in New Guinea.

In early March, after a voyage of almost six weeks, Durand and his unit were landed at Brisbane, on Australia's northeast coast, the launching pad to drive back the Japanese.

The War Machines

Today it is difficult to imagine the size and complexity of the war machine that America geared up to support its armed forces and those of its allies in Europe and the Pacific. After the attack on Pearl Harbor tens of thousands of young men rushed to enlist. Factories began turning out a torrent of planes and tanks and trucks. Shipyard lights blazed at night. Men, machines, munitions, and supplies poured into ports such as Brisbane.

In the middle of a racetrack near Brisbane's Eagle Farm airfield, hundreds of tents soon housed American servicemen. Lt. Durand and his unit probably lived in these tents while their warplanes were unpacked and assembled.

And just in time. The ability of Australia to defend itself against Japan's own war machine was badly depleted. By the time Lt. Durand and his squadron were ready for combat the Aussies had just seven flyable P-40's in Port Moresby to put up against relentless waves of Japanese bombers.

The P-39

Before being sent to the war Durand's unit had trained on the P-40 Warhawk, then for several months in a fighter newly adopted by the Army Air Force, the Bell Airacobra P-39. (At the time such were planes were known as "pursuit" planes, thus the "P" designation)



With its 37-mm cannon and six machine guns the P-39 packed a big punch and was the best plane available to rush into service. The P-39's being readied for the 35th Squadron had originally been

aboard a ship bound for the Philippines, but with the imminent surrender of American and Filipino forces on Bataan and Corregidor the ship and its planes were diverted to Australia.

The 8th Pursuit Group

By late April the men, planes, and ground support crews of the 8th Pursuit Group were ready to meet the Japanese foe. In command of the units headed for Port Moresby, New Guinea was Lt. Boyd "Buzz" Wagner. A veteran of the air war in the Philippines, Wagner was already credited with five "kills" there. His new command was comprised of Durand's 35th Squadron and the 36th Squadron, nominally 30 or more planes. The young fliers had already lost one of their own. Earlier that month a flier in Durand's squadron crashed after take-off. The pilot was unable to escape his burning P-39. He became the first American to be buried in the new American military cemetery in Brisbane.

North to New Guinea

On April 26 the 35th left Brisbane and flew to Townsville, about 700 miles north. There they met up with the 36th. Early on April 28 the two squadrons headed for a hastily built airfield on Horn Island, off the northern tip of Cape York. After a refueling stop at

Cairns the 35th resumed its long flight north to Horn Island. Bad luck struck. As the squadron neared the tip of Cape York low cloud cover and pounding rain obscured their vision. In trying to find a way through the increasingly heavy rain some pilots lost visual and radio contact. Several ran out of fuel and made forced landings. At least a couple of Durand's squadron-mates died in crash landings.



That same day advance elements of a Negro engineer battalion (the 96th) landed at Port Moresby to begin upgrading the airfield and port facilities. (The American armed forces were segregated at the time) Both new and improved airfields were necessary before Port Moresby could be used as a major base for operations. That night Port Moresby suffered its thirty-third enemy raid, and the 96th became the first Negro unit to come under fire in the war.

The Mystery of History

The search for clues and the untangling of a thousand stories to derive an understanding of a bit of history goes on long after memories fade and events are forgotten. In the case of Lt. Durand and many like him the process continues. For example, a detailed account of the 35th's troubles in getting to the Horn Island airstrip lists 15 pilots on the ill-fated flight. Lt. Durand is not among them. Yet we know that two days later he flew into Port Moresby with the rest of his squadron.

Or take the case of Durand Field.

The stranger in Australia who originally asked about a family connection had one day recognized that several streets in the Adelaide neighborhood where his daughter lives bore names familiar as World War II airfields. An engineer in Australia's civil aviation department, he was more familiar with airfields than most. Curious, he set out to explore the origins of the street names. So far he has tracked down seventeen neighborhood streets named for wartime airfields that were named in honor of Australian and American airmen who lost their lives. Through our research in the U.S. we were able to provide him with the context for the street named Durand Terrace.

But exactly when and how Lt. Durand lost his life has yet to be verified.

Into Battle

Two days later, Sunday, April 30, the 35th took off from Horn Island for Port Moresby, just 300 miles across the Strait. They timed their arrival for after midday, when the enemy's almost nightly bombing runs were presumed over. Putting down on the only

adequate landing strip (called Seven Mile field for its distance from Port Moresby), Lt. Wagner ordered the 35th squadron gassed up for an immediate attack on Lae, a new enemy strongpoint 180 miles distant where Japanese bombers were based. Between stood the towering Owen Stanley mountain range.

“Buzz” Wagner’s Report

Thirteen P-39’s participated in the raid. Several days later Wagner wrote up his report. (“Airdrome” and “drome” were words used to describe airfields)

On Friday, April 30th, 13 P-39D's took off from Port Moresby on a ground strafing mission against Lae Airdrome, 180 miles. Approach was made on Lae from 50 miles out from sea to avoid detection. When about 20 miles out 4 planes were sent ahead to engage the Japanese security patrol over Lae Drome. Top cover drew enemy security patrol off to the East of the drome and no resistance by air was encountered during the strafing.

A line of 13 to 15 bombers were strafed on a sea approach in a three-three plane element. The planes in each element were disposed in echelon right. Our strafing planes were then attacked from above by several zero fighters. Belly tanks were dropped immediately and throttles opened.

Our formation began to pull away from the zeros when the last 4 P-39's in formation engaged in combat with three zeros. In the meantime more Zeros appeared and it is estimated there were 12-13 altogether. The [four] P-39's were hopelessly outnumbered so the entire formation turned back and a terrific dogfight ensued.

As a result of this low altitude dogfight four zeros and three P-39's were shot down. All P-39's going down had been hit in the cooling system as a glycol spray could be seen streaming out behind while all zeros shot down went down burning. All three P-39 pilots were safe upon landing, either bailing out or crash landing on the beach.

In hindsight one could wish that Wagner had provided more details, but long after the event another account appeared that provides a fuller description of that fateful day for Lt. Durand.

A Japanese pilot engaged in the dogfight with the P-39’s, Saburo Sakai, wrote in his memoir *Samurai*: “[On April 30] the Allies returned our next strafing attack with a beautifully executed run by twelve P-39’s against our airfield [Lae] and heavily damaged nine bombers and three fighters. We caught the Airacobras on their withdrawal and shot down two without loses on our part....”

Ambiguities

The two accounts clearly differ in their claims of “kills” and losses. In addition, Wagner’s account does not mention that after strafing the bombers at Lae the planes of the 35th swung south and shot up a base at nearby Salamaua, claiming three seaplanes destroyed. It was after Salamaua that the “terrific dogfight” took place. And if in fact three P-39’s were lost that day, why has history fixed on the fate of Lt. Durand, honored by having a new airfield bear his name? Did friendly forces rescue the other two pilots and get them back to Port Moresby?

Such friendly forces did operate in the area. One researcher of the April 30 raid who has read “most of the P-39’s pilots’ reports” writes that Lt. Durand was seen bailing out and that “Lababia patrol reports remains of allied plane no. 7128 in sea near Lababia [an island south of Salamaua]. Pilot not in wreckage and no trace in locality.” No. 7128 was the number of Lt. Durand’s P-39.

The Fate of Lt. Durand

This same researcher writes that “it was “common knowledge” at Port Moresby that Lt. Edward Durand had been “captured and executed by Japanese forces” but the researcher could “find no accounts of these reports in any Australian or Japanese records.” Another researcher interested in the period notes that Lt. Durand “would have been the first AAF [Army Air Force] pilot captured...in that theatre and I am sure they would have been very interested in squeezing out every bit of information he had about U.S. strength and intentions.”

Waiting for Word

Shortly after Lt. Durand shipped out his wife Dorothy left her elementary school teaching position to serve as an instructor at a military radio school located at Truax Field in Madison. Today we do not know when she and her new husband’s parents received word from the War Department that Lt. Durand was Missing in Action, the official designation for someone absent after combat and not known to be captured, injured, or dead. Perhaps it was shortly after the action at Lae. A year later, however, they were notified that he’d been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for “extraordinary heroism” in that action. And a year after that, April 1944, they learned that a new airstrip fourteen miles from Port Moresby had been named Durand Field in honor of the young airman. Soon after his father, Edward Sr., a lifelong switchman with the Soo Line, died following a long illness. By this time Dorothy was doing defense work in St. Louis.

A Finding of Death

It wasn’t until December 1946, several months after the surrender of Japan, that Lt. Durand’s wife and mother received official notice that he was declared dead. By then Dorothy, 29 years old, was apparently back home with her parents in Bear Creek.

Today Lt. Durand’s grave marker stands among the Tablets of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery in the Philippines. His record indicates that in addition to his Distinguished Service Cross he was awarded the Purple Heart.

The Search for a Photo

The photo of Lt. Durand from his 1940 college yearbook is the only likeness I could discover of the young man. That didn’t seem right. Someone who lost his life in the uniform of his country ought to be remembered in uniform.

My search for such a photo revealed that his mother had died in 1966, and my attempts to track down other relatives who might have pictures led to dead ends...relatives who might have known him appear to be either deceased or long removed. But what about his widow, Dorothy? Surely she would have had pictures!

The story I uncovered about Dorothy’s subsequent life is rich with coincidence.

Another Fighter Pilot...a Friend?

In 1948 Dorothy married a former pursuit plane pilot, Lt. Robert J. Leyrer.

It’s very possible that Lt. Durand and Lt. Leyrer knew each other. Both graduated from college in 1940 (Leyrer from the University of Wisconsin), and both joined the Army Air Force soon after. Perhaps they attended the same flight schools. Perhaps on furloughs they rode the train together back to Wisconsin. Perhaps Lt. Durand introduced Leyrer to Dorothy when she met her fiancé at the train station.

Lt. Leyrer was serving in the Philippines when Japan invaded that island nation. The American pursuit squadrons decimated, airmen and support crews joined ground forces in the making their last stands on Bataan and Corregidor. Captured when the

Americans and Filipinos surrendered, Lt. Leyrer escaped during the Death March and survived in the hills for a year before being captured again. Shipped to Japan, he survived in a POW camp until liberated in September 1945.

Lt. Leyrer returned to flying status after the war, and retired a Lt. Col. in 1961. Five years later Dorothy died. Col. Leyrer died in 1999.

The End of the Story

My attempts to make contact with Dorothy and Robert Leyrer's three children have been unsuccessful. At some point in my research I learned that after the war Dorothy was said to have made a journey to New Guinea to find the gravesite of Lt. Durand. If that is true she would not have been successful either. The best information to date is that his remains probably lie in a mass grave of American servicemen executed by the Japanese at the prison camp at Rabaul, New Britain.

But the search for the Missing in Action goes on. Just last month the remains of eleven servicemen were returned from New Guinea for burial. Their bomber had disappeared in 1944 and the wreckage was just recently discovered. Perhaps some day the remains of Lt. Durand will also be returned to his homeland.

Although Lt. Durand and his family are not family, I've come to feel they are family. I wish with all my might I could have done something to ease the suffering and loss each in his or her own way endured. But I could not. I can honor their service and sacrifice by sharing their story, however, and perhaps now let it go.

END

John Durand lives in Elkhorn, WI and is the author of two historical novels and a memoir, all available at Book World in Stevens Point. He asks that anyone with further information about Lt. Durand contact him at PO Box 765, Elkhorn, WI 53121.