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Vernon woman learns details of brother's WWII death from stranger

- By Zachary F. Vasile
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Margaret Ginolfi fanned out the letters, now yellowed with age, and read them one by one.



Written on military stationery over seven decades ago, they relate the routine of a young airman at the end of World War II, detailing the rigors of enlisted life and, occasionally, homesickness from across the Atlantic Ocean. For Ginolfi, the papers represent one of the last links she has with her younger brother, Francis Godfrey, who died less than three weeks after sending his last letter on Feb. 1, 1945.

Flipping through the papers at her kitchen table, Ginolfi's eyes filled up with tears.

"He was such a sweetheart," the Vernon woman says. "He was my best friend."

Up until recently, the pain of losing a loved one was compounded by the added burden of not knowing exactly how it happened. Those questions lingered for 71 years before a stranger living a half a world away unexpectedly reached out and filled in the missing pieces.

"Who would believe that?" Ginolfi asks. "You couldn't make this up."

For Ginolfi, the mystery started unraveling last November, when she received a letter from Jeff Coleman of Hertfordshire, England. As a hobby, Coleman had been researching a 1945 airplane crash that killed eight servicemen, among them Francis Godfrey. Coleman then

began reaching out to the families of the plane's crew, finally filling in the information that Godfrey's family had struggled to find for years.

Godfrey was only 19 when his B-17 Flying Fortress ditched in the River Deben in southeast England, over 3,000 miles from Hartford, where he was born and raised.

Ginolfi remembers her brother as a sweet, dynamic personality with whom she formed a close bond. She says he volunteered to serve at 17, and needed his father to fill out paperwork to allow him to enter the armed forces before becoming a legal adult.

Ginolfi attributes his eagerness to patriotism and admiration of his older brother, Jim Godfrey, who also served during the war. That awe and adoration of his sibling was evident in the way he showed off his new uniform.

"He was so proud of that uniform because of his older brother," she says.

On the day he left home in 1944, Ginolfi says, Godfrey showed up at the store where she worked and she took the rest of the day off to spend time with him. That afternoon, they got lunch; she had a tuna sandwich and a fountain Coca-Cola. Then they walked to the train station and said their good-byes.

"He gave me money and said, 'I want you to take a taxi home,'" she says. "But I walked home instead. I cried the whole way. That was the last time I saw him."

Godfrey went through basic training and was assigned to the 493rd Bombardment Group, where he served as a waist gunner. His letters to his beloved older sister started while he was still in the U.S. and continued after he was stationed in England.

In one letter, dated Nov. 21, 1944, the young airman wrote nostalgically about the coming holiday.

"You know, it's going to be funny eating Thanksgiving in some mess hall and the next day boarding a ship," he wrote.



Jim Michaud / Staff photos

Above, Margaret Ginolfi of Vernon, with her daughter, Maureen Baker, also of Vernon, reads a letter from her brother, Francis Godfrey, who was killed in a plane crash in World War II. Below, Ginolfi looks at pictures from her brother. The family started learning details about his death last November when Ginolfi received a letter from an Englishman who had been researching the crash.



Ginolfi and Godfrey carried on their correspondence into 1945, all the while anticipating a reunion when the war came to an end. Ginolfi says she even set up a bank account for her younger brother and built it up with her own paychecks so he would have some money when he got home.

But any hope for a reunion was dashed on Feb. 20, 1945, when Godfrey's bomber, nicknamed the "Little Davey II," crashed after taking off for Nuremburg from Royal Air Force base Debach in Suffolk.

The story chronicled:-

Much of the publicly available information concerning the crash comes from Coleman's contributions to the American Air Museum in Britain, which chronicles the stories of those who served their country from the U.K. during World War II.

According to Coleman, one of the B-17's engines caught fire shortly after take-off. Despite the efforts of the crew, the blaze spread to the aircraft's right wing.

Since the plane was passing over a town, the pilot, 1st Lt. Frederick Stindt, had no choice but to look for alternative landing areas and settled on the River Deben. The river turned out to be deeper than Stindt anticipated, however, and the Flying Fortress sank in 18 feet of water.

In a first-hand account of the tragedy posted by the museum, Technical Sgt. Jewel K. Haynes says the impact blew out the plane's glass nose. A wall of water flooded the B-17, Haynes says, and the fully loaded aircraft was submerged before most of the men onboard had gotten their bearings and recovered from the force of the improvised landing.

"The water hit me so hard it threw me through the bulkhead door and I landed on my back in the bomb bay," he wrote. "By the time I got to my feet we were completely underwater."

Two men who witnessed the crash, fisherman Arthur Hunt and Arthur Reeve, an RAF airman on a week of leave, took a motorboat out onto the river and found Haynes, whose equipment had become so waterlogged that they could not pull him out of the water and had to gently pull him to the riverbank. Hunt and Reeve also helped Stindt, who emerged gasping from the water, and brought both to the Ramsholt Arms, a pub not far from the crash site that today bears a plaque commemorating the fatal accident.

Haynes and Stindt were the only survivors.

Word of Godfrey's death reached Connecticut days later.

"I wasn't there," Ginolfi says, "but my parents told me that there was a knock on the door, and a young serviceman handed them a telegram and said, 'We're sorry to inform you...' My parents were flabbergasted."

Details were few at the time, and Ginolfi's parents never learned much more than some vague details about a plane crash. The when, where, why, and how, she says, stayed unresolved blanks, even after her brother's remains were flown back home and buried in East Hartford.

Coleman became interested in the crash of the Little Davey II after discovering an account of the tragedy written down by Reeve, one of the rescuers, who married Coleman's father's cousin.

Fascinated, he began searching online for more information and joined a U.S. Air Force forum, where he was unexpectedly contacted by one of Stindt's daughters. She sent him a picture of the original crew, and the photo became an early guide as Coleman trawled military databases and websites like Ancestry.com and Find a Grave for more information.

His research led him to the Cambridge American Cemetery, where the deceased crewmembers were buried before some of their families repatriated their remains.

With a little more research, Coleman got in contact with the family of Staff Sgt. Paul Hatafsky, who is still buried at Cambridge, and offered to lay a flower on his grave for his niece.

"The realization of how much that meant to her and her family inspired me to continue to try and trace other families," Coleman says.

Coleman kept at it, connecting ages, dates of birth, and hometowns, and, after searching U.S. census and marriage records, he was able to find and contact Ginolfi and others.

After the first letter in 2016, Ginolfi and Coleman struck up a correspondence by mail and even talked on the phone. Ginolfi describes the conversation as unexpectedly natural, because even though they never met in person, Francis Godfrey was their connection.

"I have now managed to contact the families and relatives of seven of the 10 crewmembers and you soon realize how they still remember, with huge pride and great esteem, the memory of these young men who gave their lives for us," Coleman says. "It has, for me, been a wonderful journey, 99 percent of which has been achieved by just sitting at my computer searching the web."

Ginolfi says she's incredibly grateful to Coleman for finally providing closure for her family. But perhaps even more importantly, she says, his efforts have highlighted the service of eight young men whose sacrifices were not well known in their own country.

"I am so glad that this happened," she says. "Now the world is going to know what happened to these young men."