

Richmonder Fuller Patterson died at the dawn of World War II

By ZACHARY REID • Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Saturday, May 23, 2015 10:30 pm

It was a police commissioner from Belgium who finally gave Richmonder Mattie Gregory Patterson Handy peace of mind.

More than four years after her son, Richard Fuller Patterson, disappeared and was presumed dead while flying a combat mission over Europe on Dec. 7, 1941, Handy finally learned the certainty of his fate in a brief letter sent from a small village on the North Sea.

“I want to make it clear that though Patterson fell far from his country, his friends and his mother, he found here in his death of a hero, some kindly souls who recovered his body and buried it where it still rests under the shadow of a village clock tower, which he had flown over several moments before his death,” Henri Verhelst wrote.

“I can add that the death of Patterson was swift, that he did not suffer; in my own sight I had his body put in a coffin.”

The letter, written in Flemish, took a circuitous path to Handy’s Grove Avenue home and didn’t arrive until after the war was over.

But rather than being correspondence on a life ended, it became the beginning of a relationship that has spanned generations and that has sparked a family’s fascination with a part of World War II history that often has been ignored.

“What he did was the single greatest act of kindness I’ll ever witness,” said Latané Crittenden Miller, the 33-year-old grandniece of Patterson. “If not for him, my great-grandmother never would have known what happened to her son. Because of him, she knows.”



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Richard Fuller Patterson flew for the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II. Patterson hailed from Richmond but volunteered for the Canadian force in 1940 as a way "to get into the war." He flew with the Second American Eagle Squadron in England; his plane was decorated with dice and an ace of spades.

(Editor's note: Click on the photos embedded in the article to see their captions.)

The story Miller tells involves two heroes, one well-known and the other a pleasant surprise, and four generations of strong, determined women.

It's a story about a brave combat pilot from Richmond so eager to fight that he renounced his citizenship and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force because the United States had yet to enter the war.

But it's also a story about a brave man in an occupied country who risked his life to bury the dead, preserve their graves, and find and offer solace to their mothers.

It started in Richmond, where Patterson was the star of stars, a young man of such certain promise that he garnered news coverage simply by coming home for holiday leave before deploying.

It seemed to end in the tiny village of Breedene-by-the-Sea, where Patterson's plane was shot down on its way back to England. He died before the U.S. even entered the war, and he had the misfortune of going down on a day that will forevermore be remembered for the carnage in Pearl Harbor, not Belgium.

But, because of the determination of Verhelst and Patterson's family, the story has never stopped.

It wended its way after the war to Wilmington, N.C., where Patterson's only sister moved, and now to Dallas, where Miller lives.

Sitting in the dining room of her childhood home in Wilmington last week, Miller pulled out stacks of scrapbooks, photo albums and folders, a trove of documents she inherited from her grandmother, Martha Patterson Kidder.

She and her mother, Martha Patterson Kidder Crittenden, a St. Catherine's graduate, flip through the

pages, trading stories about the tale and marveling, even now after lifetimes of knowing all the details, at what they're seeing.

"For 40 years, I've wanted to tell this story," Crittenden said. "What Henri Verhelst did was just amazing, and I think people need to know that."

While Miller and her mother have long known the story, and have occasionally shared pieces of it with friends, they shied away from sharing it publicly out of respect for Kidder.

Like many of those of her generation who suffered the ravages of World War II, Kidder rarely talked about the emotional toll she suffered.

Her first husband and both of her brothers died in service, and talking about it wasn't something her daughter easily broached.

"I'd ask her about once every 10 years if I could tell it, and she just said 'no,' " Crittenden said. "There was never any explanation or reason. It was just 'no.' "

Still, though, she kept and added to the scrapbooks her mother had begun years before.

They were passed to Miller nearly 20 years ago, helping fuel the granddaughter's love of history and passion for telling her family story.

"I think she and I had a different kind of relationship than she had with my mother," Miller said. "She was my best friend. I think we told each other things we didn't tell anyone else."

Much of the telling of Patterson's story came through the scrapbooks.

There are pages full of the exploits of young Fuller, an all-everything at everything he ever tried.

The other two Patterson children, Martha and James, also grace the pages, but not with the frequency of Fuller.

“He had a huge personality,” Miller said. “He was the kind of guy who lived for the next challenge.

“I think if this had been about Jim, we wouldn’t know nearly as much. He was quieter. They were just different people.”

Crittenden said her mother had been closer to Jim, but her reluctance to talk about him meant his story was largely lost when she died in 2013.

While Kidder rarely talked about the family history, she did preserve it.

“She saved every piece of correspondence,” Crittenden said. “When she died, we found every letter I ever wrote her.

“She didn’t keep all this stuff for nothing. It was meant to be shared. Just not in her lifetime.”

Part of the Patterson story was well-documented decades ago, particularly in the pages of the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

His family created the Lucky Strike cigarette empire, and it’s their name that’s on the street signs for the avenue that winds west from the Fan District.

Even in a family of ambitious overachievers, Fuller stood out.

“He didn’t just do things,” Crittenden said. “Whatever he did, he wanted to be the best. And he was.”

Patterson was a standout student and athlete at St. Christopher’s School, Woodberry Forest, Princeton and Harvard.

When the U.S. was too slow to enter the war, he signed on with the Canadians.

He proved just as ambitious there and became the first man, of any nationality, to earn the title of “airman” in the British Empire.

He was eager to test his skills in battle, but he was so skilled they kept him behind to train more pilots.

“The spirit of fellowship, the dash and daring, the unselfishness and complete lack of self-concern that prevail among the men in the Empire’s Air Force have no counterpart in time of peace, I think,” he wrote in a letter to a Times-Dispatch reporter.

“It is my final conviction that a man must be confronted with the alternative of life or death in order to bring out the very best or very worst that is in him. As Fighter Pilots ... we have the satisfaction of knowing that we are worthy of our heritage.”

Patterson was not blind to the risks he faced.

About two weeks before his death, he wrote an eerily prescient letter, parts of which were published in The Times-Dispatch after he was reported missing in action:

“If this is where I get mine, up there where it is cold and clear, on a battlefield where the dead don’t lie about to rot, where there is no mud and no stench, where there is moonlight by night and stars, and in the day the wizardry of intriguing cloud formations, and a blue sky above where a man is free and on his own and the devil and Jerry take the hindmost; if I get mine up there, there must be no regrets. I would have it that way. It is unfortunate that those of us who love life most, the very ones who so keenly seek to live the fullest life possible, must take the long chances that in so many cases cut it short. We are not blind to the odds against us; true, we laugh at them or think lightly of them, but that is because we would have it no other way. I pity those, who living, live in fear of death.”

Patterson was killed Dec. 7, 1941. His wouldn’t be the only American death that day.

A few hours later, halfway across the globe, the Japanese staged an attack on Pearl Harbor that would propel America into the war.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt called it “a date which will live in infamy.” To the Patterson family, the annual observance is somber.

“I think for my mother and my grandmother, it was always a sad day,” Crittenden said. “What happened at Pearl Harbor was horrible, but it wasn’t the only thing. Another American died that day, too.”

Fuller Patterson’s mother, Mattie Handy, had to wait out the duration of the war not knowing what had come of her oldest son.

She found out sooner about the death of her younger son, Jim, also a fighter pilot.

In a cruel twist, he died in August 1945, making Handy the mother of one of the first and one of the last Americans to die in the war.

But she wouldn’t know for certain until the following summer, when she began receiving letters from Verhelst.

Patterson’s body was one of 19 Verhelst rescued from the Germans.

He buried them all in a small cemetery next to a Catholic church in Breedene, then spent the rest of his life trying to identify the men and find their mothers.

He marked the graves with wooden crosses he made, and he tended the graves year-round, including planting seasonal flowers.

He found 14 of the mothers, including Handy.

After his first letter finally made it to her — by way of the International Red Cross, British diplomatic channels and The Times-Dispatch, to which it was delivered in hopes someone would know Patterson — Handy replied.

In a letter dated July 18, 1946, Verhelst offered Handy something few parents ever got from World War II: an accurate, if painfully detailed, description of how her son died.

That letter has remained in the family scrapbook for nearly 70 years.

In a lifetime as fully written about as Patterson's, the three-page letter has details few people outside the family have ever known.

"It's time to share it," Miller said last week, explaining the importance of the story. "His life was an open book, but his death wasn't."

In it, Verhelst thanks Handy for her letter, then tells her what he saw that day.

"On that fatal day 12/7/41, my heart was beating anxiously and my eyes were scrutinizing the skies, believing and wanting to believe that this time again the friendly plane would once again escape the grasp of the enemy.

"Alas, fate had decided otherwise, it's with a heavy, anxious heart that I saw the big bird being massacred, the plane which carried inside of it your beloved son, its wings forcefully broken, the bird which flew towards the sea, had to succumb at the edge of the great expanse of water: the North Sea.

"Although it fell on the soil of my homeland, the plane of Patterson touched the water itself, as if it made a supreme jump, a last effort, it wanted for a last time touch both the ground where it fell and the sea which connects to the ocean, which touches his own country, America, the land of liberty."

Later in the letter, Verhelst imagined what he hoped had been Patterson's dying thought.

"My thoughts went to her who had given you life, my heart ached, far from her, far from your kind, there you were fallen in a strange land, perhaps your last thought, your last breath, one of your last words, was the sweet word 'Mama.' "

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In the years that followed, Handy and Verhelst kept up a written correspondence.

When Handy died, Kidder took over for her mother.

She and her second husband, George Everard Kidder, also a fighter pilot, visited Verhelst in Belgium and toured the small cemetery where her brother was buried.

Though they didn't speak Flemish and Verhelst didn't speak English, they managed a meaningful visit that lasted for days.

"My father and Henri stayed up all night," Crittenden said. "My mother said she could hear them laughing. My father said he discovered that vodka is a universal language."

Verhelst died in the 1970s and the correspondence stopped for nearly 30 years.

"Then Latané got one of her harebrained ideas," Crittenden said last week, making a funny face at her daughter.

"I decided I wanted to contact (Verhelst's daughter) Regine," Miller said.

In many of Verhelst's letters, and in family pictures he sent, Regine was prominent, and Miller thought she might have a piece missing from the scrapbooks.

In several of Verhelst's letters, he wrote about Handy's letters. But she didn't keep copies, and the family had no record of what she had written.

So Miller did what young people did in 2008: she went online, working contacts and searching for Regine.

"It took me four hours to get an address," she said. "Think about that. It took 4½ years for the first letter to get to my great-grandmother, and I did that in four hours."

She wrote to Regine and asked if she had any of her father's letters.

Regine, then in her 70s, did not, but she returned to Breedene, from which she had long since moved, because she thought a copy of some might be in a town museum.

A few months later, Miller, then living in Chicago, received a package in the mail.

“When I opened it, I just start sobbing,” she said. “I don’t think I got through the first page.”

In the envelope was a copy of a six-page handwritten letter from Mattie Handy to Henri Verhelst dated Aug. 18, 1946.

It read, in part, “For four and a half years, I suffered in doubt, ignorance, not knowing what had happened to my dear son. Now I know that he sleeps peacefully in a friendly country and tender care is given his grave by kind friends.

“Simple words cannot express my deep gratitude but dear friend you live in my heart and in my prayers.”

Miller shared it with her grandmother Kidder, Fuller’s sister.

She read the letter and offered but a few words.

“She said, ‘Thank you. I always wanted to know.’ ”

The letter was Miller’s contribution to the story, her way of adding a fourth generation to the family legacy.

“It think it completes the story,” she said.

For the moment.

Miller is pregnant with her first child.

“Hopefully, I will have a daughter one day who will care as much as I do where we came from,” she said. She also hopes the story can serve as an inspiration to anyone who reads it.

“There’s inspiration in Fuller to live life to the fullest, to get everything out of it that you can,” she said. “In Henri, there’s inspiration to do something kind. I hope anyone who reads about him is inspired to live a better life.”

