

Finding the Haystack:

History Flight Locates Lost Cemetery on Betio Island, Tarawa

By Clay Bonnyman Evans

Over the span of five years, I'd had dozens of conversations with Mark Noah, founder and president of History Flight, Inc., a non-governmental organization dedicated to repatriating the remains of U.S. servicemembers killed in World War II. Since 2007, History Flight had been searching for the remains of some 500 Marines and Navy personnel who didn't make it home from Tarawa.

Each time, we discussed the case of my grandfather, First Lieutenant Alexander "Sandy" Bonnyman Jr., killed Nov. 22, 1943, on Tarawa and posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, whose final resting place in a sandy sepulcher on the tiny islet of Betio had been lost to history. As Mark was always careful to remind me, even with modern technology—ground-penetrating radar, GPS data, remote aerial vehicles, even Buster, a Labrador retriever whose nose could detect deeply buried human remains—the chances of finding my grandfather called to mind needles and haystacks.

But then, in late winter 2015, Mark called me and said, "We found the haystack."

More than a decade earlier, local workers had unearthed human remains while installing a lamppost in a shipping yard on the north side of Betio. Mark was convinced that the area might conceal long-lost Cemetery 27, where my grandfather and 39 other Tarawa MIAs were recorded as having been buried. In late 2014, History Flight archaeologist Kristen N. Baker noticed that the owner had removed two Quonset huts, and Mark began negotiating permission to excavate the site. The team started digging on March 15, 2015. Six weeks and a dozen

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COURTESY OF CLAY BONNYMAN EVANS

Above: History Flight archaeologist Kristen Baker works on exposing the remains of 1stLt Alexander "Sandy" Bonnyman Jr., on May 29, 2015.

Below: Clay Bonnyman Evans holds a U.S. Marine helmet that was recovered while volunteering with History Flight at the site of Cemetery 25 on Betio in April 2013.



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Below: History Flight archaeologist Kristen Baker revealed the outlines of the skull and jaw belonging to 1stLt Bonnyman, on May 28, 2015.



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sets of skeletal remains later, it was clear they'd located the "lost ark" of Cemetery 27.

Three days later, I was on a plane to Tarawa.

My grandfather's official casualty card indicated that he should be found in "Grave #17" of the 4-foot-deep trench Kristen had discovered. But over the next few weeks, butterflies took up permanent residence in my belly. Who knew if the records were correct, or whether the burial row had remained undisturbed for more than 70 years? I worked hard

Above: History Flight archaeologist Kristen Baker, left, volunteer Paul Schwimmer (center) and technician John Frye, right, work on the excavation of Cemetery 27.

Right: 1stLt Bonnyman, second from right, facing camera, during the Battle of Tarawa in November 1943. Bonnyman was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during the battle.



CPL OBIE NEWCOMB, USMC

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every day—shooting photos and video, cleaning bones in the lab—while surging between dream-like hope and a haunting ache at the thought of failure.

But Kristen Baker never doubted as she worked steadily to the east, uncovering each new set of remains. Most were wrapped in ponchos, the bones of their feet still cradled by the rubber soles of boondockers; many wore helmets or were found with ammunition, canteens, rings, even a pack of Camels. The team carefully removed every last item and flake of bone and sent it to our local lab for processing.

On May 28, the team exposed the edge of a helmet and Kristen confirmed the presence of human remains—Grave #16. Continuing to brush away sand, she said, “There’s something else.” I climbed down in the trench, eyes stinging with tears, trying to hold the camera steady as Kristen slowly revealed the outlines of a burnished skull and jaw. Having long ago memorized my grandfather’s dental chart and its unusual, expensive restorations, she suddenly said, “Gold.”

It was 10:49 in the morning, May 28, 2015—71 years, six months, five days and perhaps 20 hours since 1stLt Alexander Bonnyman Jr. had fallen in battle.

Author’s note: When the team first exposed the remains in Grave #16, the remains in Grave #17 were simultaneously exposed. Per very important protocol, it’s critical that the team work just one set of remains at a time. So we covered up 1stLt Bonnyman and continued with the exhumation of #16 completing the removal on May 28. On May 29, the following day, the team exhumed #17, Alexander Bonnyman Jr.

Four months later, on a clear autumn day, our family laid him to rest with full military honors next to his parents and siblings on a high hill in Knoxville, Tenn., and his daughter, my 81-year-old mother, received a folded flag. For that, we are most grateful to Mark Noah who was named an Honorary Marine in 2015.

Author’s bio: Clay Bonnyman Evans is a journalist who has written for the Los Angeles Times and the Orange County Register. He is now a freelance writer and his book, “Bones of My Grandfather: Reclaiming a Lost Hero of WW II,” about his grandfather’s life and the recovery of his remains from Tarawa, published by Skyhorse Publishing, was released in July. To learn more or make a donation to History Flight, go to historyflight.org. 🇺🇸



COURTESY OF CLAY BONNYMAN EVANS

The Bonnyman family commissioned artist Arturo Noci to create this portrait of 1stLt Alexander “Sandy” Bonnyman Jr. in 1944.



CPL SARA GRAHAM, USMC

MajGen Burke Whitman presents the American flag to Frances Bonnyman Evans at her father’s funeral in Knoxville, Tenn., Sept. 27, 2015. To Evans’ left are her sister, Alexandra Bonnyman Prejean; her son, Clay Bonnyman Evans; and her niece, Margot McAllister.