

An Airman, A Medal, and 61 Years: Sergeant John W. Ahern, 452nd Bomb Group, Killed In Action May 12th, 1944

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In about 1995 the Rochester, Minnesota community decided to create and build a memorial that would honor all of the men and women from the southeastern part of Minnesota. It was designed to specifically honor those who died from any cause while serving in the military during any time period. Over time, plans were made for the actual memorial, called the Soldiers Field Veterans Memorial, and those plans included engraving on the walls of the memorial the names of all those from this region that died while serving in our armed forces. An appeal was put out to the community asking for help in finding and researching the names to be engraved on it, and I volunteered to work on the research. Over 2,200 names were found and decided on for inclusion and engraving on the memorial. One of the names that was found and was eventually engraved on the Soldiers Field Memorial was that of a World War Two casualty named John Ahern.

In about 1998, as I continued to try and collect and research the names for the memorial, as a hobby I began to study, and then to collect, U.S. military medals. More specifically, the medals I began to collect were from those that were killed in action in America's wars, World War One, World War Two, Korea, and Vietnam, and even more specifically yet, from Minnesotans who were killed in those wars.

I started to really look for medals, and began to find them at places like antique stores, estate sales and auctions, and on Internet auctions. I always wondered why people would ever part with or sell the medals that a family member was awarded when they were killed, but as I got more into it I found that medals are like other antiques and that they come available for a variety of reasons. Sometimes surviving family members die and there are no survivors. Other times surviving family members that are left no longer want the medals for whatever reason, usually because the survivors are not veterans and the medals belonged to someone that died decades ago and the medals were from a person that no one left alive ever knew. Many museums don't want the medals and have no interest in them, or are not willing or able to display them. Sad, but the reality of our times I guess. There have been people that have felt that the idea of military medals being bought and sold is not right. As a veteran, I can understand that feeling, but my response is this: I am proud to have them, by having them I keep the memories of those that earned the medals alive, and that my having them is a far better alternative to having them simply thrown in the garbage, which sadly does happen.

The medals that I find for my collection are awards such as the Purple Heart, Air Medal, Distinguished Flying Cross, and Silver Star, to name a few. Almost all of them have engraved on the back of the medal the name of the man who was killed. Why? Because the medals were sent to the surviving next of kin that way, by the U.S. Government. I

research the names on the medals and find out what I can. I do my research locally in terms of finding news articles, through the various branches of the military, through the National Personnel Records Center, and through the National Archives. I try and find out the unit that the person served in, and then details on their death. I also try and find out the more personal things; what the person was like in terms of personality, likes and dislikes, family history, etc. Once I have completed my research, I then compile all the information that I have and do a write up on the person that was killed, and place the write up and the medals in a display case that I keep here in my home.

As my time has allowed, I have done displays of my medals for others. I use the displays to tell the stories of the men and women that earned those medals.

In about the year 2000, I found on the Internet and bought a World War Two Air Medal that had the name John W. Ahern engraved on the back of it. Some basic research revealed that John W. Ahern was an Army Air Corps Sergeant who was killed in action in Europe during the war, and that he was from Hastings, Minnesota.

Additional research that I did on him located copies of a series of news articles in 1995 Hastings newspapers, done on the 50th Anniversary of the end of World War Two and regarding all of the men and women from the Hastings area that had been killed during the war. The article told a little bit about John Ahern, and was based on an interview that the author did with John's sister; she was then in her mid 80's. In the middle of 2005, I again came across the article and decided to see if John Ahern's sister, Ms. Rosemary Ahern, was still alive. I did some checking and found out that she was in fact alive and well and still living in the Hastings, Minnesota area. I decided to write to Rosemary and see if she would be willing to meet with me to talk to me about John, her family, and their loss of John. I was not sure exactly how to approach Rosemary at first. After writing her a letter, she replied within a couple days, and we made arrangements for me to travel to Hastings and see her.

I drove up to Hastings in late August 2005 and met Rosemary, and it proved to be a very fulfilling experience. Before I arrived Rosemary had taken the time to pull out photos, letters, telegrams, and papers related to John. We spent half the day talking about what the war years were like for her and her family, for John, and about his loss and the events, circumstances, and feelings surrounding it.

John W. Ahern was the youngest of five children in the Ahern family; Walter was oldest, then Kathleen, Rosemary (age 91 at the time of our meeting, Art, and then John. Rosemary is the only one of the siblings still living. Their parents were Johanna and Edward Ahern, and they lived on a farm at Ninenger, a small village about three miles west of Hastings. John was born at the Latto Hospital in Hastings on January 21st, 1920.

John graduated from Hastings High school in 1937, and from there went to the Civilian Conservation Corps (the CCC) for a one-year period, stationed in Washington State.

John came home to Ninenger after his CCC time, and then attended the University of Minnesota. John had grown up on the farm and was familiar with farming and the

animals, but he did not have a desire to stay on the farm, so he went to the University, and had taken business courses. John made it to his junior year at the University before he enlisted in the Army, for service in World War Two. Rosemary told me “John enlisted for several reasons, one reason was that his brother Art had already enlisted and was in the Army. I was serving as a VA nurse at a Veterans Administration Hospital in North Chicago, and John also enlisted because it was just the thing to do in those times. Everyone was behind the war and had a part in it in some way, and all were affected by it.”

Ironically as it later turned out, brother Art Ahern, already a soldier, was part of the reason John enlisted. Rosemary said “Art was in the field artillery and would have gone overseas and into the fighting, but while he was stationed in California he was walking down a road with a friend and they were struck by a car, and Art was badly injured and hospitalized for a long time. Because of that Art never made it overseas.”

John had enlisted in the Army though, and was sent first to Camp Grant, Illinois, then to California. John was in the Medical branch and was stationed at Letterman General Hospital in California, then at Camp Stoneman, also in California. Rosemary related that “John and a good buddy that he was serving with in California decided that they wanted to be pilots, so both applied to go to the Air Corps and were accepted. Once they got accepted, John’s friend’s orders came through first, so he and John were split up.” John did make it into the Air Corps though, as an aviation cadet, and began his training to be a pilot. “John never finished pilot training, as his entire group (of pilot trainees) was pulled out of training for pilots. They apparently didn’t need that many more pilots, so the men were sent to other areas, and John was trained to be a gunner on an aircraft.” His pilot training was started in approximately late January of 1943, and some of John’s Air Corps training was at Janes Field in Texas.

John was allowed to come home to Minnesota on leave prior to finishing the last of his Air Corps training, and Rosemary was able to come home then also. When John was ready to leave to go back to his aerial gunnery training school and then probably overseas after that, the family took him to the Union Depot in St. Paul, to get on a train. Rosemary remembered “When I saw him off at the train station, I had a terrible feeling that I was never going to see him again.”

The family received from John a picture of his B-17 Flying Fortress crew together. The picture had a few of the other crew member’s names written on the back, and it was the last photo that the Ahern family had of John.

John wrote the family a letter from England after he had arrived there, and in the letter he described what he had seen, what the country and people were like, and told about how well things were going and that he thought everything would be all right. While she was still working as a nurse in North Chicago, Rosemary’s parents received a telegram from Western Union, probably by way of the train station in Hastings, informing the Ahern family that John was missing in action. The telegram, which Rosemary still has, was dated May 24th, 1944, and simply states that John was missing in action in Europe as of

May 12th, 1944. She did not recall how she found out, but suspects that her mother wrote her and told her.

She (Rosemary) had gone on to enlist in the Army herself, as a nurse and officer, after John had been declared missing. She eventually received her nurses training and Army training and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant, and was herself sent overseas to France and then Germany, working in the officer's ward of a large general hospital unit. "After I joined the Army, it was even harder having John missing, as my being in the Army made it even more difficult for me to find out more about what was happening with him," said Rosemary.

The Ahern family was not able to get any new or additional information about John or his fate, and right after he was declared missing, the Army would not tell the Ahern family anything. However, several months after John was reported missing, the Army sent the Ahern family a list of the other men that were on John's aircraft the day it went missing, along with the addresses of the other men's families. Rosemary still has that letter today.

The crewmembers of John's aircraft, as listed in the official Army letter:

- 2nd Lieutenant Walter V. Naylor, of Colorado (the pilot, later listed as killed in action)
- 2nd Lieutenant Winecke F. Carpenter, of Illinois, (later found to be a prisoner of war)
- 2nd Lieutenant Austin F. Casselberry, of California (later listed as killed in action)
- 2nd Lieutenant Michael M. Veselich, of California (later listed as killed in action)
- S/Sgt. Roger J. Mullenmeister, of Minnesota (later found to be a prisoner of war)
- Sgt. Duward F. Mitchell, of Texas (later listed as killed in action)
- Sgt. Richard R. Berkoben, of New Jersey (later found to be a prisoner of war)
- Sgt. Thomas G. Garten, of West Virginia (later found to be a prisoner of war)
- Sgt. Ralph R. Bates, of Washington (the tail gunner, later found to be a prisoner of war)

The Army encouraged the families of the missing men from John's aircraft to get in touch with each other, and the Ahern family did just that. The list of the other missing men included Sergeant Roger J. Mullenmeister from Faribault, Minnesota, not all that far from their home in Hastings, so the Ahern family naturally got in contact with them. They also wrote letters back and forth to the families of the other men, to see if anyone had heard anything, but Mullenmeisters were the only ones the Aherns stayed in regular touch with.

The Mullenmeister family had a picture of Roger, which they sent to the Ahern's; Rosemary still has the picture, and on the back of it the writing says that Technical Sergeant Roger J. Mullenmeister was 24, and the picture was from 1944. Roger is in some of his flying gear in the photo. Through the Ahern family's correspondence with the Mullenmeister family, the Ahern family learned that Mullenmeister's had received a card in the mail saying that Roger was a prisoner of war of the Germans. That word about Roger Mullenmeister at last gave the Ahern family some hope that maybe their John was also a prisoner.

The war in Europe finally ended, and still no word about John or what had happened to him. Mullenmeisters wrote and said that they had finally heard from Roger, he had been a prisoner of war of the Germans, and Roger had contacted his family and said that he was in England after having survived his being a POW. Roger had given no word about John.

When John was found to have not been a prisoner of the Germans, the Army did finally declare him to be dead. Rosemary related that "Our family had a memorial service for John at the Guardian Angels Catholic Church in Hastings." Later, some time after the memorial service for John had been held, the Army sent the Ahern family a letter saying that John's remains had been found, and that he had in fact been killed in action on May 14th, 1944, when his B-17G bomber, serial number 42-97235, had crashed near Merzhausen, Germany. Rosemary has the letters that the family received telling them of this. Also with those letters was another letter from the Army asking what the Ahern family wanted to do as far as John's remains were concerned, whether or not the family wanted John brought back home to the USA or buried permanently in Europe. "My brothers and sisters talked this over amongst ourselves, and we all came to the agreement that it would be easier for us, and my mother and father, if John were left buried in Europe. We had already had the memorial service for John in Hastings, and we all had thought about it and on our own we had all each decided that it would just be too hard if John were to come home, as we would all have to go through all the pain again." With that, the Ahern children spoke to their parents about John's remains, and they decided to let John rest permanently in Europe. More letters from the Army, kept by Rosemary, show that John was permanently laid to rest in the Ardennes American Cemetery at Neupre (Neuville-en-Condroz) in Belgium. Sergeant John W. Ahern rests in Plot B, Row 37, Grave 37, in the company of 5,791 other Americans who also gave their lives during the World War Two years and are buried or commemorated there with John.

Some time well after the war was over, Roger Mullenmeister came to Hastings to call on John's parents. Rosemary was home when he came to see them. She could see that Roger was upset by what had happened, but Roger did talk to them some about John and about what had happened to the crew on the day that John died. From what Roger said, it sounded to her like it might have been one of their own aircraft or people (other Americans) that caused John and Roger's aircraft to go down that day.

The Ahern and Mullenmeister families, who had become well acquainted with each other during their ordeals, did get together on at least one occasion and did continue to stay in touch with each other through letters for some time after the war was over. "Roger's sister later wrote to the us that Roger had had to go to a hospital or something after having bad nervous problems, like a nervous breakdown I always guessed, because of what happened to him during the war."

In the years after John was killed and had his final burial in Belgium, their sister Kathleen was able to visit John's grave once while on a trip to Europe. She was the only one in their family to ever see it in person though.

“John’s being missing was a huge unknown to our family. We had a lot of support from our family, and also from our priest, an Irish priest from Guardian Angels Church that we went to. My parents accepted what happened to John, and there was relief when we found out he had been killed, as knowing that, there was no more wondering about what had happened to him.”

Rosemary’s memories of what John was like are that “I remember John as being fun, with a good sense of humor, and always so kind. I used to have to take care of him when he was a baby, because I was older, and he was a good kid, not a troublemaker. The word “nice” is what sticks out in my mind when I think of how to describe him.”

“When I think about John and his death, I think that how he died was all right. John had wanted to go into the Air Corps, and he had wanted to be a pilot and when he could not do that he still wanted to fly and became a gunner instead. John died doing something that he wanted to do, and if he was going to die, then that is how I guess I would have wanted it, while doing something he liked.”

Rosemary described John’s death as something that was bad, and terribly hard, but the Ahern family accepted it as being a terrible cost of the war, but something that just was, and that had just happened.

Rosemary expressed an interest in getting in contact with Roger Mullenmeister again, but research about him revealed that he had passed away, while still living in Minnesota, in 1991. He was 72 years old when he died.

As part of my research into John Ahern’s life and his service, I was fortunate enough to get in touch with Mr. Hank North of the 452nd Bomb Group Association. Via emails, Hank passed on to me information about John, including about the missions he had flown. John and the Naylor crew were in the 729th Bomb Squadron, and John’s first mission had been on April 26th, 1944, to Hildesheim, Germany. He flew additional missions on April 29th and 30th, then more on May 1st, 7th, 8th, 9th, and 11th. John’s May 12th, 1944 mission was to Brux or Bruz (I have seen it spelled both ways) Czechoslovakia to bomb oil refineries there. John’s aircraft was one of the 15 lost that day, the worst, darkest day in the 452nd Bomb Group’s history.

Sadly, Hank also told me that it appears that none of the members of John’s crew who survived their shoot down are still alive. I am grateful to Hank North for his help.

As time goes on, the stories about the lives and losses of men like John Ahern slowly fade away as the World War Two generation leaves us. In John’s case, I was so fortunate to have been able to get in touch with his sister Rosemary, and I am proud to have been able to document what I could about John and his family. For those of you that read this, sit down with your loved ones and tell them about your experiences, so that your role and your experiences during the war are not lost to time like the story of John Ahern nearly was. Tape record it or video tape it or at the very least write down your memories and thoughts as to what you went through. It is so important for future generations to know

what you went through, from the cooks in the mess halls to the pilots and crews flying the toughest of missions.

To the men that served in the 452nd Bomb Group in World War Two, I salute every one of you for your service. And to those of you that flew missions... the courage to get into your aircraft and fly the missions that you did, day after day, mission after mission, and loss after loss... It just astounds me and is humbling, knowing what you faced and what you lived through, experienced, and overcame. And finally, to John Ahern, rest easy, you have not been forgotten.