



## WHAT'S IN A NAME: A LEGACY FROM 1944

A simple headstone marks the final resting place of eleven soldiers killed on a bombing mission over Balikpapan, Borneo October 3, 1944.

By Daglin Von Ruden

Benjamin Disraeli wrote, “The legacy of heroes is the memory of a great name and the inheritance of a great example”.

I have a unique given name. One you likely have never encountered – nor likely to encounter in the future. I know only one other person with this given name - my namesake, Daglin Salmon, a Staff Sergeant in the Army Air Force in World War II. He was killed, along with his entire crew in a surprise air attack on a mission to bomb a Japanese controlled oil refinery at Balikpapan, Borneo. Daglin was nineteen.

Daglin and my dad were best friends growing up in the small, rural community of Claremont in southern Minnesota. I am the first-born son in our family. My parents named me Daglin in his honor.

This Memorial Day I would like to return the honor by recognizing and remembering Staff Sergeant Daglin Salmon along with his fellow crew members who gave their lives in service to our country.

Daglin was a 1942 graduate of Claremont High School where he played football and basketball. A teacher’s note in his senior yearbook provides a glimpse into his personality. “To the Little

Napoleon who has helped to make the Bookkeeping classes a little more cheerful. I extend a most happy graduation...and a successful future to follow. I shall long remember you and your happy-go-lucky spirit, Daglin. Best of luck always”.

Daglin enlisted in the Army Air Force in August 1943, graduated from gunnery school in Laredo, Texas and was assigned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 470<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, 802<sup>nd</sup> Bomber Squadron stationed at Tonopah Army Airfield, Nevada.

In a letter to my dad from March 1944, he wrote, “I thought I would never see the end of the world but here it is. We are 300 miles from a decent sized town. Tonopah is about 1,500 but there isn’t a damn thing to do here. They have an old run-down theater and a couple of gambling joints...(but) there is more liquor here than we know what to do with”.

And, he hinted at love! “You know that girl from Rochester that I was telling you about? I’ve been writing to her about three times a week since I left”.

And, in a moment of prophetic irony, wrote, “I’ve been assigned to a crew. It’s a B-24 Liberator. I’m tail gunner, of course. We call it the ‘purple heart’ position”.

In June Daglin went overseas with the 13<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 307<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, 424<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Squadron - first to Australia and then Papua, New Guinea. The 307<sup>th</sup> is the famous “Long Rangers” which began its offensive in the Battle of Guadalcanal, fought its way through the northern Solomon Islands and into New Guinea where it was engaged in the destruction of Japanese aviation fuel supplies and facilities in eastern Borneo.

It was dangerous duty.

In a letter to his mother he described having participated in six combat missions and that four out of five of his pals had already met their death.

On October 3, 1944 Daglin’s plane was chosen to participate in a critical bombing mission. The main target was one of the most important in the entire Pacific – the Pandansari oil refinery at Balikpapan, Borneo.

Six planes each from the 370<sup>th</sup>, 371<sup>st</sup>, 372<sup>nd</sup> and the 424<sup>th</sup> squadrons would fly that day – an expected round trip of almost 2,600 miles. Twenty of these planes were to target the Pandansari oil refinery.

Between 0900 and 0915, two formations of Liberators approached the target. Suddenly, 55-70 Japanese fighter planes – Tonys, Zeke 32’s and Tojos - came out of the sun to attack. None of the bombers turned back before reaching the target and releasing their bombs.

The air fight continued for 75 minutes.

In total seven aircraft were lost that day with damage to thirteen other planes. 63 men were missing and almost 30 others injured. According to the mission report, “... intense, heavy and

accurate enemy aircraft fire was received by all planes in the Group. Its effectiveness was demonstrated by the great amount of damage to our planes, and was reported ***as the toughest ever experienced by any of our crews***".

One of the planes lost that day was Liberator Aircraft # 42-110101 - Daglin's aircraft.

Immediately after "bombs away" a Japanese plane, completely out of control and whose pilot was presumed dead, came into the formation of B-24's head on. After nearly grazing the plane in front, it swerved into Daglin's plane and exploded, knocking off the wing of the B-24 and causing it to turn on its back.

The plane went into a dive and crashed into the tidal basin, 600 meters off shore, killing all eleven men aboard.

For "*gallantry, determination, and esprit de corps in accomplishing its mission under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions*", the 307<sup>th</sup> would be awarded its 2<sup>nd</sup> Distinguished Unit Citation in the Pacific theater. Staff Sergeant Salmon would be posthumously awarded the Air Medal for meritorious achievement while participating in aerial flight.

After the war - in 1947 and again in 1948 - the crash site was investigated by personnel of the United States Army Graves Registration Service. With extreme difficulty, partial remains of an undetermined number of deceased were recovered from the wreckage which was buried in mud at the bottom of the basin.

The identification tag of the pilot found in the wreckage identified the plane and its crew.

The remains of the eleven fallen soldiers of Aircraft # 42-110101 were returned to the United States for internment on February 5, 1950. A simple headstone marks their final resting place.

I was one month old. My life was just beginning.

Over 400,000 American soldiers died in World War II. Perhaps the early American poet, Joseph Drake, said it best, "*And they who for their country die shall fill an honored grave, for glory lights the soldiers tomb, and beauty weeps the brave*".

I've been honored to carry the name of Staff Sergeant Salmon, and "the inheritance of a great example".