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A World War II mystery *by [Jason Babcock](#) Staff writer*

The remains of Capt. Walter Francis Duke, shot down in combat over the jungles of Burma in World War II, may have been located, his kin were advised earlier this month.

Family members are hoping that a 68-year-old mystery has been solved.

A forensic genealogist working as a contractor for the U.S. Army said it's premature to say Duke has in fact been found in recently cleared jungle in the country today called Myanmar, but the Army doesn't put her to work to locate survivors if a loved one hasn't been found. A P-38 aircraft with numbers matching Duke's plane was discovered with the remains, the genealogist said.

"When they give me a case to do, there's a reason," she said, asking to remain anonymous because it is the Army's responsibility to make the official notification to the family.

Duke went missing in action, reported shot down over Burma on June 6, 1944. That was also D-Day, the day half a world away when U.S. forces and their allies crossed the English Channel to push back the Nazi German forces.

The family was left wondering what happened to Duke ever since.

"I don't know how I feel about it," said Eleanor Ann Fearn, 88, after learning Duke's remains may have been found.

"All the memories come back now. I was in high school when he was reported MIA," she said from her Leonardtown home.

Fearn is one of two sisters still living among Duke's many siblings.

Fearn said she was contacted by the genealogist. "They didn't tell me what they had found, but they asked about DNA" to verify if the remains are Duke's.

"If it's a match, then a casualty officer physically visits the family," the genealogist said.

The Duke family burial plot is at the old St. Aloysius Cemetery off Cemetery Road in Leonardtown. Fearn said, as the next of kin, she would request his remains be buried there, as well.

"My brother, George, I wish so he was still alive. [Walter] was his idol," Fearn said.

George Duke was 12 when his older brother went missing.

George Duke researched his brother's service over the years, trying to find out what happened to him in combat. George Duke even found the pilot who shot his brother down with the help of the Japanese Embassy, his sister said, and began a written correspondence.

Capt. Duke signed up to be a combat pilot before Japan attacked the United States in Hawaii on Dec. 7, 1941. Before the Pearl Harbor attack, most Americans wanted to stay out of the war.

Capt. Duke signed up with the Royal Canadian Air Force in July 1941, after Germany had invaded France and

launched an aerial attack of England. He joined the U.S. Army Air Corps in May 1942 after the United States was pulled into the war.

By the age of 21, Duke was a captain and an ace fighter pilot. In March 1943, the Allies began pushing the Japanese Air Force out of Burma, George Duke told the St. Mary's County commissioners in a 1999 letter.

From March to May that year, Capt. Duke scored 10 confirmed kills, eight probable kills, 13 damaged aircraft, plus more destroyed or damaged on the ground.

The (Baltimore) Sun called him "Maryland's leading air ace of World War II" on May 20, 1944.

In wartime letters back home, the newspaper reported, Capt. Duke shared few details of his combat missions. "I am getting my share. ... I get a little scared in the tough spots, but I am doing okay," he wrote March 30, 1944.

Capt. Duke, on leave back home in St. Mary's, married Verja Graham in March 1943, a girl he had known since childhood, The Sun reported on June 23, 1944.

His P-38 plane had "Miss V" painted on the nose, after his wife.

The genealogist found Verja still living in Florida. She remarried, so she is no longer next of kin.

Capt. Duke told his family he was expecting to come back home for a visit, so a celebration was planned in his hometown of Leonardtown. However, the news came on June 21, 1944, that he was reported missing as of June 6.

The celebration plans were not canceled, The Sun reported. "St. Mary's countians plan to honor their ace by buying war bonds," an article said.

Sen. Millard Tydings told the audience on June 22 that he believed that Capt. Duke was captured by the Japanese or was making his way through the jungle.

Now, more than 68 years later, the question of what happened to Capt. Duke may have been answered.

George Duke said his brother shot down three enemy planes before they got him.

The county's airport was once named after Capt. Duke but is now called the St. Mary's County Regional Airport. The terminal building bears Duke's name.

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