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"Bobby, he made all these people come together."

- Joyce Butler Allen

As birthday requests go, Joyce Butler Allen's was a tad unusual. But if fulfilled, it would not only satisfy a longtime dream, but also bring closure to an entire family.

The way Joyce, now 77, figured it, she and her husband John were going to be in Europe anyway, on a business trip. So why not, after all these years, travel to the site where, 67 Octobers ago, her brother Bobby's B-24 "Liberator" crashed to the earth following a mid-air collision with another American bomber?

Plans were made, and so, too, a phone call - between Joyce's travel agent and a friend in France who then contacted the Edenkoben Homeland Society in the Palatinate region of Germany. And so was set in motion a journey that not only brought Joyce to the site of her brother's death, but also brought nations - once bitter enemies - and people together. For one Handley grad (Class of '54), it was the trip of a lifetime.

Joyce was but 9 when the plane on which Staff Sgt. Robert R. Butler served as a flight engineer and top turret gunner went down on a cold and gray October afternoon. Its mission: to bomb German industrial targets near Mainz.

Joyce says her mother never talked about the death of her son, the oldest in a family of 10. Not even the return of Bobby's remains to the United States - he was buried in Mount Hebron in late 1948 - could assuage her grief. But Joyce, who resides with John in Coalton, W.Va., near Elkins, never gave up on a long-held wish. This past Oct. 5, it came true.

And what a story she heard. Bobby was one of 12 American aviators lost that day when the two planes hurtled into the Black Forest. Burghers from Edenkoben buried them all at the north end of the town cemetery. Following the end of hostilities, the airmen's bodies were exhumed - and, in Bobby's case, identified - and removed to the American cemetery near the French town of St. Avold.

To this day, as Joyce discovered, Americans and Germans are still collaborating in the search for MIAs. She learned, too, that the collision of the two Liberators remains a matter for historical inquiry, and that the hardy citizenry of Edenkoben never forget. They consider the spot where the planes plunged to earth "sacred ground."

And so on the morning of Oct. 5, there to greet Joyce and John was not only town historian Herbert Hartkopf, who wrote an article for the local newspaper on the anniversary of the crash, but also Uwe Benkel, an insurance agent who, as leader of the MIA Research Club, had scoured the crash site with a metal detector.

Oddly enough, Joyce says, Herbert and Uwe had never met until that day, even though the latter had positively identified pieces of the downed aircraft. A portion of a tail section is displayed in the Edenkoben town museum.

On that morning, the small party traversed the "sacred ground" where Bobby perished. Uwe, his metal detector ever at the ready, found what he believes are pieces of a bomb. Joyce carried flowers that she laid in the forest and observed a prolonged moment of silence for her brother.

Tears still glisten in her eyes as she retells the story of that day, and of how Uwe has gone into German schools, with a photo of Bobby in hand, to tell his story and that of the doomed planes.

"Think of it," she says, "a German telling the story of the Butlers, that this man [in the photo] came from a family affected by war."

"To the German people, to them, it's very important that German villagers, through circumstances, were involved in this."

And so closure, it seems, belongs not to the Butlers alone. This is a birthday gift that keeps on giving, in so many ways.



Robert R. Butler



Joyce Butler Allen at the site where her brother „Bobby“ died 67 years ago