

DNA may identify sailor 68 years after Pearl Harbor

May 26 2009, By Michael E. Young

The call came unexpectedly a few weeks ago, the sharp ring and a calm voice asking whether she was Starring Winfield's sister.

And in that moment, Sunny Patton was transported back to Dec. 7, 1941, her grief new and fresh again.

"When they called, I started crying. I almost fell out of my chair," said Patton, now 88. "It brought everything rushing back.

"After 68 years, you don't expect someone to call and say they might have identified my brother's remains."

But 68 years ago, few could have imagined that teeth and bone held the secret of [mitochondrial DNA](#), a genetic fingerprint that enables scientists to identify soldiers and sailors dead for decades.

"The military doesn't want any more 'unknown soldiers,'" said Paul Stone, a spokesman for the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Rockville, Md. The military continues a push to collect DNA samples from as many survivors of still-unidentified war dead as possible.

Starring Winfield was 22 when he died, newly married and a recent Navy enlistee, serving as a radioman third-class aboard the USS Oklahoma. He started his shift in the radio room that Sunday morning, minutes before the first wave of Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor's "Battleship Row."

The Oklahoma, berthed outside the USS Maryland, lay completely exposed to the attack and suffered at least five torpedo hits, which ripped huge gashes along the ship's 582-foot length. It rolled and capsized within minutes, trapping hundreds of men, including Winfield, inside.

When the Oklahoma capsized, rescuers worked furiously to find survivors. Over three days, 32 sailors were rescued, either from the burning, oil-slick water of the harbor or from inside the ship itself.

But 429 couldn't be accounted for, more than any ship at Pearl Harbor except for the USS Arizona, which lost 1,177 when its forward magazine exploded.

"I remember when I was 5 and he was 6, if someone bothered me, he'd put his fist up. 'Don't you hurt my baby sister!'" he'd say.

"He was always very kind, very outgoing. He liked sports; he loved to hunt and fish. And he was a smart young man. He even skipped a grade in school."

The brother and sister were friends as well as siblings, often double-dating after high school in San Rafael, Calif. Soon before he shipped out, in September 1941, Winfield married one of Patton's best friends on a quick trip to Reno, their families in tow.

His stepfather, a retired Army colonel, firmly believed that war with Japan was inevitable and suggested that Winfield enlist in the Navy, believing that would be a better, safer place to be than the Army.

"Then, of course, he was killed at Pearl Harbor," his sister said. "But so many people were killed in the war."

Patton remembers those days vividly -- especially her mother's sense of foreboding.

"The Friday before Pearl Harbor, my mother said, 'Something terrible is going to happen. I know, I know,'" Patton said.

When word of the attack flashed across America, her mother couldn't be consoled.

"She said, 'My son has been killed.' She never got over it," Patton said. "It took me years before I finally came to grips with it."

Then, 68 years later, the telephone rang.

The Oklahoma lay mostly submerged until salvage operations in 1943 finally righted the ship. The bodies of those who died onboard were removed, 35 of them identified. The rest went into mass graves.

"These remains had been underwater for more than 14 months," said Kenneth Terry, director of the POW/MIA Branch of the Navy Personnel Command Casualty Assistance Division in Millington, Tenn.

"It wasn't very easy to make identifications, either in the ensuing days after the attack or after remains were recovered from the ship."

After the war, remains were moved to the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, the Punchbowl. There they would have stayed, except for the efforts of a Pearl Harbor survivor named Ray Emory.

He often visited the Punchbowl, walking among the rows. The graves for unknown soldiers and sailors touched him, and he began searching for information that might put names on the stones.

Indirectly, Terry said, Emory led the Navy to Patton.

"Basically, all this with Mrs. Patton stems from a disinterment that occurred in June 2003, based on some research done by Mr. Emory," Terry said.

"He has been successful in identifying grave sites that held individual remains. This was a grave site listed as unknown, but associated with the Oklahoma, and the impression was, based on the paper trail, that there was one individual buried here.

"But when they opened it, they found five bundles of commingled remains."

Patton believes her brother is one of the five and hopes her DNA sample -- three swabs drawn carefully along the inside of her cheeks _ proves it.

The military is more cautious, but still hopeful.

Air Force Lt. Col. Wayne Perry of the public affairs office at the Joint POW-MIA Accounting Command in Honolulu said that while Starring Winfield is listed in the agency's database, there is no specific information about the status of the identification process.

"So we're not near any ID yet," he said. "But the request was made to have a reference (DNA) sample for when we get to that point.

"We did have some remains from the Oklahoma that came in recently, and we're working on those now."

Since 1992, the Department of Defense has collected blood sample cards from every member of the military, 5.4 million so far, so it would always have DNA information on hand.

But identifying those lost in earlier wars requires DNA samples supplied by relatives -- even generations removed -- or in the rarest of cases, some object that carries the DNA.

"We were able to pull DNA off a licked love letter a Korean soldier had sent to his wife," said Stone of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology.

Mostly, though, the military contacts relatives to donate [DNA samples](#), because human mitochondrial DNA is carried unchanging over the generations by the female line.

Remains of the outlaw Jesse James were identified by comparing his mitochondrial DNA with DNA of a relative four generations removed, descended through the female line of Jesse James' sister.

Many descendants of soldiers and sailors still listed as missing seem eager to help in the identification process, Stone said.

"One woman told us she wanted to do this because her mother was pregnant with her when her father went off to World War II," Stone said.

"She said, 'I never got to meet him.'"

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