

TREASURE RETURNS

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Nearly 70 years later, WWII soldier's Bible returns to Tennessee:

COOKEVILLE – Kenneth Simmons recently received a call from a person he's never met in Friendship Maine. The lady told Ken she had something that belonged to Sgt.



James Hollis Simmons, whom she believed to be Ken's brother.

"After 60-something-years, I never expected to hear about it," Ken said. "I couldn't believe it, after all these years, that someone called me and said they had it."

(Pictured: Kenneth Simmons holds a photo of his cousin, James Hollis Simmons, and the

bible, James carried during his service in the army during WWII. James was killed when the B-24H that was carrying him and nine other crew members to Florida crashed near Memphis in 1944).

James, Ken's first cousin, signed up for the Army the very day he graduated from high school.

The Derossett, TN, native was inducted into basic training at Miami Beach, FL, on April 5, 1943, and, like other soldiers, he was given a small, red pocket-sized bible during training.

"In November 1943 we spent time together on leave and then he transferred," Ken said.

That was the last time Ken ever saw his cousin.

On a rainy April morning in 1944 somewhere northeast of Memphis, James – now a Top Gunner – and nine other crew members were en route to Morrison Field in West Palm Beach, FL, in a B-24H Liberator. After a short stopover in Morrison, they would be sent to join Allied forces in the fight to defeat Nazi Germany.

All of that changed in an instant as the bomber, flying at about 5,000 feet, exploded into flames midair and broke into three pieces over the skies of Millington.

Amid the heavy rain, the front and rear sections of the fuselage fell separately as the wings and engines soared for another half-mile before plowing into a local man's farm, an article from the Memphis paper, *The Commercial Appeal*, says.

A few crew members attempted to parachute from the plane but only one was successful in getting his parachute to bloom.

He was the sole survivor of the crash.

Onlookers rushed to the scene to attempt to rescue any possible survivors. But the rescue mission quickly turned into a recovery and clean-up operation.

The remains and personal effects of nine crew members, James Simmons included, were carefully collected and removed from the two-mile long scene.

After being in the army for a little more than a year, James, who had yet to see the perils of combat, was buried with full military honors at Smith's Chapel Cemetery near Sparta.

Some believed that lightning was the cause of the explosion but witnesses stated that there was no lightning with the storm, just heavy rain.

Ken, like most others, was surprised that the freak accident occurred. After all, these four-engine bombers were built for enduring hellish wartime battle.

"They didn't expect a big bomber to fall from base to base," he said.

Ken eventually went on to serve in WWII and then Korea. After returning stateside, he lived in Illinois for 44 years and then moved to South Carolina before finally coming back to Tennessee.

Approximately 10 years ago, Ken was contacted by a man whose uncle was killed in the very same crash as James.

"I didn't expect to be contacted about it, he says.

Kurt Dold, the nephew of S/Sgt. Albert S. Dodd, has dedicated much of his spare time to tracking down information about each of the crew members who died in the crash. He contacted Ken in hopes of getting additional information for his memorial website dedicated to the crew of the ill-fated flight.

Through his own research, Kurt was able to provide Ken with a copy of James' death certificate, a photo of the crew, newspaper clippings and other pieces of information –

including a copy of a letter from the government explaining that James' record could not be found likely due to the fact that his name was misspelled on the official record.

Ken, in return, shared what information he had about James with Kurt but didn't think much else about it.

"In November (2011), I got a call from this lady in Friendship, Maine," Ken said, "She said, 'I have his bible'and, she mailed it to me."

The lady, Kathy Silvestri, says her father bounced around the U.S. training at several military facilities and then went overseas to fight in France and Germany.

After he passed away, his belongings were sorted through and the bible was discovered.

"My dad died in 1980," Kathy Silvestri said. "We had gone through the box, as I gave my sons his dog tags, and I have his bronze star...but we had no way of searching the bible, as we had no computers back then. Anyway, in September, I asked my mother if I could take the bible and Google the name to see if in fact this was the boy. When I Googled it, a wonderful page came up telling the story of James Simmons."

Kurt's memorial page had opened a portal to connect the stranded bible with its owner's next-of-kin.

"I cried and felt a connection as I held the bible and saw the picture of this handsome young man who died at 19."

Kathy says she isn't sure how her father, a pilot from Waldoboro, Maine, came across the bible.

"I know my dad was in Florida and the bible was issued to James in Florida but I just don't know," she said.

The bible, in near-perfect condition with the exception of yellowed pages, features James' name printed in bold black letters.

"Back in World War II, all of us – if you're going to get shot or killed – they'd give you a bible," Ken said as he thumbed through its pages.

He says isn't sure what will happen to this bible once he's gone but, in the meantime, it will remain a treasured reminder of the bravery and sacrifice of his cousin and the other soldiers of the Liberator bomber.



JAMES HOLLIS SIMMONS

b. 11 September 1923 – d. 8 April 1944, Millington, TN, (US Army Air Corps, Top Turret Gunner, B-24 Liberator Bomber), s/o **Dock Ondes Simmons** (1892-1968) & **Mattie**

Jane Palmer (1894-1971). James Hollie Simmons is buried in the .

*Read more about the people of Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>

On April 8, 1944, a B-24 Liberator Bomber (41-28983) took off from Topeka Army Air Field in Kansas. The B-24, and its crew of ten men of the United States Air Corps, were bound for Morrison Field in West Palm Beach, Florida. Morrison Field was a staging base for the theater of war. After a stopover, the B-24 Liberator Bomber and its crew of ten men would have been en route to Europe via the South Atlantic Ferry Route to join the Allied effort to defeat the Nazi war machine. Shortly after takeoff, the B-24 crashed in the Millington, Tennessee area in the vicinity of the Chickasaw Ordnance Works. Nine men were killed, and one man, Sgt. Richard H. Martin Jr. from Lynchburg, Virginia, parachuted to safety and survived the crash. He was admitted to Kennedy General Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. The nine men who perished in the crash are listed as official casualties of World War II, having died in the service of their country.