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Family awaits return of pilot's remains after Cold War thaw

Roseburg Flyer's 1952 CIA Mission: Daughter of Roseburg native shot down during Cold war rescue flight will finally bring father home

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Roberta Cox has only known her father through photographs, medals and stories from those who knew him.

The 52-year-old schoolteacher from San Jose, Calif., wasn't born until several weeks after a plane flown by Roseburg native Robert C. Snoddy was shot down in China on Nov. 29, 1952.

Snoddy was the co-pilot of a C-47 transport plane flying in to pick up a spy. He was killed when a double agent compromised the mission and the waiting Chinese shot down the aircraft near the border with North Korea.

In the next few weeks, Cox plans to travel to Hawaii with her aunt, Ruth Boss of Creswell, to retrieve her father's remains from the U.S. Army's Central Identification Laboratory.

A team of lab scientists recovered the remains last summer during an archaeological dig at a remote site in Jilin province. Bone fragments and two teeth found there were recently confirmed as coming from Snoddy.

What for some might seem a sad and tragic ending to a decades-old mystery was instead a relief for Cox and Boss, 81. They had already dealt with decades of deceit about the true nature of Snoddy's mission and the exact spot where his plane went down. They had already grieved for the loss of a father and brother, so the news that his remains had been found and positively identified through DNA comparisons with a sample provided by Boss came as a relief.

"Any news was definitely good news," Cox said.

Both Snoddy and pilot Norman A. Schwartz of Louisville, Ky., were killed, either from the gunfire or the crash. Two other men aboard the plane, CIA agents Richard Fecteau and John Downey, were captured and spent 20 years in Chinese prisons. They were released only after President Richard Nixon acknowledged they were spies.

None of the information about the true nature of the flight was shared with the families of either Snoddy or Schwartz. Cox grew up believing her father had died during a routine flight over the Sea of Japan.

Cox said her mother, Charlotte, who died in 1973, repeated a cover story she had been told that a flock of birds had flown into the plane's propellers, causing it to go down.

Late last month, government officials notified Cox that remains discovered last summer in Jilin province in northeast China were positively identified as her father.

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Robert Snoddy and his wife, Charlotte.
Undated courtesy photo

It was news that Cox, a schoolteacher in San Jose, Calif., and her aunt had waited a long time to hear.

"It was amazing that they were able to find the remains after all this time," Cox said.

It was important for the discovery to be made not only for her own peace of mind, but that of her aunt. Boss, born three years after her brother, had spent more than a half-century waiting for proof of his death.

"We're all very proud of him and the sacrifices he made," Cox said. "He gave his life for his country and people should know that."

Both Cox and Boss wish that searchers weren't able to locate any of Schwartz's remains. They would have liked for his family to have the closure they've received.

"I feel very badly for them," said Boss. "It's too bad they aren't bringing part of Norm back."

Snoddy grew up in Roseburg and had a paper route delivering The News-Review. He graduated from Roseburg High School in 1939 and worked in the paper's production department. Later, he went to work as a lube jockey for Si Dillard -- who would later become his father-in-law -- at Dillard's Dodge dealership.



Snoddy served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. He shot down two Japanese planes during the war and was awarded a Naval Air Medal with four stars and a Purple Heart.

After the war, Snoddy and his wife moved to Japan, where he flew for Civil Air Transport. The airline was formed by Lt. Gen. Claire Chennault of the Flying Tigers to airlift food, supplies and people into China during the Chinese civil war.

The Central Intelligence Agency bought CAT in 1950, operating covertly in Asia. Neither Snoddy nor the other pilots were told who had bought the company. They were sworn to secrecy as they continued to make runs throughout Asia.

Snoddy and Schwartz were considered contract employees rather than CIA operatives. However, in 1998, the names of both men were added to the Book of Honor at CIA Headquarters in Virginia. It marked the first public acknowledgment by the government of the pilots' roles.

On a cold winter night in November 1952, Snoddy and Schwartz left Seoul, South Korea, in an unmarked C-47 Skytrain bound for the town of Antu, China along with CIA officers Downey and Fecteau.

They were sent to carry out "Operation Tropic," a mission to pick up anti-communist Chinese agents positioned in the region the previous summer. The operatives had been sent to collect intelligence and to keep troops distracted so they wouldn't take part in the fighting in Korea.

The plan had been to snatch the Antu agent off the ground using a retrieval line spread between two poles. A hook from the plane would pass over the line and grab it, reeling the agent into the aircraft. However, as the plane flew low for the pickup, waiting gunners riddled the cockpit with small arms fire.

Snoddy and Schwartz were killed; Downey and Fecteau survived and were captured.



Chinese officials confirmed in the 1970s that Snoddy and Schwartz had been killed and their remains buried near the site. It was impossible, however, to locate the site, they said.

In 1999, Defense Department officials provided detailed information about the crash to the Chinese. Following a series of delicate negotiations, the team from the Central Identification Laboratory were given permission to visit the site in 2002.

Officials located an elderly man who in 1952 had seen the plane shot down and helped cover the charred bodies with dirt and snow. He and another witness detailed the incident and led searchers to the location.

When Cox and Boss return from Hawaii, Snoddy's cremated remains will be placed inside his mother's plot at Rose

Haven Memorial Park in Eugene. His father's grave is nearby.

"It's time for him to come home," Cox said.

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