

Recovering the past

■ Class ring from WWII-era plane wreckage sent to surviving daughter

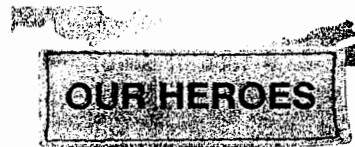
By NATE SUNDERLAND
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After more than 70 years, Nancy Lee Gavalis, is finding closure regarding the death of her father, Sgt. George H. Pearce Jr., during World War II.

En route to Gavalis, 73, are two parts of a high school class ring recently discovered by Idaho National Laboratory archaeologists at the crash site of Aircraft 42-73365. The consolidated B-24J Liberator bomber crashed in the Arco Desert during a training mission in 1944. All seven crew members died in the accident.

The debris field was rediscovered in March by Marc McDonald, a local historian and airplane enthusiast. Subsequent work at the site yielded personal items belonging to the crew, including the ring.

The black ring bears the initials WHHHS for William H. Hall High School in Hartford, Conn., a reference to a 1935 graduation date and the initials M.A.H. McDonald was able to determine the ring belonged to Madeline (Hopkins) Pearce, the



young bride of George Pearce.

Surviving family members confirm Pearce wore the ring on a chain around his neck as a memento and good luck charm. It was with him the night of Jan. 8, 1944, when the plane went down some 40 miles north of the Pocatello Air Base.

Discovering Sgt. George H. Pearce Jr.

There are few remaining details about 25-year-old Pearce.

Gavalis was 2 years old when her father died. She has no memory of him, besides stories told to her by family. Immediate family never was

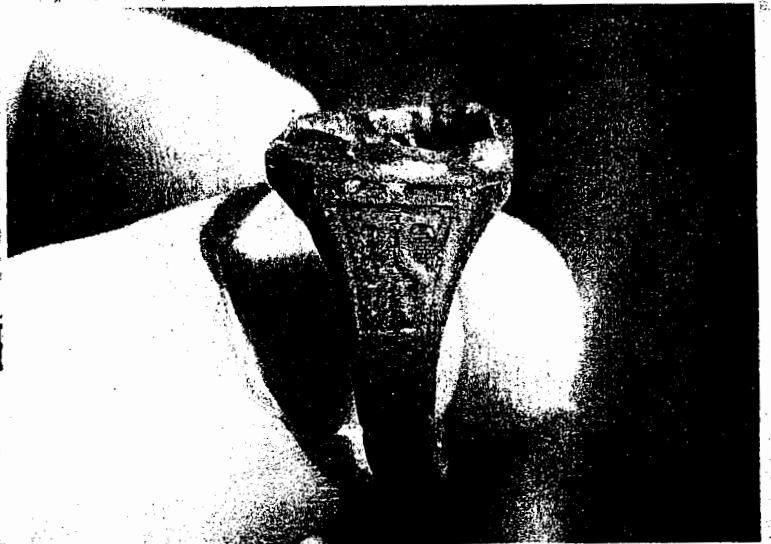
■ The B-24 bomber was nicknamed the "flying coffin"

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Sgt. George H. Pearce Jr.

Courtesy Nancy Lee Gavalis





Courtesy Idaho National Laboratory

ABOVE: This nearly 80-year-old ring was recovered at the accident site of Aircraft 42-73365, a B-24 bomber that crashed in the Arco Desert in 1944. It is inscribed with the letters WHHHS for William H. Hall High School in Hartford, Conn. and MAH for Madeline A Hopkins (Pearce). It was worn as a good luck charm by Madeline's husband Sgt. George Pearce Jr., who died in the crash.

Courtesy Nancy Lee Gavalls

LEFT: George Pearce with his wife, Madeline A. (Hopkins) Pearce, the owner of the ring, and whose initials appear on the inside of the band of the ring. They were married in 1940, and their daughter Nancy was born in 1941.

RING

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provided specific details about the crash or Pearce's death.

Malcolm Pearce, George's nephew, is one of the few living family members who still remembers the Army Air Forces gunner. He said his uncle was spurred to enlist after the Dec. 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor.

"Junie (short for Junior)," as George Pearce was known to friends and family, joined the U.S. Army Air Forces on Sept. 18, 1942. It was a gutsy decision, since flight inside the early, hastily constructed bombers carried almost as many risks as the battlefield.

"I remember he came home once and my mother asked him if he was afraid to be up in a bomber because those airplanes were so dangerous," Malcolm Pearce said. "He told her (the flight crew) all had good luck charms and he carried a rabbit's foot and a ring around his neck."

Pearce recalled that during and after WWII, the B-24 bomber was nicknamed the "flying coffin."

George Pearce initially trained in gunnery in Texas, but in 1943 transferred to Pocatello to join the 464th Bombardment Group.

Gavalis still has letters from her father that her mother kept. The letters show Pearce wanted his wife of two years to join him in Idaho.

"He would have loved to have her come, he worried about her," Gavalis said. "But because she had me and because I don't think

she wanted to leave the security of her family, she didn't."

The last time the family saw Pearce was Christmas 1943, weeks before he died. Gavalis was told by her grandparents that it was a sad time because Pearce had to leave again.

The accident

It's still unknown what caused the crash.

As part of the 464th Bombardment Group, Pearce and his crew practiced high-altitude bombing and air combat training in the sky above what today is INL.

That night, Aircraft 42-73365 was participating in a nighttime practice bombing run. They were to drop sand-filled practice bombs, with black powder spotting charges, onto wooden pyramid targets.

Records show they made three successful runs, but on the fourth pass something went wrong. Technicians later suspected failure in one or two of the aircraft's four main engines. Whatever happened, the plane fell into a dive and within 3 minutes dropped from 20,000 feet to about 100 feet above the ground, according to witnesses.

Pilot 2nd Lt. Richard A. Hedges, and co-pilot 2nd Lt. Lonnie L. Keepers, attempted to correct the aircraft, but to no avail. The plane spun out of control. It fell quickly, crashing into the desert and in a bright, loud explosion observed by witnesses.

Pearce, Hedges, 25, and Keepers, 23, died alongside 2nd Lt. Robert W. Madsen, 28, 2nd Lt. Richard R. Pitzner, 23, Sgt. Louis H. Rinke, 19, and Sgt. Charles W. Eddy, 22.



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The nearly 80-year-old ring was recovered at the accident site of Aircraft 42-73365, a B-24 bomber that crashed in the Arco Desert in 1944.

The rediscovery

The existence of the plane's remaining wreckage initially was discovered by McDonald. While studying WWII-era plane crashes in eastern Idaho, he came upon the story of Aircraft 42-73365. He contacted INL with the suspicion that the crash may have been

close to or on the site.

Using Google Earth and photos from the 1944 accident report, McDonald and INL archaeologists Julie Williams, Hollie Gilbert and Brenda Pace were able to pinpoint the site's location.

Gilbert discovered the ring during the initial expedition, but they were unable to locate the stone

from the middle of the ring.

In the months following the rediscovery, McDonald worked to find information about the families of the flight crew. Williams and Gilbert also returned to the site to map its boundaries.

"As we are standing there talking ... Hollie mentioned she would love to find the center of the ring and ... I'm not kidding ...

she bent down and there it was," Williams said. "This was such an important find because there are names associated with the site."

The discovery of the stone and the initials WHHS and M.A.H gave the historians additional clues about the ring's ownership.

"After we looked at it for a while, we determined it too small for a man to wear and that it had to be a woman's ring," McDonald said. "I contacted the families — five of them said it wasn't us and then finally I got to Sgt. Pearce."

Malcolm Pearce led McDonald to Gavalis.

"I called her, and Nancy told me her mother's maiden name was Madeline A. Hopkins and that the ring was hers," McDonald said.

McDonald was ecstatic. He has investigated many crash sites, but this was the first truly personal item he recovered.

"This is the first time we've been able to find something and track down who it belonged to and give it back," he said.

Gavalis was speechless when she got the news.

"To think that someone found it after all these years," Gavalis said. "It's almost like something you see on TV. It's an incredible story.

The only wish of Gavalis is that her mother were still alive. Madeline Pearce, who remarried when Gavalis was 9 years old, died in the mid-1980s.

"My mom was very proud that he went into the service, even though he lost his life," Gavalis said. "I just wish my mom was still alive, because that would have made this really special."