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Legendary pilot 'Earthquake McGoon' heads home

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James "Earthquake McGoon" McGovern poses on the wing of his World War II fighter plane.

NEW YORK (AP) -- More than a half century after he died in the flaming crash of a CIA-owned cargo plane and became one of the first two Americans to die in combat in Vietnam, a legendary soldier of fortune known as "Earthquake McGoon" is coming home.

The skeletal remains of James B. McGovern Jr., discovered in an unmarked grave in remote northern Laos in 2002, were positively identified on September 11 by laboratory experts at the U.S. military's Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii.

They will be flown back to the mainland next week for a military funeral in New Jersey on October 28, said McGovern's nephew, James McGovern III, of Forked River, New Jersey.

"Bottom line, it's closure for my family and a great feeling," McGovern said.

Six feet and 260 pounds -- huge for a fighter pilot -- McGovern carved out a flying career during and after World War II that made him a legend in Asia.

An American saloon owner in China dubbed him "Earthquake McGoon," after a hulking hillbilly character in the comic strip "Li'l Abner."

He died May 6, 1954, when his C-119 Flying Boxcar cargo plane was hit by ground fire while parachuting a howitzer to the besieged French garrison at Dien Bien Phu.

"Looks like this is it, son," McGovern radioed another pilot as his crippled plane staggered 75 miles into Laos, where it cartwheeled into a hillside.

Killed along with "McGoon," 31, were his co-pilot, Wallace Buford, 28, and a French crew chief. Two cargo handlers, a Frenchman and a Thai, were thrown clear and survived.

Ho Chi Minh's communist forces captured Dien Bien Phu the next day, ending a 57-day siege that had captured the world's attention.

It signaled the end of French colonial power in Indochina, and helped set the stage for the 15-year "American war" that ended with the fall of the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government in 1975.

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CIA-owned 'lock, stock and barrel'

Although civilians, the swashbuckling McGovern and Buford, an ex-World War II bomber pilot, were the first Americans to die in combat in the Asian country where war would later take nearly 60,000 American and more than a million Vietnamese lives.

It was no mystery in 1954 that the United States was supporting colonial France against Vietnam's communist-led rebellion, and "McGoon" was already famous for his exploits when he was killed.

The only secret was that his employer, a charter airline called Civil Air Transport, or CAT, "was owned by the CIA -- lock, stock and barrel," Felix Smith, a retired CAT pilot and McGovern friend, said in an interview in 2002. (It was not until the 1990s that the CIA-CAT connection was finally declassified.)

The CIA is arranging for James McGovern III to fly to Hickam Air Force Base near Honolulu and escort his uncle's remains home, he said.

The CIA did not immediately return a call for comment.

Dr. Thomas Holland, director of JPAC's Central Identification Laboratory, said McGovern was only the second person ever identified through "nuclear" DNA from a male relative - a particularly difficult task with bones that are decades old. The first was another Southeast Asia casualty identified recently. Most cases rely on mitochondrial DNA, from female relatives.

Onetime 'Tiger Shark' pilot

McGovern first went to China in 1944, as a fighter pilot in the 14th Air Force's "Tiger Shark" squadron, descended from the famous Flying Tigers, the Chinese air force unit of American volunteers formed to fight the Japanese in the months before the U.S. entered World War II.

According to Smith, McGovern was credited with shooting down four Japanese Zero fighters and destroying five on the ground.

At war's end in 1945, McGovern signed on with CAT, which was under contract to Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist regime, then fighting a civil war against Mao Tse-tung's communists.

Captured by communist troops after a forced landing, "McGoon" was freed six months later. Colleagues joked that his captors simply got tired of feeding him.

CAT moved to Taiwan after Chiang's 1949 defeat. In 1950 it was secretly acquired by the CIA, and continued to fly commercially as a cover for clandestine activities.

Three years later it was detailed by the Eisenhower administration to Indochina, flying supply missions for the French with its planes' insignia painted out.

Ultimately, CAT morphed into Air America, the "CIA airline" that operated in Laos and South Vietnam during America's Vietnam War.

Search was long in coming

McGovern's exact fate was unknown until a French visitor learned of the crash during a 1959 visit to the Laotian village of Ban Sot.

That report was suppressed by the CIA, Smith said, but after a private historian found it in French files years later, a group of former CAT pilots led by Smith persuaded the CIA to back a search effort.

In 1997, an American MIA team investigating an unrelated case found a C-119 propeller at Ban Sot, and a JPAC photo analyst spotted possible graves in aerial photos. Excavation in 2002 uncovered remains that turned out to be McGovern's.

JPAC experts are still seeking the remains of co-pilot Buford, one of 35 civilians among 1,797 Americans still unaccounted for in Indochina.

James McGovern III said his namesake uncle will be buried with military honors in Basking Ridge, next to his brother John, a former sportswriter who died in 2001.

James McGovern III said that as a Purple Heart recipient in World War II, his father was eligible for burial at Arlington National Cemetery, but had expressed hope of one day lying next to his long-lost brother.

"All those years were enough of a separation," James III said.

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