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5/21/2015 - **WHITEMAN AIR FORCE BASE, Mo.** – It's impossible to know what is going through a man's mind in the final minutes before he dies.

As 2nd Lt. George Whiteman ran toward his P-40B Warhawk on the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, he likely thought only of getting airborne to retaliate against the attacking Japanese fighters.

As a burst of enemy gunfire shot through his aircraft's cockpit wounding him, he may have thought of his younger siblings back in Missouri, waiting for their big brother to return safely.

As his plane crashed and burned moments after he lifted off the runway, he may have thought of his mother waiting for her first-born to make it home alive.

It's impossible to know exactly what Earlie Whiteman was doing at the moment her son took his last breath.

Although it was morning in Hawaii, it was afternoon in America and all throughout the country, radio programs were interrupted with breaking news: Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor.

At 10:13 p.m. that night, official news reached Earlie back in Sedalia, Missouri: Her 22-year-old son George had died. When interviewed by a newspaper reporter, she said, "It's hard to believe. It might have happened anytime, anywhere. We've got to sacrifice loved ones if we want to win this war."

It was the same news 416,000 other mothers of American service members during World War II would receive.

On August 6, 1945, pilots from the 509th Composite Group dropped the "Little Boy" atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. On August 9, a second crew dropped "Fat Man" on Nagasaki.

George is now believed by many historians to be the first pilot killed in aerial combat during the war. Although his life was cut short, his legacy lives on in military history.

In 1955, the recently re-opened Sedalia Air Force Base was renamed Whiteman Air Force Base in his honor. Fast forward to 2015. Each year, a ribbon-covered wreath is placed on the young lieutenant's grave to honor the sacrifice he made.

This year's wreath-laying ceremony was held on May 16. As the flag was raised to half-staff, George's grave was surrounded on three sides by groups he impacted in one way or another. On one side were Security Forces Airmen from the base, lined up in a neat

formation with sharp salutes. On another side, descendants from his nine brothers and sisters solemnly watched the flag slide up the pole. On the last side of the grave, veterans from multiple conflicts also rendered the proper salutes.

The event's guest speaker was U.S. Air Force Brig. Gen. Glen VanHerck, commander of the 509th Bomb Wing, which ties its roots back to the 509th Composite Group.

“He would be proud to know the wing that dropped the atomic bomb and effectively ended the war now resides at the base that bears his namesake,” said VanHerck.

VanHerck, whose first assignment as a young lieutenant was also to the Pacific as a part of the 44th Fighter Squadron under the 18th Fighter Wing, said he feels a personal connection to Whiteman, who was assigned to the forefather units of that squadron.

“Whiteman had a choice: he could run from the fight or he could run to the fight,” said the general. “He could have easily spared his life, but he placed himself in harm's way for his country, his family, his fellow Airmen and all of us standing here today. He embodied everything we desire in our service members.”

This year, in addition to the traditional wreath-laying ceremony, plaques were placed at locations throughout his hometown on a route known as the Whiteman Corridor. The plaque located in Katy Park at the intersection of 24th and Grand streets is accompanied by two metal sculptures by local artist Don Luper.

The first sculpture, a P-40 pointing toward his childhood home, represents the past. The second sculpture, a B-2 Spirit stealth bomber pointing toward Whiteman Air Force Base, represents the future. Together, they are called “Whiteman: Legacy of Freedom.”

“Whiteman Air Force Base has grown and changed many times in the past 60 years, but its mission remains the same as Lt. Whiteman's missions that early December morning: to protect this country, its people and its freedom from those that would do it harm,” said Dianne Simon, who serves on Sedalia's Military Affairs Committee.

“When the base received its current name, many Sedalia residents would have still remembered Lt. Whiteman and his family, or known others who have served and sacrificed in that Great War,” Simon added. “Today, the numbers of that generation are rapidly dwindling and we do not want the memory of Lt. Whiteman to fade away with them.”

George Williams, the lieutenant's nephew who was named after his uncle, agreed that it's important to remember the pilot's sacrifice.

“Today's generation doesn't fully understand what he did and what others did,” said Williams, who added he's very proud of the service members who gave the sacrifice then as well as the ones who are serving now. “This ceremony helps keep it in front of them.”

It's impossible to know what Whiteman would think of his legacy, but it's likely he would have been proud of the base that bears his name and the Airmen who help keep his memory alive.

Source: <http://military-online.blogspot.com/2015/05/the-short-life-and-long-legacy-of-2nd.html>