

After 61 years, 'It felt good to bring him back to his family'

BY MAUDLYNE IHEJIRIKA

Staff Reporter

Light, falling snow accompanied the haunting melody of taps as U.S. Army captain and South Sider Vladimir M. Sasko, a military surgeon missing in action since his plane crashed in New Guinea during World War II, was finally laid to rest Saturday.

Exactly 61 years to the time and date he disappeared, surviving family members saw their storied relative receive his long delayed military burial — a dignified, 21-gun salute. Sasko's remains, recovered just last year, were buried at 1:30 p.m. at Chicago's Bohemian National Cemetery.

It was about 1:30 p.m. on Dec. 10, 1944, when a military plane carrying Sasko and four other soldiers crashed in the dense forests of what is now Papua New Guinea.

'Last loose thread of her life'

"After almost 61 years, my mother received the news she had prayed for. Her brother was finally coming home," Sasko's nephew Al Peterson, of Garland, Texas, said at graveside with two other nephews and their families.

"My mother passed away eight days ago, knowing her family was reunited," said Peterson. "She said that this was the last loose thread of her life."

After U.S. Army Chaplain Darin Powers opened the funeral with acknowledgement of Sasko's "ultimate



Army Capt. Vladimir M. Sasko is laid to rest Saturday at the Bohemian National Cemetery in Chicago. He was killed in a plane crash 61 years ago in New Guinea. —JEAN LACHAT/SUN-TIMES

sacrifice," the three nephews, children of Sasko's sister, Kveta Peterson, spoke of the uncle they never knew but whose life they researched extensively.

Capt. Sasko was born Jan. 9, 1914, and raised on the South Side. He was a 1931 graduate of Lindblom High School and a 1938 graduate of the University of Chicago Medical

School, where he trained as a surgeon.

He entered the Army and was assigned to Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, where he received his military training. He married wife Helen at his parents' home and was later inducted as a captain and assigned to medical units that took him to North Africa and Australia,

his family said.

Oldest nephew Bill Peterson of Tinley Park recounted his mother's tales of Sasko the practical joker.

"His favorite thing was to sew up the sleeves or legs of your clothing. My mother said, 'I got to hate him during the winter for sewing up all my sweaters,'" Bill Peterson said. "Even after he died, we'd find evi-

dence of his jokes. At Christmastime in 1945, my grandmother was trying to open a tablecloth and found it sewed up. When she finally got it apart, a note from my uncle fell out that said, 'Aha! Got you again. Vlad.'"

Crash site found in 1978

On the day he died, Sasko, then assigned to the 8th Medical Lab in a suburb of Brisbane, Australia, was loaned to the 27th Evac Hospital in Hollandia, New Guinea. Carrying his pet monkey, he arrived at the airfield and boarded a C-47 piloted by 2nd Lt. Stanley D. Campbell and Cpl. Carl A. Drain, according to the brothers and Army officials.

The plane never made it to its destination, crashing on the ridge of a mountain. In 1945, the U.S. declared all five men dead and declared the remains non-recoverable in 1948. The crash site was discovered in 1978 by a Papua local. The Army searched the site from 1979 to 1981, recovering the remains of the pilot and co-pilot. And in 2004, an excavation of the site recovered the remains of Sasko and the other two passengers.

"It was a great honor to finally repatriate one of our fallen comrades," U.S. Army Major Kurt Wagner said after the military ceremony ended with each nephew throwing a spade of dirt on the vault holding Sasko's remains. "It felt good to bring him back to his family and give them closure."