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Uncle's heroic end

THE CHICAGO WAY | Nephew finds truth about WWII tragedy

An American soldier dangled from a parachute snagged on a building in a small German town, a crowd gathering below. Little boys jeered: "Heil Hitler!"

Across the street, a girl watched, horrified.

"He was a big, beautiful man."

She remembers that now perfectly, remembers the whole day, though it's been 63 years.

A visitor asks her: What was the expression on his face?

"He looked very sad."

Was he crying? Was there screaming?

"No, he just looked very sad."

The visitor thanks the woman. He finds this oddly soothing. Now he knows: His Uncle Shep, in the minutes before he was murdered, did not cry or scream, though he looked very sad.

This is why the visitor came, just for this. This is why he flew to Germany from Chicago.

When Matt Smith, 44, was growing up on the North Side, his Uncle Shep — Sgt. Sheppard Kerman — was a sweet spiritual presence.

When Matt said something funny or warm, his mother might say: "That's something Shep would say."

When the whole family got together on holidays, he listened to stories about how Shep once caught a robber while walking to school, about how he carried a couple of ducklings home from a butcher and put them in the bathtub because he couldn't bear to see them killed, about how he dated the actress Jane Greer. Stories about Shep were told with smiles that faded into sighs.

Shep's photo was always on the mantel or a table, and Matt could feel his uncle's eyes following him. They were eyes that made Matt feel loved, not frightened.

Uncle Shep was that one person in the family — beloved and missed — who embodied the family's highest values, who stood for the family at its best. Every family has, or should have, an Uncle Shep.

But growing up, Matt knew almost nothing about how his uncle had died.

"He died fighting the Nazis in Germany — I knew that," Matt says now. "My mom told me only that he



Sgt. Sheppard Kerman did not cry or scream before he was murdered, says a German woman who witnessed the event as a little girl.



pulled a trigger.

And soon after that, Sgt. Kerman's body was dumped in the street like so much garbage.

But what exactly had happened in the upstairs room? Transcripts from two later war crimes trials offer details:

Sgt. Kerman had raised his arms to signal surrender. But a German army reserve captain, Wilhelm Kanschat, ordered all but two other men out of the room. Then he turned to Gerd Beck, a young army veteran, and said: "Shoot that man."

Beck took a gun from the third German in the room, a Nazi hack named Otto Weinreich, and shot Sgt. Kerman in the back of the neck.

At their later trials, all three men put up laughable defenses.

Beck claimed to have suffered a "mental blackout." But if he did shoot Sgt. Kerman — he could not be sure — it was because he had

been trained as a soldier to follow orders. A witness testified, on the other hand, that Beck had bragged, "Well, we finished this one."

Weinreich claimed, according to a transcript, that he had brought along his pistol only to "protect himself and the flier from the threatening crowd." Somebody — he could not say who — grabbed the gun without his consent.

And Kanschat, described by the

Summarily shot

When Matt was 17, curious to know more, he filed a Freedom of Information request with the U.S. Army, asking for any documents pertaining to Sgt. Sheppard Kerman, a flier in World War II who was killed on Sept. 28, 1944, after his B-17 bomber was shot down over Germany.

What Matt learned was chilling.

Of the crew's nine members, all but Kerman had been captured by farmers and survived the war. Kerman, however, floated into a quaint town called Wolfenbuttel, where his parachute snagged on the roof of an apartment building, leaving him hanging outside a second-floor window.

A crowd formed. Soldiers and politicians pushed into the building. Somebody pulled Sgt. Kerman in through the window. Somebody

court as a "rather fanatic Nazi," insisted he went to the room to "save" the flier and left before Kerman was killed.

Beck and Kanschat were sentenced to death, though eventually their sentences were commuted. Weinreich was sentenced to life in prison, but his sentence was commuted, too.

Research in Germany

Matt never told his mother, Lois Kerman Smith, what he had learned about Uncle Shep. He feared it might cause her pain. But after she died in 2003, events and coincidences persuaded him to dig deeper.

Most surprisingly, Matt read a story in a Las Vegas newspaper in 2005 about another crew member on Uncle Shep's B-17, 1st Lt. Jack L. Timmins, who claimed — it was right there in the paper — that Sgt. Kerman had saved his life by pushing him out of the plane as it fell.

In October of last year, finally, Matt flew to Germany. He met several residents of Wolfenbuttel who were kind and helpful. He visited what had been his uncle's unmarked grave, though the remains were returned to the United States long ago and reburied in Westlawn Cemetery in Norridge. He met the old woman who, as a girl, had seen it all from across the street.

Perhaps most memorably, Matt met an old man, Gunther Rode, who provided the kind of dark details that made everything fit.

The killer Beck? He wasn't just following orders, Rode said. Beck had charged to the scene with a pistol in a yellow holster, like an excited cowboy.

And Kanschat, the man who had ordered the execution? He was skimming money from the military hospital.

"But look," Matt said, trying to see the other side, "I understand in wartime that if you have somebody coming at you with a gun, you're gonna kill him, but..."

Rode shook his head.



Kerman's parachute snagged on the roof of this building in Wolfenbuttel, Germany. He was pulled through a second-story window and executed.

"It was murder," he said.

'A universal story':

Was all the work worth it to Matt? The digging for documents, the letters and phone calls, the trip to Germany. What good did it do?

"It's a universal story," replied Matt, who is chief spokesman for Chicago's Department of Streets and Sanitation. "Everybody has had a relative who has gone to war, and sometimes they don't come back. But you can't give up on them. You can't forget them. War really is hell, but don't let it take from you any more than it can."

Tom McNamee's "The Chicago Way" column runs Mondays.



Kerman's remains were moved from an unmarked grave in Germany to Westlawn Cemetery in Norridge.