



*Sgt. Sheppard Kerman in his B-17 bomber*



# Tracing the bloodline

Alum Matt Smith investigates the death of an uncle he never knew.

By BRENDAN SHEA

**M**att Smith (BA '85) walks up to a tall, Tudor-style home in Wolfenbüttel, Germany. Behind him is his wife, Elvira (BBA '86), with a camera in hand. Together, the two record what seems to be a typical Sunday morning in this quaint Lower Saxony village: newspapers are stuffed inside mailboxes; a man is out for a stroll with his dog. But for Smith and his wife, today marks a somber anniversary. Exactly 64 years to the date, on September 28, 1944, his uncle, Sgt. Sheppard Kerman, was pulled into this very house and shot point-blank with a pistol.

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Matt Smith (BA '85) in his City Hall office, surrounded by some intriguing faces, including his uncle, his boss (Mayor Daley), St. Ignatius, and JFK.

## A 64-year mystery

### SEPTEMBER 28-29, 1944

Sgt. Sheppard Kerman is killed as a POW after his plane goes down in Wolfenbüttel, Germany. The chaplain of the 303rd Bomb Group issues a Missing in Action notice to the Kerman family.

### DECEMBER 8, 1944

Letter from Captain Louis C. Jurgensen says there is "every reason to believe your son will be reported safe." Chicago newspapers later run hopeful stories.

### MARCH 3, 1981

Matt Smith files a Freedom of Information request to learn more about his uncle's death.

### JULY 4, 2005

A news article appears in the *Las Vegas Review Journal*, which sparks a resurgence of Smith's investigation.

### SEPTEMBER 22, 2007

Smith receives a special blessing from 303rd Bomb Group veteran Bishop Emeritus René Gracida at the bomb group's final reunion in Washington DC.

### SEPTEMBER 28, 2008

Smith returns to Wolfenbüttel with his wife, Elvira, to mark the 64-year anniversary of his uncle's murder.

Though the precise details of the murder have been shrouded in uncertainty since World War II, over the years, Smith has dedicated himself to picking up the pieces.

“This story keeps reaching out to me,” he says. “I have no choice but to follow it wherever it will lead.”

His investigation began when he was only 17 years old. As a curious teenager, Smith decided to file a Freedom of Information request to learn more about his uncle’s death—an event that his late mother’s family rarely discussed.

Instead, Smith says, they chose to look back on the fonder memories of their brother Shep: the time he brought home a brood of duck-

ifying the family of his death a month later. But in December, a new letter surfaced suggesting Sgt. Kerman might have actually survived the crash. This was further corroborated by news reports sourcing the pilot’s mother, who received word that all of her son’s crew members survived. In fact, Sgt. Kerman had not.

Instead of drifting safely to nearby farms, as his fellow crew members did, Sgt. Kerman ended up in Wolfenbüttel, a town embroiled in war, where his parachute snagged near the top of a building. As he dangled in mid-air, a crowd gathered below him. According to war crime reports, Sgt. Kerman, whose dog tags bore the letter “H” for “Hebrew,” was then pulled in through the home’s window by

Two years later, in the fall of 2007, Smith made his first trip to Wolfenbüttel, where he met with a historian and other locals to get a better understanding of what transpired. Smith recalls one particularly moving meeting with a woman who witnessed the final moments of Sgt. Kerman’s life from her childhood home across the street.

“I had a lump in my throat when she looked out the window and described what she was seeing,” Smith says. “Even 63 years later, she still remembered everything vividly.” She said Sgt. Kerman appeared to quietly accept his fate.

Between that trip and one this past year, Smith prepared himself for a more analytical investigation, trying as best he could to set emotions aside in order to get straight to the facts. He taught himself basic German by listening to audio tutorials during his daily commutes. He says the recent visit helped clear up some loose ends and confirmed much of what he already knew.

Although he doesn’t have any scheduled visits to Wolfenbüttel in the near future, Smith does plan to go back somewhere down the road. For now, he’s focused on trying to turn tragedy into something positive—perhaps through the creation of a scholarship, a book, or, at the very least, a simple message to let military families know that they are not alone in their suffering.

“Pursuing the story of my uncle and sharing it with people shows the broader picture of what happens to families in war,” Smith says. “A lot of people try putting it out of their minds, because it’s too painful. But with me, it’s a story I’m close enough to be a part of emotionally and spiritually, but at the same time, I’ve got enough distance to pursue it without hurting anyone.”

The story Smith has gone to great lengths to complete is not a happy one, but it has brought him a measure of satisfaction in its reconstruction. It has taken him across the ocean twice, taught him a great deal, and, in a way, allowed him to get to know an uncle he never had the chance to meet.

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—MATT SMITH (BA '85)



lings from his job at the butcher shop, unable to stomach the thought of their slaughter; the time he made the Chicago papers for capturing a tavern robber. He even once dated the beautiful film noir star Jane Greer.

“It was said that he turned the heads of women, children, and small animals when he walked down the street,” Smith recalls. “He was very charismatic.”

Recounting the darker details didn’t come so easily. From his FOI report, Smith learned of the basic events surrounding his uncle’s death. Sgt. Kerman had been a member of the 303rd Bomb Group in WWII. After his B-17 bomber was gunned down over Germany, the Army acknowledged his Missing in Action status the following day, before officially noti-

three Nazi officials, who bickered back and forth before one finally turned and shot him. Sgt. Kerman’s body was later taken to an unmarked grave in a nearby cemetery.

In the years following the FOI report, Smith says the story sat dormant. It wasn’t until 2005, when an article appeared in the *Las Vegas Review Journal* with a mention of his uncle, that he ever seriously considered pursuing it again.

Through the reporter, Smith met Vicki Timmins Morgan, whose father was mentioned in the article for having been saved by Sgt. Kerman. Smith says he wanted to know more—from the survivors, their children, and anyone who may have witnessed the events following the crash.