



**ROLLING THUNDER<sup>®</sup>, INC**  
**CHAPTER 2 OF ILLINOIS**  
**P.O. Box 394**  
**Round Lake Beach, Illinois 60073**



**“MISSION COMPLETE”**

**1 LT James Meagher**

After graduating from Elgin High School at the height of the Depression, Meagher attended the University of Illinois in 1937-38 but left before he graduated. By 1942, he was manager of the L & B Storage Co. in Elgin and was living in a tiny white house near the north end of Logan Avenue with his wife and his father-in-law, George Pfister.



Sometime in early 1942, the young family man decided to join the Army Air Corps and learn to fly. He likely had been caught up in the wave of patriotism and anger that swept America after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Training in California and then Arizona, he was assigned to the 352nd Fighter Group and received orders to head for England.

On June 30, 1943, the men of his group boarded the Cunard passenger liner Queen Elizabeth — then the biggest ship in the world — and set sail from New York. On the Fourth of July, they landed in Scotland and moved to their base in Bodney, England. From there, they would begin breaking in their lumbering, heavy P-47 Thunderbolt fighters and would adopt the then-very-salty-seeming nickname “The Blue-Nosed Bastards of Bodney.”

**MISSING:.**

After two months of training, they began flying combat missions against the German Luftwaffe in September 1943, a time when Nazi Germany still occupied all of France, Belgium and the Netherlands.

A typical mission was to protect B-17 Flying Fortress bombers against Luftwaffe fighter attacks as they bombed targets in the occupied countries or Germany. Almost as commonly, the 352nd would be ordered to carry two 500-pound bombs each and drop them on a German airfield, then fly across the field, firing their machine guns at enemy planes on the ground.

But flying a tough, big old war bird or not, 1 LT Meagher didn't have a chance to survive on Feb. 8, 1944.



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1 LT Meagher already had flown 40 missions and was well on his way to the 200 hours of combat flying time needed before a fighter pilot could be sent home for a month. But unlike many in the squadron, he hadn't shot down any enemy planes.

1 LT Meagher and four other young Thunderbolt pilots — lieutenants Harold Nussman of Salisbury, N.C., flying a plane named “Dixie Boy”; Raymond Phillips of Newton, Iowa, in a plane named “Hildegard”; and John Walker Jr. of Los Angeles and Lothar Fieg of Oneonta, N.Y., made up what was called “Red Flight” that day.

As they flew over Mons, Belgium, they heard a radioed plea for help from a B-17 bomber that had been forced to drop out of its formation because of damage and was being attacked by a German fighter. Red Flight winged toward the bomber.

Suddenly, from the direction of the sun, where pilots are blinded, four German FW-190 fighters came diving at the five Thunderbolts, each firing four 20 millimeter cannons and two machine-guns.

Lt. Nussman tried desperately to warn the others they were under attack even though an enemy fighter had perfect declination on him.

Thanks to Nussman's self-sacrificing warning, Phillips and Fieg managed to break away from the fight, their planes shot up. They never saw what happened to Meagher, Nussman and Walker. But when those three failed to come home, they were declared missing in action. When the Germans failed to report that they had been captured, suspicion grew that they had been killed. But no one knew for sure.

**RECOVERY:**

Horrifying telegrams from the War Department were becoming all too common in the Fox Valley by early 1944. The Courier-News ran a front-page story on Feb. 21 that year headlined, “Lt. Meagher Lost In Raid Over Belgium. Fails To Return From Fighter Escort Mission.”

The story reported that a telegram had been delivered to his wife, “Mrs. Leone Pfister Meagher,” the day before, 12 days after he disappeared.

Ironically, the newspaper report added that on the very day that story was to be printed, the newspaper had received a dispatch from the Eighth Army Air Force stating that Meagher had received another medal —his third oak leaf cluster to his Air Medal for participating in 40

operational sorties over Nazi-held territory in Europe. He had only been in the Army for two years.



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The Joint MIA/POW Accounting Command, or JPAC — whose sole mission is to solve such mysteries and bring closure to grieving relatives, said the first clue to Meagher's fate came in about 1947 as the victorious Allies studied captured Luftwaffe documents. One report detailed how the four FW-190s over Mons had followed three ambushed Thunderbolts in a running dogfight across the Franco-Belgian border and finally had shot them all down over northern France. It remains unclear whether the endangered bomber survived.

Another German document is titled "Salvage of Enemy Aircraft." It is dated March 24, 1944, about six weeks after Meagher disappeared. It states that usable pieces of a crashed Thunderbolt had been carted off from a crash site at Saint-Gobert, eight kilometers south of Vervins, France.

"Kind of landing: Crashed, on fire," the German document reads.

"Crashed: 8 Feb. 1944 at 1120 hours."

"Crew: 1 Man. Dead: 1 Man," it says.

But when a German search team tried to find the exact crash site in 1949, they couldn't locate it.

Jim Meagher's end would remain a mystery until 2006, when a group of French people who are fascinated by the world wars and feel a deep appreciation for the United States' role in saving their country learned from eyewitnesses where an American plane had crashed near Burelles, France, that Feb. 8.

A team of JPAC investigators went to France and interviewed an 82-year-old French farmer. The farmer said his father had covered what remained of the burned wreckage and the burned pilot's body so he could resume planting crops.

Two years later, in 2008, a team of JPAC archaeologists went to the site and began digging. Most of the plane had been carried off by that German scrap-collecting team or had burned up. But the archaeologists found bits of parachute, shreds of clothing, three .50-caliber machine guns, and some bones and teeth. They took the remains back to Hawaii to be analyzed.

The machine guns bore serial numbers from James Meagher's P-47. These remains included teeth, and some of those contained fillings that matched those in the teeth of James Meagher."

So on July 28, 2009, the MIA agency officially declared the remains were those of 1st Lt. James Meagher, USAAF.

**INTERMENT:**



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On 13 August, 2011, 1 LT Meagher's family, friends, and local community organizations gathered at St. Mary's Church in Gilberts, IL to celebrate a mass for 1 LT Meagher. Following the mass, the funeral procession was escorted to the St. Mary's Cemetery by the Gilberts Police Department, Rolling Thunder, Chapter 2 – IL assisted by members of Warriors Watch. The procession was greeted at the Cemetery by an American Legion Honor Guard. Rolling Thunder formed a flag line discretely near the burial site.



After three volleys echoed across the sun-swept graveyard, and the last notes of taps had faded, a P-51 airplane, painted in the colors of 1 LT Meagher's unit, made repeated flyovers in tribute to 1 LT Meagher. An overwhelming sense of pride and sorrow swept over the crowd.



A soldier presented an American Flag to the daughter of 1 LT Meagher, Pat Meagher. His family was also presented with a shadow box of his medals, including the Purple Heart.

Rolling Thunder Inc. Chapter 2 of Illinois stood as a solemn Honor



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Guard to pay their respects and present family members with a POW flag, and a Chapter 2, POW/MIA challenge coin.



The Flag — The POW/MIA flag was presented as a symbol of our commitment, dedication, and perseverance to ensure our Nation's concern and commitment to resolving, as fully as possible, the fates of Americans still held prisoner, missing and unaccounted for, does not waiver.

The Coin — The coin symbolizes a “test of our metal” in supporting the on-going efforts to ensure the remaining 80,000 plus servicemen, servicewomen, and civilians, unaccounted for, are returned to our Country and to their loved ones. Each member of our

Chapter carries a coin as a reminder of our continuing mission.

Despite decades of time, the ceremony brought a sense of closure to the family, comfort to his friends, warmth to his fellow Americans, and pride to his Veteran brothers and sisters.

**We will “Never Forget” 1 LT James Meagher.**

**Rolling Thunder Participants:**



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Left to Right; Gary Brandt, Tom Smyth, John Lunde, Pat Thies, Nancy Wells, Wayne Kirkpatrick, Ray Burg, Randy Braun, Joan DeRango, Penny Burg, Greg Smith, Pete Mazik, Mary Walters, Dale Perdelwitz, Jeff Vander

