

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

GREGORY "PAPPY" BOYINGTON - 1912-1988

Number 1133

January 1996

As a young eight-year-old child Gregory Boyington flew up in the air with a barnstorming pilot and came down with a determination that made him the top Marine Corps flying ace of World War II. Idaho born Boyington became a skilled pilot who eventually quit the Marine Corps to serve with the Flying Tigers.

He later rejoined the Marines and led a presumed group of misfits called the Black Sheep Squadron in extraordinary aeronautical exploits.

Marine Colonel Gregory "Pappy" Boyington was born December 4, 1912 in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. He graduated from Lincoln High School in Tacoma, Washington, and went on to receive a degree in aeronautical engineering at the University of Washington. Throughout his life he married four times, and was the father of one son and two daughters.

After working as a draftsman for a year at Boeing, he trained for the Marines. In 1941 Boyington joined the Flying Tigers in China where he shot down his first six planes. When the United States entered the war Boyington joined his old marine outfit. There he commanded the Black Sheep squadron, going on to set the United States record for enemy planes shot down. His Marine career became famous worldwide during World War II when he approached the United States record of twenty-six enemy planes shot down. Time, Life, and Newsweek all followed his career until his final dogfight over Rabaul in the South Pacific. In January 1944 Boyington shot down his twenty-sixth enemy plane, then plummeted to his own unknown fate. Ironically, his disappearance occurred just days before his age would have forced him out of combat. Because Boyington was in his thirties, and a number of years older than most of the men he commanded, he was called "Grandpappy," which was later shortened to "Pappy."

When World War II ended, American forces rescued Boyington from a Japanese prison camp after twenty months of imprisonment.

He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Harry Truman, and the Navy Cross after being credited for two more downed enemy planes, totaling twenty-eight. In a magazine interview Boyington stated, "I dislike professional medal winners - guys who use it to punch real estate in Florida. The saddest kind of guy is the one who trades on past glories and has nothing to live for."

Boyington lived a turbulent life: his bouts with alcoholism were something he never totally overcame. He wrote of his World

War II experiences in a 1958 book entitled, Baa Baa Black Sheep. The book not only describes his War experiences and public adulation as a result, but also personal loss. "Shortly after the war the glamour was gone and there was nothing in my life but turbulence for nearly ten years."

All my life I seemed to have difficulty saying no to anything, especially when I was drinking. But my biggest problem was that I could never say no to liquor - and mean it. I suppose the only reason for the war record is that I couldn't stop myself from volunteering . . .

However, his War record is significant and he has earned a place in history. Boyington died January 11, 1988 at Fresno, California, and is now buried in Arlington National Cemetery just below the Tomb to the Unknown Soldier.

By Guila Ford and Elizabeth Jacox

(This information has not been edited.)