

## Peter J McGirr

**U.S. Army Air Corps, WWII**  
**Northrop P-61, Black Widow Fighter Pilot**

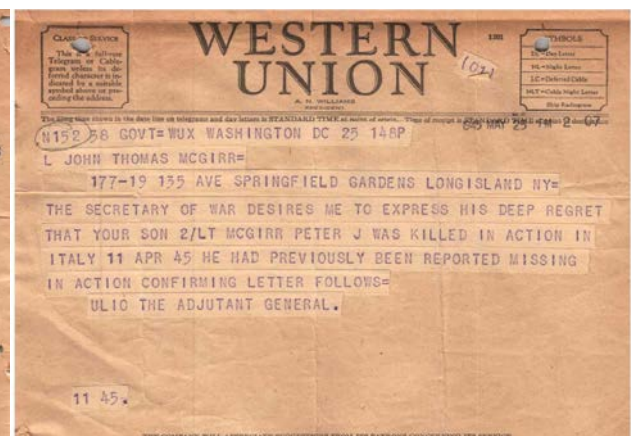
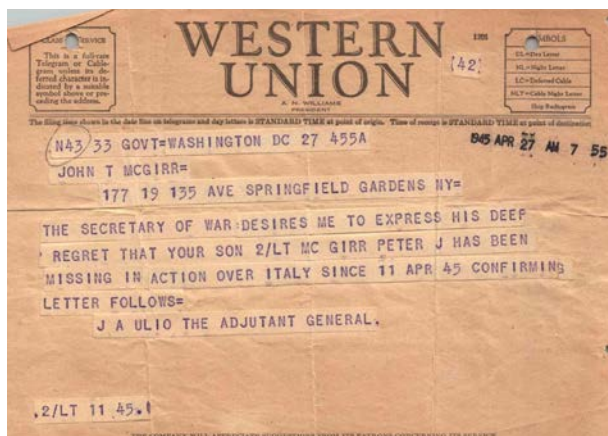
**KIA, April 11, 1945**  
**Night Mission over Northern Italy**

**Family of Board Member, Ellen Manzo**

### Remembering Peter J McGirr

**Peter McGirr** served as a fighter pilot in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II, flying the formidable Northrop P-61 Black Widow, the first American aircraft specifically designed as a night fighter.

On the night of April 11, 1945, Peter and his crew of three aboard their aircraft, *Frontdoor 50*, took off from Pontedera Airfield at 20:56 hours for an intruder and bombing mission targeting the Ghedi Aerodrome. After confirming takeoff with base command, all contact was lost. Despite repeated attempts to reestablish communication, *Frontdoor 50* was never heard from again.



That very night, according to *Smithsonian Magazine*, marked the most successful single night of combat for the P-61 Black Widow during the entire war. U.S. night fighter crews downed 14 Luftwaffe aircraft, many of them Junkers and transport planes, as they attempted to resupply encircled German forces.

Peter McGirr's final mission was part of this pivotal night—his courage and sacrifice is forever linked to a turning point in the air war over Europe.

JERRY - C. SMITH 763 ASP NORMAN - OKLA. November 20, 1945

Dear Mr. McGirr,

You don't know who I am, but I have some information about the death of your son, which I believe you would like to know.

I am a farmer pilot of the 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force, and was shot down last February over North Italy. I managed to parachute down safely and to evade the enemy. A friendly Italian family took me into their home, and kept me until the Americans found me on the last day of April. This place where I stayed was a small village named Fontanella in the province of Mantova.

Every night as soon as it was dark, the American night-fighters

and bombers would begin their patrols bombing and strafing where ever they found a target. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April about midnight, I was in bed when I heard a plane pass very low over the village. A few minutes later a girl from next door came running in to tell us that "People", this was the name that the Italians gave to all planes that flew at night, had crashed just outside of the village. This girl was scared to death of the planes, and would become hysterical whenever one was close; so we payed no attention to her and told her to go back to bed.

The next morning we found that it was true. a plane had crashed just outside of the village. I never

ventured out of the house for fear of being recognized; so it was impossible for me to inspect the wreckage myself. My friends did go out however, and brought back the news that the plane was completely demolished, and that three boys had been killed. The bodies were laying at some distance from the plane and were all intact. They also brought to me a form which is carried in all planes and which bears the names of the occupants. The last names of the boys on this particular form were McGirr, Bram, and Cheely.

The people of this village were kind and good and were very sorry for the three americans. So they

put their money together and bought three coffins at a great expense to them, because they were very poor. They then placed the bodies of the boys in separate coffins, and buried them in their own cemetery. They bought headstones for the graves and placed flowers on them. I know this is all true, because after I was liberated I went out to the cemetery and saw the graves myself.

On May 5<sup>th</sup>, I arrived at the 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force Headquarters in Florence, and reported what I knew. They told me that the coffins would be brought back South and placed in an American cemetery.

They also told me not to notify  
the families of the boys until  
after six months, which is the  
reason I am just now writing to  
you.

I wish to express my very  
depest sympathy for you, St. M'Girr's  
family, and friends. If there is  
anything I can do or any questions  
that I can answer, please call  
on me.

Sincerely yours,  
Jerry C. Smith

