

## Lt. Richard Lehr

By Amanda Francazio, Curator

A large WWII footlocker owned by former Lakewood resident and war hero Richard Lehr was recently found by his family. Generously shared with the Society, the footlocker was filled with a treasure trove of history with early photos and records of the McCreary and Lehr families, residents of early Rockport Township. Among the contents was a collection of Richard's photos and personal papers, including his WWII letters. As the items were studied and scanned, they revealed a fascinating view into the life of Richard and his family in the early years of WWII.



Lieutenant Richard Lehr, U.S. Army Air Corp.

Richard Lehr was a 1933 graduate of Lakewood High School, a 1939 graduate of Miami University; he also attended Harvard. His father, Raymond Lehr, and stepmother, Helen, lived on Wascana Avenue. Records show that in his youth, Richard lived with his



Richard Lehr as a teen.

grandmother, Ella McCreary Lehr, and aunt, Ruth Lehr, on Marlowe Avenue. Ella was the daughter of James McCreary, who had settled on a farm on Riverside near Hogsback Hill. Ruth Lehr, Ella's daughter, was a former Society patron and donor of many McCreary family collection items.

Richard was close to his "Auntie Ruth," and wrote her often. The letters were addressed to his father and



Ruth Lehr (b. 1888; d. 1988), Richard's aunt.



McCreary farmhouse on Riverside Drive.

his grandmother in Lakewood, and to Ruth at the Woolworth's store in downtown Cleveland, where Ruth was employed. His enlistment papers, found in the footlocker, show that he joined the Army Air Corps in July, 1940, before the war. He received his cadet training at Parks Air College in Illinois and Barksdale Field in Louisiana. He was then transferred to a base in California, and then received his orders to move by ship to Pearl Harbor, at Hickam Air Base. He was there the day the Japanese attacked the base on Dec. 7, 1941. A telegram from him was found addressed to Ruth at Woolworths, on Dec. 8, with just the words, "Am Safe." After war was declared, Richard was careful not to go into detail about his movements in his letters home, because of the strict



restrictions of censoring. In February of 1942, Richard snuck a letter to his aunt that he hoped would bypass the censors, and talked about the war and his movements, sometimes under secret orders.

"...I have asked Tom Warren, the navigator in our combat crew, to drop this in the mail for me when he gets back (to the states). I hope you receive it without any hitch. If you receive it, just



McCreary / Lehr Family.

mention that you had a letter from my friend Tom in California, so that I will know it reached you.

*Since the war started, I have been the bombardier in a combat crew flying the latest thing in the Flying Fortresses. We have had our share of excitement – but for the most part it is routine work. When we are on the searching force, we fly out to sea 800 nautical miles and return. It makes a long day of it – for we take off at the crack of dawn and get back at dusk. Since the war started, I have blown two Japanese submarines out of the water. One was here in Hawaiian waters and the other down in the south Pacific near the Union group of islands.*

*Auntie, I should like to say so many things. I am sure that people back there in the States do not really know what is going on. Certainly, you did not get the true story of the Dec. 7th attack. Every time I fly over Pearl Harbor and see seven of our best battleships lying on the bottom – as well as the host of other ships out of commission, I burn up. Both Hickam and Pearl Harbor lost far more men than the casualty lists would indicate. We were really caught with our pants down – but the situation has grown so serious here in the Pacific that I think people back home should know what they are facing...*

*I am making an awful mess of this letter – but I did want to impress upon you the fact that things are in bad shape in this part of the world – we have lost a lot of ground and it is going to take a long time to regain it. It is going to be a long drawn out war – and people back home are going to have to draw in their belts and get to work and stop worrying about the little things..."*

In June of 1942, 6 months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Battle of Midway was waged for 5 days. Richard earned a Silver Star for valor in the conflict, and describes his role in the battle to his father:

*"...Much to tell you, Dad. Your son came through in great shape. If he is not the best GD bombardier in the Air Corps, he still did a good job and justified all those months of training and waiting around. I was at Midway several days before the battle. Our squadron was the one which found the Japs and started the action. I was in the lead ship and I claim the distinction of having dropped the first bombs...For more details, consult your local newspapers. After we were back, we gave our story to Associated Press, International, Collier's, Life, etc. and they flew Tolan, ace Hollywood photographer, down to take our pictures for the newsreels..."*



Newsreel still, Richard Lehr on left.

In August, 1942, records show Richard and his flight crew took off in their B-17E Flying Fortress from Namaka Airfield on Fuji, on a reconnaissance mission over the Solomon Islands, and failed to return. In his collection of letters, were a few letters addressed to Richard from his father. Sadly, these few letters were returned and stamped, "Missing in Action." In one letter, his father mentions a niece went to the Cleveland's Newsreel Theatre near Public Square, to view "Minutemen of Midway," which included Richard's photos, and called out, "There's Uncle Richard!" His newsreel photo was proudly displayed in the theater's lobby, where he was named "Celebrity of the Week."

After official notification that he was MIA, the family clung to hope that he had survived, and perhaps had been

captured by the Japanese. Ruth contacted the families of the missing members of his flight crew. Their return letters are filled with rumors of the crew's last flight. It was said the crew's pet cat who usually tagged along on their journeys, refused to enter the plane before their last fateful flight. There were eyewitness accounts that his plane was seen going down in the invasion of Guadalcanal.

Richard's predictions that the war would be a long drawn out one came true, and the war finally ended in 1945. Richard would never return, and his name would be added to the casualty lists. In 1947, Richard was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart, and his name was memorialized on the tablets of the missing at Manila American Cemetery.

*Many thanks to McCreary family descendant, Jamie Zilko, for the loan of this wonderful collection to the society for scanning and study.*



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