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FEATURED

Cozad honors native son, Robert Laier, who was shot down and killed during the Korean War

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Richard Laier unveils the new monument to his father, Robert Laier, during the ceremony held on Tuesday.

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Editor's Note: This article was written in part using information compiled by Dawson County Historical Museum volunteer Steven Wolff, the books "MIG Menace over Korea" by Igor Seidov and Yuri Sutiagin and "Holding the Line" by Thomas McKelvey Clever.

COZAD — Members of the Cozad community gathered at Veteran's Memorial Park on Tuesday for the unveiling of a new memorial to Robert Laier, a native son who was shot down and killed in aerial combat during the Korean War.

Robert Holmes Laier was born on May 2, 1927 to Paul and Bernice (Walker) Laier. The family lived on a farm south of Cozad, he later attended Cozad High School and graduated in May 1945.

Laier must have been one of those individuals with a fascination with flight, because he enlisted with the U.S. Air Corps Reserves in July 1944. After graduation he attended the University of Nebraska for a term and later transferred to South Dakota State College.

He was honorably discharged from the Air Corps after Germany surrendered on May 7, 1945, he then enlisted with the Naval Reserve in June 1945, his last assignment was at Camp Wallace, Texas.

It was here Laier would learn to fly, at the Lynch-Parrish Aviation School at Rosenberg, Texas. He was honorably discharged from the Navy Reserve in 1946.

Laier wasn't done yet and enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, which had just been founded on Sept. 18, 1947. He completed basic pilot training at Randolph Field, Texas and was then assigned to advance training at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona, graduating as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Air Force Reserve.

He was assigned to the 48th Fighter Squadron in Bangor, Maine, flying a F-84 Thunderjet fighter. The F-84 was a turbojet fighter-bomber.

This era of flight saw the emergence of the first generation of jet fighters; early designs were similar in many respects to their piston-engine contemporaries, having straight, upswept wings and being made of wood or a light alloy.

In 1949, Laier was assigned to Langley Air Force Base in Virginia and promoted to First Lt. Shortly after this promotion, he would return home to marry Nancy Ann Dawson.

One year later, war exploded across Korea.

After the surrender of Japan, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel into two zones of occupation, the communist Soviet Union administered the north, while the Americans administered the south, thus was set the physical and ideological boundary that remains in place across the country to this day.

Both governments of the two new Korean states claimed to be the sole legitimate government of all of Korea and neither accepted the 38th parallel border as permanent.

The totalitarian leader of the northern socialist state, Kim II-sung began to seek the Soviet Union's dictator, Joseph Stalin, for support of an invasion of the south. At the time in 1949, Stalin did not think the time was right, as the communist People's Liberation Army was still embroiled in the Chinese Civil War and U.S. forces remained stationed in the south.

However, by 1950, the strategic situation had changed dramatically, the PLA under Moa Zedong had secured victory in China, U.S. forces had withdrawn from Korea and the Soviets had detonated their first nuclear bomb, ending the U.S. atomic monopoly.

With the United States not directly intervening to stop the communist victory in China, Stalin calculated they would be even less willing to fight for Korea, which had much less strategic significance.

Stalin gave Kim permission to attack the South, under the conditions China would send reinforcements if needed. However, Soviet forces would not openly engage in combat to avoid direct war with the United States and a nuclear exchange.

Bolstered by Soviet equipment, North Korean forces invaded the south on June 25, 1950.

The United Nations Security Council denounced the move as naked aggression and authorized the formation of the United Nations Command to dispatch forces to Korea and repel the invasion.

The first year of the war saw a dramatic swing of the proverbial pendulum. The initial invasion by the North nearly pushed the forces of the South into the sea. By September 1950, they were in control of nearly the entire peninsula.

In the same month, a risky amphibious United Nations counteroffensive was launched near the city of Incheon, with the goal of cutting off the supply lines of the North's troops. The landings were a success and changed the complexion of the war.

United Nations advanced and invaded North Korea in October 1950, now the shoe was on the other foot, with the UN in control of the nearly the entire peninsula by December 1950.

However, after moving close to the Yalu River, the border with China, the Chinese PLA crossed the river and entered the war. This surprise intervention of Chinese troops triggered a retreat of UN forces and the line finally stabilized back at the 38th Parallel, where all of this had started.

It was amid this action that Laier was deployed to Japan and then to Korean as a part of the Fourth Fighter Inceptor Group, based in Kimpo, South Korea, now flying the F-86 Sabre.

The F-86 was the first swept-wing fighter that could counter Soviet aircraft of a similar design, the MiG-15. The air war over Korea is best known for the first jet-to-jet battles in history, with these two designs squaring off against one another.

The Sabre was armed with six .50 caliber machine guns and generally had greater maneuverability than the MiG-15 at altitudes below 24,000 feet. The MiG-15 was heavily armed with one 37 mm cannon and two 23mm cannons, it handled better above 30,000 feet than the Sabre, but in the hands of a skilled pilot, aerial victory could go either way.

It was fated that Laier's flight on June 19, 1951 would be his last.

On this day he was flying as wingman with another Sabre at 24,000 feet in the vicinity of Sonchon, North Korea. This was over a section of the country known as "MIG Alley," the site of numerous dogfights between UN and North Korean fighters.

However, there was an open secret about some of the pilots flying the MiGs, some of them were Soviet airmen.

Participation by Soviet pilots in the conflict was kept secret for many years, though it had been widely suspected by UN forces. Soviet aircraft were adorned in North Korean or Chinese markings and the pilots wore Korean or civilian uniforms to hide their origin.

For radio communications, they were given cards with common Korean words for flying terms spelled out in Russian. It is noted the subterfuge did not survive long in the fury of air-to-air combat and the pilots were soon heard communicating, and cursing, in Russian.

While the UN pilots chafed at the restrictions imposed on attacking Chinese airfields, the MiG pilots operated even tighter restrictions. They were prohibited from flying over non-Communist-controlled territory or within 30 to 50 miles of UN lines and not allowed to pursue UN aircraft over the UN-controlled Yellow Sea

One Soviet pilot shot down over UN territory shot himself rather than be captured, another pilot bailed out into the Yellow Sea and was strafed by his own men to prevent him from being captured.

By 1952, radio communications traffic intercepted revealed more than 90 percent of the MiGs engaged over North Korea were flown by Russians. Yet, the United States did not directly confront the Soviet Union about their airman's participation in the war.

"There was a real fear at the highest levels of the US government and UN command that such an 'incident' could change the Korean 'police action' into World War III," Thomas Clever wrote.

As for the United States, their pilots did not always abide by their restrictions and took advantage of a "hot pursuit" exception of flying over the Yalu River to pursue MiGs across the border.

This later became blatant MiG hunting over China, with U.S. pilots maintaining a code of silence about these actions, flight leads picked wingmen who would keep their mouths shut and many rolls of incriminating gun camera footage would "mysteriously" disappear.

On June 19, as Laier cruised alongside his wingman, a group of 10 MiG-15s were being vectored where they were flying, in the area of the Antung-Charyongwan railroad. One of them was the future top Soviet ace of the Korean War, Nikolai Vasilyevich Sutyagin.

Sutyagin and his fellow Soviet airman had been ordered on a "secret tour," and deployed near the Korean border to counter UN airpower in the region.

He would later be credited with shooting down 22 UN aircraft, his first kill was the F-86 of Robert Laier.

While in a left hand turn over the area of Sonchon, Sutyagin spotted a pair of F-86s below and to the left. With a predator's swiftness, he issued the command, "I'm attacking, cover me." He made a climbing turn to the left while throttling back and deploying his speed brakes, so not as to overshoot the Sabers and end up in their gunsights.

Sutyagin executed a split-S, an inverted half roll that turns into a descending half loop, resulting in level flight in the opposite direction at a lower altitude. It was likely that Laier and his wingman saw the MiG and went into an oblique loop.

However, by the second loop, Sutyagin and his own wingman were still above and behind the Sabers in a superior firing position. Sutyagin aimed at Laier's aircraft and fired two short bursts.

The shots missed.

Sutyagin decided to close the range but Laier and his wingman dove and then banked to the right and then rolled to the left in a climb, trading speed for altitude. The MiGs hung on like glue though and the range had now dropped to under 1,000 feet.

Noticing this, the Sabre element performed a half roll and dove.

Sutyagin released his speed brakes and went after Laier, diving at a steep angle of 70-75 degrees as the Americans dove east in the direction of the Bay of Korea and safety.

It was too late for Laier however; Sutyagin had closed within 500 feet and opened fire, hitting Laier's Sabre. It then nosed down into a dive, it was last seen passing a cloud deck at 10,000 feet.

Laier's fate after being shot down remains a mystery to this day. His son Richard, said there are countless stories and accounts of him parachuting to safety, only to be captured and sent to a prisoner of war camp in China.

Allegedly, Laier's voice had been heard on Peking radio and recognized by his fellow airman in their barracks.

Richard sought out the fate of his father, even reaching out to the Korean Family MIA association and traveling to Washington D.C. to meet the group and a Russian delegation. His grandmother, Robert's wife, Nancy, even submitted DNA to a military lab in Hawaii should any remains be found

After searching through lists of names and even looking for misspellings, Richard could find no trace of Robert H. Laier.

Richard later received the Russian account of the battle where Laier was shot down, he later searched for the names of Russian Korean War aces and found himself staring at a photograph of Sutyagin, the man who had killed his father.

For his part, Richard said his closure is the belief his father was dead before the plane struck the ground.

Laier was at first declared missing in action and later deceased in February 1954, he had been awarded the Purple Heart, Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, Prisoner of War Medal, Korean Service Medal, United Nations Service Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Korean

Presidential Unit Citation and the Republic of Korea War Service Medal.

Richard spoke to the crowd gathered at Veterans Memorial Park for the unveiling of the new memorial to his father, an effort organized by Rex German.

He said there were many people in attendance who knew his father, “Bobby.” They could recall his voice, his laughter and his sense of humor, but Richard said he could not count himself as one of them, having never known his father.

The loss was hard on Nancy, but she remarried when Richard was three years old and he said John Ernest was also an Air Force man and a wonderful father. As Laier was an only child and Richard the only grandchild, his mother would put him on a plane every summer to visit his grandparents on their farm south of Cozad.

“It turned out to be the greatest gift she had ever given me,” Richard said.

For over 50 years, Richard would visit Cozad and hear stories of his father from people who had known him, as both a child and as a man.

Yet, Richard said, “How does one relate to someone you never knew but is always referred to as your dad?”

Richard’s grandfather died in 1986 and his grandmother died in 2007 at the age of 103, he said he returned to Cozad to bury her and to handle her belongings. It was during this process; Richard noted a pink plastic box on the back of a toilet that had always served as a tissue dispenser.

“Why I did, what I did next, I will never know,” Richard said, “I opened it.”

Inside the container, under the tissue box, was a letter, it turned out to be the last letter his father had written home to his own mother, it was dated June 16, 1951, three days before he was shot down and killed.

The last line of the letter read, “Am I a dad yet?”

Richard said as he grew older he began to embrace two fathers, Robert Laier, the man who had given him life and John Ernest, the man who had raised him.

“So here I am once again, back in Cozad, to honor a man I never knew but grew to respect and realized the message he left for us all,” Richard said during the ceremony, “It’s not what my father was fighting for, it’s what my father was fighting against – intolerance.”

Richard said communism, socialism, fascism and nationalism do not tolerate differences in people, but America is made great because of its diversity and our ability to tolerate our differences.

“We are all different, different politics, different religions, different beliefs and different immigrant ancestors,” said Richard, “Yet here we are, peacefully gathering for a single purpose; to honor an American who fought against intolerance.”

Richard continued saying our democracy continues to embrace all the differences in people, “without tolerance we have no peace and without tolerance we have no democracy.”

Richard said what his father was fighting against is equally important as what they were fighting for, so people could live in peace.

“Wars don’t need to be fought for us to lose our democracy, if we begin to view those around us as our enemies, then we will lose our democracy,” said Richard, “to do so would dishonor those who fought and died fighting for our country. Please honor the sacrifice my dad, and all the other men and women made so we can live in peace.”

Richard then unveiled the new memorial to his father; it features his picture, a profile view of an F-86 and the list of medals he earned. It sits near a headstone on the corner of 10th and E. St, next to Veterans Memorial Park.

During the rest of the ceremony, Cozad’s Mayor Marcus Kloepping declared May 4, as Robert Laier Day in Cozad.

Retired U.S. Army Lt. Colonel Scott Schmidt spoke about the history of the war in Korea, noting the conflict did not end in peace, but still remains under an armistice.

The Cozad High School Band, under the direction of Mark Messner, played the U.S. Air Force song and Taps was played by Landry Geiger and the Cozad Honor Guard conducted a 21-gun salute in honor of Robert Laier.