

Father Hero Never Forgotten
An Interview with Ms. Judy Ikels
By Gary Cheng

On May 8, 2015, more than fifty World War II aircraft flew over the nation's capital to commemorate the Allies' defeat of Nazi Germany 70 years ago. Named "Arsenal of Democracy: WWII Victory Capitol Flyover," the event celebrating Victory in Europe Day provided a rare sight for observers on the National Mall in the capital city. Right by the Mall, I was standing on the roof top of the Department of Labor building, looking up at the cloudy sky with the planes flying in formations reminiscent of the war's decisive battles when Nazi Germany surrendered in May 1945. However, what was on my mind at that time were the scenes far away from the European Theater, over the mountainous region of China. Almost everyone in China knows the story of Flying Tigers: heroic American pilots came all the way to China, and alongside with the local people they waged an air war against Japan's invasion. "It must have been like a beacon of

hope for the wartime Chinese to look up to the sky and see American planes flying over," I said to one of my colleagues near me and he agreed. Our talk didn't lead us into a more detailed discussion about the American military actions inside China. However, some seven years later, I had an opportunity to speak with the daughter of Flying Tigers hero, a father she never met. About 14 months before Japan surrendered to the allied forces, a B-24 Liberator bomber loses its

engines near Kunming, China on June 10, 1944, following a raid on Japanese forces. The pilot, 2nd Lt. William H. Wallace Jr., sacrifices himself to save the lives of his seven crew members. He leaves behind a wife and an unborn daughter, Judy. In 2022, Judy Goodman Ikels published her book *Death in Wartime China: A Daughter's Discovery*. From the book you will discover

Bill Wallace's odyssey - the heroism of a young American pilot far from his home and his newly

wed wife, as well as revelations from Judy's "once-in-a-lifetime journey" to China, a journey of memory, reconnection, love that spans the Pacific Ocean, and love that survives death. The following is an interview with the author in the Fall of 2022 on her book and her life stories.

Cheng: Thank you so much Judy for the interview. I have read memoirs and biographies about U.S. military leaders and officers who fought alongside the Chinese people against Japanese invasion during WWII. By far, your book *Death in Wartime China* was the most touching and moving reading experience to me. What message did you wish to send to readers when you were writing the book?

Ikels: first of all, thank you so much for taking time to talk with me about the book. Writers just love nothing better than to have someone take the time to read the book that they have written. I wrote this book for several reasons. As you know, a book is a pretty big project, you have to have several things to push you to research it and to finish it. One of the main things that I wanted to do was to find out more about my father, who sacrificed his life in China to save his crewmen, and all that happened before I was born. So, I felt like there was part of my own

history that I needed to complete, that I needed to understand. And I wanted to write that history for my own family, for my children and my grandchildren. Secondly, I wanted to write about his experience there, because I had not been able to read very much about it. When I was growing up

in Texas in public school in the 1950s, the text books all seemed to have not that much about WWII, so I've never really studied it as a student. Somehow a semester would come to an end, we were on something else, or there just wouldn't be any time to look at it. And seldom do I remember seeing anything about the war in China. This was an emptiness to me. And lastly, I felt that because I was sought out by Dr. Patrick Lucas, and he had been so diligent, and so patient for so many years, to think about my father's service which he ran across when reading some military records, and he had been so patient and diligent looking for me, I felt that I really want to record all of this story for people to read about it. Most of all, I wanted to thank Dr.

Lucas, who worked so diligently to trace and to find me, and I wanted to thank people in China for their sincere honoring of my father. Interest in writing came through several different doors.

Also, I was writing during the COVID pandemic which allowed me quite a bit of time on my own. All these circumstances seemed go together and encouraged me to start writing the book. Cheng: 70 years later, having gone through all the discoveries, reconnections, and the journey to

China, have there been any changes of your views on life?

Ikels: This is a life changing experience for me. First, it proved to me that it is never too late to look for what really matters in your life. If you have something that you think it is important and you haven't been able to learn about it as yet, it is never too late to look for it. Another thing I learned is that I really love to write. When I was writing, which happened mostly between January and June of 2020, I found that writing was the only thing that I really wanted to do, and when I was doing it, I didn't want to be doing anything else. I was very focused on that. It was easier than I thought it was going to be. And of course, at that time I didn't really know how much Chinese people still remember the American service there. I just wasn't somehow aware of

that. It was so surprising and also gratifying to learn how Chinese people's feeling towards that service remain alive.

Cheng: Did this emotional writing experience change what you see as the meaning of life?

Ikels: Yes, it is focused on the optimism of my parents and how I do believe that optimism can pass on to the next generation. Because there they were in the middle of the war. The United States had been in a horrible depression; things were not easy for them. Still, they decided to get

married and my father decided to train to be a pilot. He enlisted for military service, and it taught me that if you are in the midst of hard time, you can find positive things to do. And it is good to reflect that in your own story. I used to think it was sort of selfish to do so, but now I don't think that anymore. It is a good thing to reflect on your own situation and your own heritage and your own history, in doing so you can really learn a lot, and you can be more empathetic with other people.

Cheng: It is great that you truly enjoyed writing the book. But I wonder what the most difficult parts were for you to look back on? How did you overcome them and carry on?

Ikels: I am just sorry that I didn't know about this history earlier in my life. That's the main part, I had never gotten to know my father. From my early age, I knew I would never know him. That's hard. However, I learned that there were ways that I could come to know more about him. I talked to people and read materials that were written at the time he served. Every time I turned corner, another piece of history appeared. I felt that I knew him better. This is what's so interesting. And then, thanks to Dr. Lucas' inquiry email which eventually lead to my visiting China and writing this book was, really what I believe the correct word is catharsis. I hope I don't drag my readers too much into it. When I was very young, even mentioning his name made me cry a lot. Even when I first talked to Pat Lucas who finally found me for his memorial project of Flying Tigers, I could not do an interview. He brought a camera to my house and tried to interview me, and I couldn't speak about Bill. But look at me now, I can.

Cheng: It seemed that the Flying Tigers had some re-deployment and reinforcement in dealing with the changing battle situation in the air and on the ground back then.

Ikels: The Flying Tigers under General Claire Chennault was a special arrangement between Roosevelt and Chiang Kai-shek to bring American fliers to China where they were under the command of General Chennault. They would keep their American citizenship but fly for the Chinese, and that was an unusual arrangement. At the beginning, the Flying Tigers were completely those solo pilots that would go out and do the air battle, like we saw in the movies. But then, the war changed and the goals changed a little bit, and the Americans realized that they

could also make a dent in the Japanese invasion by targeting their shipping. The Japanese were

raiding the countryside to get industrial materials for their war machine. And so then, the plan was refitted to add bombers, like the one my father flew, which was a B-24 low altitude bomber. When some people were looking back to this period of history, they thought the Flying Tigers were only those that flew solo. But in my new research I found both solo flyers and bombers and their crew as all part of the Flying Tigers. I reference it as a fact, and of course I choose to think that my father was a member of Flying Tigers, and other historians do as well.

Cheng: Let's talk about your visit to China. You have worked at overseas posts in different countries. In your experience, what were the unique aspects of China as a country?

Ikels: I wrote about this in my book. The United States is a very young country, we were teenage, maybe toddler in some sense. But the places we lived overseas included Mexico, Brazil,

Greece, El Salvador, Columbia, and Venezuela. In particular, I found things to think about with relation to Mexico and especially with Greece where it is that combination of very ancient cultures, and the modern. Sometimes when you haven't been to a county, you don't know how really modern it is. My goodness, China is absolutely everything you could possibly think of in modern cities: transportations and communications, and everything is so developed and advanced. We visited Beijing, Kunming and Xi'an. We enjoyed all of those places. It kind of reminded me in a way when we visited the Great Wall outside of Beijing. When I was there, I was thinking about all the experiences when we visited ancient sites of Greece, and how eventually some of that history becomes incorporated into the modern world. You think about these civilizations that were so advanced and so artistic, and had so many beautiful

accomplishments, so long before the United States ever appeared on the scene. It is very interesting and very humbling to me: here you have China with populations and traditions that are centuries old. When we were visiting the farmhouse up in the mountains with the Li family, who were among the benefactors for my father's monument, someone asked Mr. Li how long his

family has been there. He couldn't really answer the question. He didn't know how many hundreds of years his family had been in that village. I just think that is so remarkable. I felt very humble in that situation to realize that they had been farming that land for as long as anyone could remember.

Cheng: What did you make of the life of farmers in rural areas today?

Ikels: It was different from the scene of cities but it wasn't that different. The Li's live in a very small village of Qingshuitang (清水塘). I understand in many rural villages the homes are clustered together, and then the farmers walk out to the fields to farm. They had a beautiful house, and when I said farmhouse, I always had to explain to my American friends: forget about your picture of a farmhouse on a Kansas prairie; they don't look like that. His house is two stories in a compound, as all the houses in the village. They had everything from hoes, rakes and

baskets to gather grains and their produce. They gave us wonderful honey that was produced on

their farm, and some wine that came from their own cellar. There is a sense of abundance there. It was not necessarily modern, but it was beautiful, and of course everyone had a cell phone, so communication was not a problem. I was having hard time figuring out all the relationships of the people who were with us. They were working in Kunming and came out to the mountain village on weekends. We were visiting during the lunar new year, the time when everyone goes home. It felt so perfect for us to be there at that time with them.

Cheng: I was also very much touched by Li's family's adoption of your father into their genealogy so Bill may be remembered as long as the family goes on.

Ikels: Bill's story was very compelling to them. Pat Lucas, the American who did all the research on Bill's wartime experience and related that to people there, told them why he was looking for him. When Pat Lucas told the Li family that he couldn't find any relatives of Bill, this made them very sad, saying "Who is going to remember him?" So that's when they decided to, in a sense, adopt him into their family and give him a Chinese name. Li (李) for the family name,

Shu (树) for the generational name, and Hua (华) for the sound as close as it could be to Wallace. I understand Hua also stands for China. I thought it was so touching and it pointed out to me the importance that Chinese people, well, people everywhere, but I think especially Chinese have for ancestry, and for heritage, and for families. It is very poignant to me. Before our trip, I asked Pat Lucas what gift I could take to the Li family because I knew I was going to meet them. I wanted to take them some gifts, but I didn't know what would be appropriate. He said: Judy, just bring some baby pictures of Bill. If he is part of their family, they need to have some pictures of him as a baby and as a young boy. Oh, my goodness! I realized they were really serious about this. When we got to the Li's home, after we went upstairs and got settled into our bedroom, we gathered in a sitting room at the top of the stairs. Mrs. Li went into her room, and came out with a small photograph of Bill that Pat Lucas had left with her 10 years

before. She had kept it, she cherished it, and she showed it to me, and that's what made me know, oh boy, this was for real, this was not just some story. They really felt strongly that they had "adopted Bill!"

Cheng: In the traditional society of China, families tended to have their own temples or rooms for ancestors, to be remembered and worshiped. That's how people pass on the meaning of life, generation after generation. What were some other values of traditional living that you found interesting?

Ikels: From morning to night, everything was interesting to me. The care that people took to welcome us was overwhelming. We were given so much good food. There were toasts and welcoming remarks. My husband served in the Foreign Service overseas for 31 years, and I was with him the whole time. We had our fair share of welcome parties, for different people, for us, for ambassadors. Nothing I had ever experienced was a welcome like that: a big banner outside of the civic hall, special gifts. The mayor was there. Journalists were everywhere following us around wanting to talk to us. It was a wonderful and enormous welcome. It wasn't just about me, however. The welcome was because of my relationship to an American pilot who fought in that war. It could have been any daughter, any pilot, they would give the same welcome.

Cheng: You served with your husband during his career in the Foreign Service and also had your own career in the Civil Service of the State Department. How were changes in American culture reflected in Foreign Service life, and were you involved professionally in making some of the policy changes as Chief of the Work Life Division in HR Office?

Ikels: My husband decided to join the foreign service the same year we got married. In 1966 he joined the U.S. Information Agency, and in 1967 we went overseas. It was still at a time when women could be foreign service officers, but if they married, they had to resign their commission. Therefore, all the officers were men or single women, and all the spouses were women. In 1972 that changed because of some very active advocacy by some women whom I had pleasure of meeting later in my life. I think it is interesting how institutions evolve. When all spouses were only women, they took care of each other and newcomers overseas. In the 1970s and before, spouses could not be employed overseas; they employed themselves taking care of the community. Later, when spouses could work, and more spouses were male, everything was more equal. Changes had the effect of diminishing the unofficial role of community support that

had existed. The institution had to find some way to formalize the support. That organization came to be known as the Family Liaison Office, and eventually around the world, at almost every post there was a "Community Liaison Office Coordinator" with the assignment of welcoming and supporting the official community. Some people work their whole lives and no one ever says thank you, but that was not my experience at the State Department. I received many thanks and awards for my efforts. Finally in 2019, a year after I left the department, I got a call from the Office of the Director General. I had already been retired for a year, and I thought, what did I do wrong? Why is she calling me now? Ambassador Carol Perez nominated me for the Civil Service Cup that goes to one Civil Service employee each year! I was so grateful for the award. It actually represents a lot of great teamwork. In government nobody works alone.

Cheng: While you were in China, you were interacting with the villagers and making dumplings together just like a family member of their own. How did your life and work in the foreign affairs inform your understanding of different people and cultures?

Ikels: Thank you for that question. I am happy to say that as a foreign service family member, and later as an employee, I think the State Department does a really good job of giving you the opportunity to learn about where you're going to serve, to learn culture, to learn the political and economic history of a country where you're going to be assigned. They don't just send you out without the right tools. Even way back to the "dark ages" when all the spouses were women, they had classes for cross-cultural communication, protocol, and so forth. I took advantage of those training opportunities. It really made a difference for me. Those resources are still available

to people now and I hope people take advantage of them. You have to remember that you're in somebody else's country, you are not at home, and your way of doing things may or may not work, you just have to really pay attention.

Cheng: For those who don't have a chance to read your book but are interested in Flying Tigers history, where do they go to learn more about Bill's stories?

Ikels: Yes, there is a Flying Tigers Museum in Kunming. Here in the United States, the Smithsonian Museum has displays about WWII. There are a couple of places in the Washington,

D.C. area. Bill's name appears on the memorial Wall of Honor at the Udvar-Hazy Center National Air and Space Museum in Chantilly, Virginia. The museum website has his on-line biography. Also, the World War II Museum has resources. Bill's story and that of other World War II heroes appears on Pat Lucas' website Remembering Shared Honor (RSHonor.net). There

are so many WWII books in the library. I believe that Barbara Tuchman's Stilwell and the American Experience in China is the best record of the China-Burma-India theater of war. She does a such good job. There is a lot of information online about Flying Tigers and WWII. The Library of Congress and the National Archives are also resource which I used.

Cheng: Your book is ranked 233 in Historical China Biographies on Amazon, which is a very good record since there are so many books in this category, and your book just was just published in 2022. Do you have future book projects?

Ikels: Yes, I do have future projects. When you write a book, it's sort of like having a baby. I want to get this baby through its toddler stage before I start another project. I have several

projects in mind. I look forward to doing that. Maybe I will start writing a little bit, but I really want to pay attention to the current book. I want people to read the stories I wrote because I thought we needed to hear about this part of World War II history, and because I want my father to be remembered. Writers love to read, I just wanted to read this passage from my book and take

us back to the day when my late husband Larry and I, all the people that with us including the Li family, walked to the monument. This monument is not just a small marker on the ground. It is about 4-feet tall, a thousand-pound block of limestone, and it was engraved on two sides in Chinese and two sides in English. It has my father's full name on it. This was very stunning to me when I first saw it. Here we were in the middle of the countryside in far south China, and

there is a monument with my father's name on it, and it had been there for 10 years. It just so impressed me. Here is my writing about the scene.

"Standing on that mountainside in southern China, we discovered kind, empathetic people to connect with over shared history and values. We met families who had tilled the land, raised children, and survived war and hardship, largely unnoticed by outsiders. These strong ethnic Yi people, living south of the clouds in Yunnan Province, remember American servicemen with gratitude and honor. I found a small space where an American daughter could wander into a crowd of strangers, seeking memories of her father, and feel welcome. The sun was getting low in the sky. Finally, it was time to return to the village. I kissed Bill's name on the cold stone and thanked everyone again for coming with us. As we turned to climb the steep field that we had descended, in a spot adjacent to the memorial stone, someone set off strings of loud fireworks as

if to say, 'Here we are. We made it here to honor Bill!' What a nice Chinese tradition. It was a day for memories, flowers, and fireworks."

Cheng: It is very touching indeed. I am grateful for the opportunity to interview you today and thank you so much Judy for sharing your thoughts and your stories which are so profound and inspiring. Best wishes to your book projects!

Ikels: Thank you Gary!