

A DOG Tag's *Way* Home

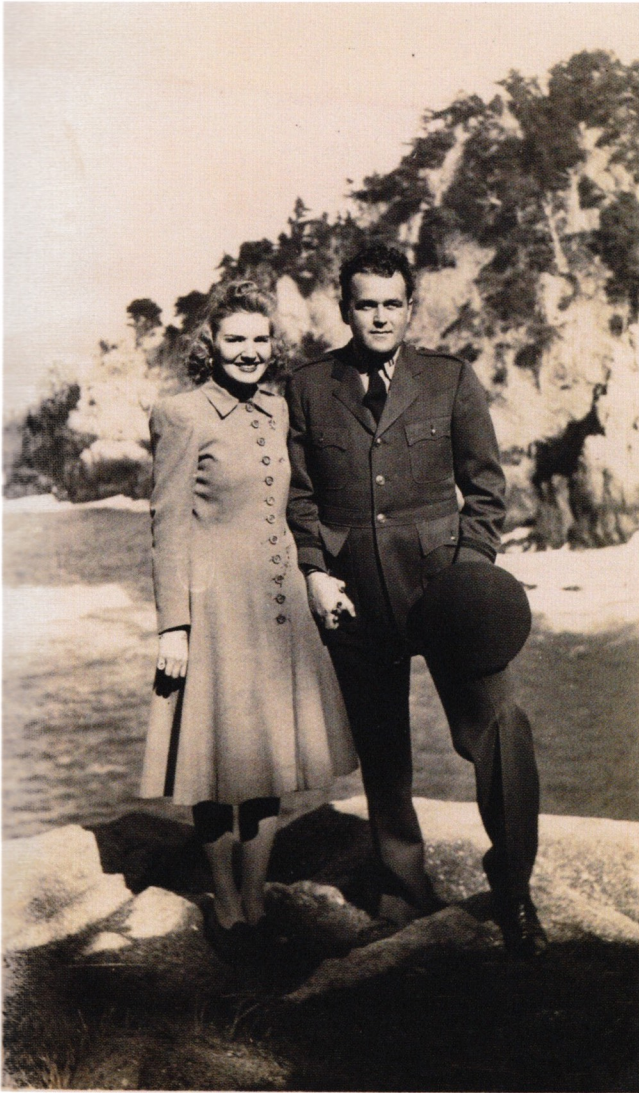
Story By Donna Esposito. Photography courtesy of the South Pacific WWII Museum.



Animal lovers will surely recall hearing stories of lost dogs traveling great distances to find their way home against improbable odds. This has even been the subject of books and movies over the years, from 1963's *Incredible Journey* to the recent *A Dog's Way Home*. But could this astounding ability also extend to dog tags? A recent discovery at the South Pacific World War II Museum on Espiritu Santo suggests this just might be the case!

Dog tags, metal identification discs typically containing a name, service number, and medical information, became standard issue in the U. S. military in the early 1900s. The tags, worn around the neck on a chain or cord, were arguably the most personal piece of equipment issued to a soldier, sailor, or marine and had the grim purpose of identifying the body of the fallen. Some tags were accidentally lost, while others were carefully carried home as a souvenir by those fortunate enough to survive.

In gathering artifacts for display at the new museum, a classic set of World War II-era US Navy dog tags was acquired from a USA based militaria dealer. Wondering about the service history of the tags' original owner led to the discovery of a remarkable story. Not only had the tags belonged to someone who had served in a prominent role on Espiritu Santo, but he had also played a strategic part in a top secret project: a squadron of unmanned drones which carried out strikes on Japanese bases from the Solo-



Previous page: Modified Avenger torpedo bomber control plane with radio and television receiver/transmitter antenna in the deployed position below the fuselage (Official US Navy photograph). *This page top left:* Lt. Francis A. Mahan and his wife, Alice Read Mahan. *Top right:* Lt. Francis A. Mahan somewhere in the South Pacific.

mon Islands in 1944.

Francis "Frank" Aloysius Mahan was born in 1907 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to parents of Irish descent. Known as a good athlete, he graduated from Villanova University in 1930 with a degree in economics. Mahan settled into a comfortable life as a banker and married a beautiful woman, Alice Read, who even modeled professionally as a Chesterfield girl. But like many Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Mahan answered the call to service. And perhaps the call to adventure. He enlisted in the US Navy in 1942 and was sent to Harvard University for special training in radio communications. No

doubt due to his aptitude and education, he was assigned to a very special project: the top secret STAG-1 squadron. Special Task Air Group One was part of the Navy's classified drone project. While we think of drones – unmanned aircraft for reconnaissance and tactical strikes – as a recent invention, the concept dates to before World War II. As early as 1936, the term 'drone' had been given to pilotless aircraft, a nod to specialized male bees with the single job of mating with the queen. Like different species of bees, there were multiple types of drones being developed and tested in all theatres of the war. In fact, Lt. Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., older brother of future president John F. Kennedy, was killed in

England in 1944 while flying a specially converted B-24 bomber, which exploded before he was able to parachute out and activate its remote controlled functions. The STAG-1 group, to which Lt. Mahan was assigned as the radio communications equipment officer, flew TDR-1 drones. These lightweight, twin-engine planes developed by Interstate Aircraft and Engineering Corporation of El Segundo, California, were controlled by a modified Grumman/General Motors TBM Avenger torpedo bomber equipped with a remotely controlled guidance system utilizing a new technology: television. The Avenger carried a second pilot who controlled the drone and watched the view from its nose through a televi-



This page: A STAG-1 ground crew prepares a TDR-1 drone, 'Edna III, for an attack on Rabaul. Official US Navy photograph.
Next page: Harriton House, the historic 1704 home of Francis Mahan, now a museum in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. Photo by Donna Esposito.

sion screen. The drones did have a cockpit and controls, allowing a pilot to fly the aircraft directly as well. This threw off even the workers in the factories making the drones; they had no idea they were constructing secret, experimental aircraft. This is even more remarkable given what those workers would have normally been manufacturing in peacetime: Wurlitzer organs and Schwinn bicycles! Knowing that the TDR-1 drones did not need the same protection as piloted aircraft and were more or less expendable, they were constructed with as little strategic material as possible. The frame was made of lightweight steel tubing, a natural for the Schwinn Bicycle Company. It was covered with a skin of molded wood manufactured by the Rudolf Wurlitzer Company, accustomed to crafting finely

shaped wooden housings for jukeboxes, pianos, and organs. Ironically, both companies were founded by German immigrants. But, when the planes were flown away from the factory to join the fight, they were headed to the Pacific Theatre.

STAG-1 was commissioned in August of 1943. After nine months of stateside training, Mahan, along with a host of other squadron personnel, including drone pilots, Avenger control plane pilots, radiomen and gunners, set sail for their overseas assignment. They arrived at Banika Island, part of the Russells group in the Solomon Islands, in June of 1944. The group set up their base of operations and began training in the field.

Test flights and practice bombing missions were flown almost daily from July through September of 1944, including bombing runs on the Yamazuki Maru, a beached Japanese ship at Cape Esperance on Guadalcanal. Remarkably, colour film footage documenting the practice strikes was shot and can be viewed online today. The practice missions were flown with no loss of lives. Finally, it was time for STAG-1's trial by fire.

Although the Solomons campaign was largely over by late summer of 1944, it was still possible to fly missions against important Japanese targets that had not been captured. In October of 1944, STAG-1 squadrons VK-11 and VK-12 flew ten attack missions from airfields on Stirling and Green Islands. Although some drones suffered mechanical failures and



others were shot down or missed their mark, they did score hits on targets on Ballale, Bougainville, New Ireland, and New Britain. The results were mixed, but proved the potential of the drones to inflict damage without loss of American lives. While some drones did drop bombs, in most cases the drone itself became the bomb; the armed drone was flown directly into the target. The Japanese troops on the receiving end of these strikes were quite surprised to see American aircraft intentionally flying into targets. Unaware that the planes were unmanned, they called them "American Kamikazes."

Despite this promising performance, after just one month of combat duty the STAG-1 project was abruptly cancelled with little explanation. Apparently by then the outcome of the war seemed sure, and the Navy chose not to devote more resources to the experimental project. Much to the chagrin of those who had worked so hard to implement the new technology, the squadrons were disbanded and the remaining planes and drones were destroyed. Lt. Mahan was transferred further to the rear and became the field maintenance and communications officer for Palikulo Airfield on Espiritu Santo, a position he held until April of 1945.

Next Mahan was transferred to Saipan, serving as field operations officer at Kobler Field until September of 1945.

One has to wonder if he knew the significance of the B-29s taking off from neighboring Tinian on August 6th and again on August 9th to drop atomic bombs on Japan. Or perhaps his knowledge of secret projects ended with STAG-1.

Mahan was sent home at the end of the war. Unlike many other returning servicemen, he had a house, a wife, and a good job waiting for him. The home, purchased in 1940, happened to be quite historic. Originally built in 1704, Harriton House was the first building in Bryn Mawr, which became an affluent suburb of Philadelphia. The house's most famous resident was Charles Thomson, Secretary of the Continental Congress during the American Revolution. Thomson's other claim to fame was as the designer of the Great Seal of the United States, the bald eagle holding thirteen arrows in one talon and an olive branch in the other.

Mahan returned to the bank and later became involved with real estate, rather sedate occupations after the excitement of a top-secret project and exotic locales. He and his wife never had children, and their historic home became a museum owned by the town in 1968. Mahan would often tell the director of the museum, Bruce Cooper Gill, or anyone else who would listen, about



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Top: Lt. Francis A. Mahan poses in front of a Beech SNB-1 Kansan. Photo courtesy of the F.A. Mahan Collection at Harriton House, c. 1944.

his exciting days during World War II in the South Pacific, working on the secret drone project. Mahan died in 1983, and his wife followed in 1996. Their personal effects, among them Mahan's dog tags, were sold off, but Gill had the foresight to save Mahan's wartime scrapbook filled with personal photos and two reels of movies filmed in the Pacific. Needless to say, he was surprised to be contacted years later by another museum halfway around the world announcing they had Francis Aloysius Mahan's dog tags in their collection.

It would seem that somehow, like a lost dog looking for its home, those dog tags, which Mahan had carried so close to his heart, had managed to find their way home to Espiritu Santo, a place Mahan remembered with fond nostalgia. Truly an incredible journey.

To learn more about STAG-1, visit www.stagone.org. Watch colour footage of TDR-1 drone tests here: <https://www.pbs.org/video/history-detectives-tdr-1-test-mission/>

A special thanks goes to Bruce Cooper Gill, director of Harriton House for providing photos and details about Mahan.

Visit www.harritonhouse.org for more information.

Donna Esposito is a writer and World War II historian based in upstate New York. She is also a member of the South Pacific World War II Museum on Espiritu Santo. To find out more about the museum, visit www.south-pacificwwiimuseum.com.