

# Meet 1st Lt. Charles A. Harker Jr., Korean War, Air Force Pilot, POW/MIA, One of Cranford's 86 Hometown Heroes

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As our selection process began this month we were contacted by a nephew of one of our Cranford 86 that was a result of our many inquiries on Ancestry.com. Chris Harker of Oregon identified himself as the son of Robert Harker, the 88-year-old brother of Charles A. Harker Jr. He informed us that his father was alive and well and living in Oceanport, NJ. He said his dad had many clear pictures of "Junie," short for Junior, as he was known to his family, and would be glad to meet with me. We had much of Charles' story documented already; it was the pictures that we needed to complete our mission of letting people "see the faces" belonging to the names of our fallen heroes read on Memorial Day.

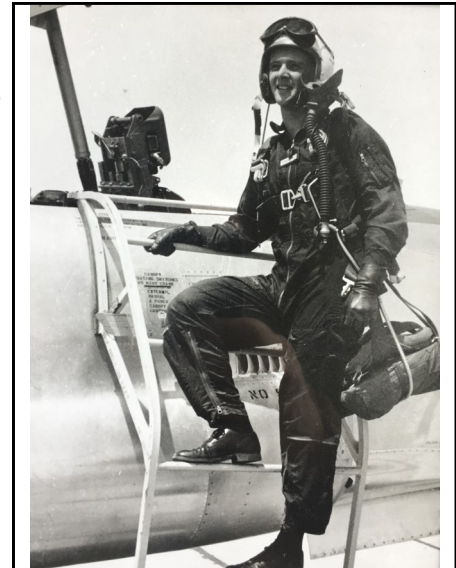


Charles A. Harker Jr. from  
Cranford's 1948 Yearbook

Bob Harker called me the following day and we made an appointment to meet. He didn't let us down. Formal military portraits, casual snap shots and best of all, Lt. Charles Harker Jr. standing in front of his F-84 Thunderjet, the aircraft that he volunteered to fly solo the night of May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1953, his 38<sup>th</sup> mission into

hostile territories over North Korea, his final mission. Bob and I talked for more than an hour, telling me the personal notes that we like to gather in telling the whole story of our Hometown Heroes. He spoke of his younger brother that he grew up with at 218 Arbor Street as a light-hearted, happy-go-lucky guy. I asked him about the inscription under his yearbook picture: "A man among men, but mostly among women." Bob said his brother had a special way with the ladies. He teared up a couple of times during our talk. I could tell he was still affected by the incredible story that we are about to reveal in this article.

The story starts as three close Cranford High School graduates, class of '48, were studying at college in St. Petersburg, Florida, in November of 1950. Jimmy Walker, Jim Hall and Chuck, as his friends knew him, were on the beach, listening to the Army-Navy game on the radio. As a news flash broke into the broadcast they heard President Truman announce a national emergency in Korea.



"Junie" boarding his F-84  
Thunderjet fighter-bomber.



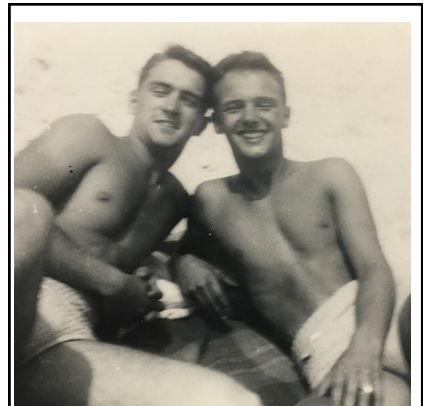
The F-84 Thunderjet.

Communists had invaded South Korea, our forces were backed into a peninsula and were about to be overtaken. Walker and Hall both enlisted right away, Walker into the Navy, Hall, Chuck's closest friend, in the Air Force. Chuck stayed to complete his college year at St. Petersburg Junior College. He eventually applied and was accepted into pilot training for the Air Force. The three friends sadly were never together again.

Charles Harker soon became a pilot with the new fleet of over 7000 F-84 Thunderjet fighter-bombers, a predecessor to the more refined F-86 Sabre. The Korean War was the first battle theater where jet fighters routinely dominated; it was a new era of aerial combat. Because of the danger of these encounters, night sorties to strike supply lines were being conducted. Charles was awarded the Air Medal in recognition of his gallant service and heroism

in this challenging battle environment prior to the fateful night of his disappearance in May 1953.

Military reports initially stated that Charles flew beyond radar surveillance and voice communication and crashed his aircraft, disintegrating upon impact. However, it was later reported that the aircraft following him by minutes saw no sign of a crash scene. No search had taken place due to the hostility of the area. Charles' aircraft may not have crashed at all ; no remains were ever recovered. Accordingly, Charles was classified as "MIA," missing in action and presumed dead. He was awarded the Purple Heart posthumously. It seems like a simple story with a sad ending, another brave young man giving his life for his country, . . . but maybe not so simple.



Bob and "Junie" brothers on the beach in Ship Bottom NJ



1st Lt. Charles Harker Jr. in a casual moment

Fast forward to 1960, Jim Hall, Charles' best friend, is now a civilian information officer employed by the Department of the Army, assigned to the United Nations in Korea. Seven years after the conclusion of hostilities, armistice talks are still taking place in a building right on the line that separates North and South Korea. On one side of the table, a team of stern-faced Communist North Korean officers sit, and on the other, similar looking United Nations officials stare back. Jim Hall was a spectator listening to days of tedious rehashing of post-conflict matters. The conversations had turned to the repatriation of suspected prisoners still being held captive by the North Koreans and Russians. As lists of the suspected captives were read, Jim heard "Charles Harker Jr. " Jim said, "Did you just say Charles Harker Jr.?" He immediately went to the UN officials to find out why they just read the name of his

best friend as being held by the Communists. He was told that a picture of what appeared to be his buddy Chuck had surfaced from a Russian POW camp. For the next

ten years Jim Hall would work tirelessly, using all of his Washington contacts, to uncover further information about the situation he had stumbled upon, but to no avail. It seemed like he hit a dead end. Decades passed, now 1990 when Jim Hall attended a Cranford High School reunion and he ran into Chuck's older brother Bob. He shared his revelation while he was working in Korea. Bob was notably shaken by the story. Trusting that Jim had turned every stone possible in his research, they both agreed that Junie had been taken from them in the springtime of his life. Case closed, again Autumn 1993, following the breakup of the Soviet Union, brought another turn in this amazing story.

The Associated Press uncovered a government report titled "The Transfer of U.S. Korean War POWs to the U.S.S.R." telling of the organized transport of American POWs to China and ultimately the Soviet Union. The Clinton administration decided not to release the report; however, an unidentified leaker brought the story to light. Documents had been discovered indicating that American pilots were being held by the Russians as early as 1953 and our government knew about it. More proof was found through the 1960's. Never was any grief-stricken family given a hint of the



"Junie" and his sweetheart Gail Carson of N. Plainfield. Note her wearing his wings.



1st Lt. Charles Abbott Harker Jr.  
311th Fighter-Bomber Squadron  
56th Fighter Bomber Group



program to move their loved ones to Siberian gulags (forced work camps) or other remote locations in Russia. Interviews with retired Russian officers from these camps confirmed the leaked information. Lists of the Russian-held pilots were included in the reports. There were several lists containing hundreds of names, Charles A. Harker Jr.'s name appeared on two of them.

Our research uncovered the actual list of Charles' personal possessions at the time of his interrogation at the Russian POW camp. It is printed in Russian and translated into English. It itemizes the complete contents of his wallet and personal bag that accompanied him on his ill-fated mission.



1st Lt. Charles A. Harker Jr.  
receiving Air Medal for gallant service.



Memorial marker at Arlington  
National Cemetery.

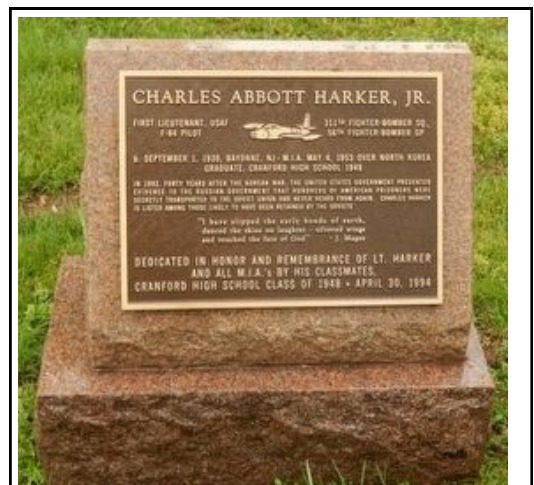
information about the new F-86 fighter jets that had been plaguing their MiG-15 fighters, formerly the best air-fighting machines. The kill ratio between the MiG-15 and the F-86 was 5:1. The F-86 was slightly faster and had superior radar gun sights that made it deadly in high-speed dogfights. Interviews with retired Russian officers revealed Stalin's plan to attempt to force F-86 fighter jets to land, and then take the pilots to interrogation camps in Mongolia and Siberia. The aircraft would be transported for study and duplication.

The Soviet 64th Fighter Aviation Corps was the unit formed by Stalin to hunt pilots who had been shot down or grounded. It is documented that there were 70 Russian teams with the sole mission of searching for these men. It is believed that about 600 American pilots, many of F-86 Sabres, may have been taken captive in this way. Officers of the 64th Fighter Aviation Corps were interviewed after the Soviet breakup, confirming this diabolical plan. Twenty-four years have passed since

this disclosure by the Russian government. Not one of these pilots were repatriated after the conclusion of hostilities, a complete disregard for all Geneva Convention requirements. Josef Stalin died four months prior to the end of the Korean War, March 5, 1953, two months before Charles Harker Jr. went missing. In all, 54,246 Americans were lost and 8,140 are unaccounted for, 2,195 are estimated to have been captured.

Charles A. Harker Jr. "Junie" was a great American and one of our Cranford 86 Hometown Heroes. Amazingly at the time of his disappearance he was just 22 years old.

The goal of our group is to introduce the brave men that sacrificed all, so that we can live here in freedom. This Memorial Day at our town's ceremony that follows our parade we are planning to dedicate banners that will line the streets of Cranford. Each will bear the photographs and information of the heroes whose stories have been told this year.



Cranford Memorial Park monument  
dedicated to Charles Harker by his 1948  
graduating class in 1993 after being  
identified as a POW