

WWII soldier honored in San Angelo



Members of the ASU ROTC Honor Guard stand at attention during a ceremony honoring 1st Lt. Mark Mathis at Fairmount Cemetery on Sunday. PHOTOS BY COLIN MURPHEY / SAN ANGELO STANDARD-TIMES

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In the U.S. military, there is a tradition of leaving coins on the grave markers of veterans. A nickel means the visiting soldier and the deceased veteran trained together at boot camp. Leaving a dime means the soldiers served together in some capacity. A quarter means the visiting soldier was with the deceased at the time of death. A penny simply means a member of the military visited the deceased and paid respect.

By the end of a ceremony at Fairmount Cemetery on Sunday, the marker honoring 1st Lt. Mark Mathis was covered with pennies placed by dozens of



A member of the U.S. military places a coin on the plaque for 1st Lt. Mark Mathis at Fairmount Cemetery during a ceremony Sunday.

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members of the armed forces in attendance. There were no nickels, dimes or quarters because none of the military personnel in attendance had even been born when Mathis lost his life in the line of duty.

Mathis enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps on April 30, 1941, at the age of 23. He served as an engine mechanic at Goodfellow AFB before being deployed as a bombardier to Africa and then the European Theater during World War II.

After completing a bombing run over German submarine yards in 1943, Mathis' aircraft was attacked by enemy fighters over the Atlantic Ocean's North Sea. It was last seen going down over the water. The crew members were never seen alive again. Mathis' body was never recovered.

On Sunday at Fairmount Cemetery in San Angelo, a memorial plaque at the Mathis family plot was dedicated to Mark. Larry Miller, program coordinator with the Freedom Through Vigilance Association (FTVA) Heritage Chapter, said the effort to recognize Mathis was a way to remind people of what members of the armed services give up to serve their country.

"We honor those who have served and perished in conflict," Miller said. "We shouldn't forget these people who went off to war. In the case of Mark, his remains were never returned. These people hugged their mama, they shook their dad's hand, they kissed their loved ones, and then they went off to war and never came back. I think that's reason enough to honor their service and sacrifice."

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A member of the U.S. military salutes the plaque for 1st Lt. Mark Mathis at Fairmount Cemetery during a ceremony Sunday.

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Larry Miller addresses the audience during a ceremony honoring 1st Lt. Mark Mathis at Fairmount Cemetery on Sunday.