

THEIR CALL SOLVES MYSTERY OF FROZEN ARM FOUND IN GLACIER FOLLOWING 1948 PLANE CRASH

**ASKEATON**  
**Martin Byrne**

A RANDOM late-night phone call from California to County Limerick last October has now led to the answer to a question which had puzzled sports across America for almost a decade.

And the solution – quite literally – came from the mouth of a retired Englishish maintenance supervisor in Borrigone, Askaton.

Months of research and the use of leading edge science has finally proved the identity of a severed arm which had emerged from the ice of a glacier in Alaska.

The arm had belonged to one of 24 merchant sailors who had crewed an oil tanker from the east coast of America to Shanghai and who were flying back to New York.

A flight crew of six was also aboard.

Their chartered DC4, Northwest Flight 422, was never to reach its destination, smashing instead into Mount Sanford in the Wrangell Mountains and falling 11,000 feet to the glacier floor below.

The date was March 12, 1948.

Terrible as the loss of life was, the American press ran with a different angle because the rumour soon grew that the plane was also loaded with gold.

The gold, it was rumoured, was part of the treasure of the Chinese dynastic government of Ming. Kathayia, a story which was already being depicted by the Communist forces of Mao Zedong.

The gold, worth many millions of dollars, was



Maurice Conway, Borrigone, whose DNA sample was able to identify the owner of a frozen arm found in Alaska, with his cousin Liam Dundon, also from Borrigone

being taken to the US for safety. It was said, in reality, however, no credible evidence has ever emerged to substantiate the existence of the gold.

And so things remained for half-a-century, until 1997, when two commercial pilots, Kevin McCreagor and Marc Milligan, discovered some wreckage at the base of the glacier.

This had been the culmination of their fascination with the accident and they had already collected biographical details and family trees of everyone who had been on board.

White back at the glacier in 1999, they discovered an arm, frozen and mummified and wearing a handmade ring.

Flown to Anchoorage, the official pathologist tried to get clear fingerprints, but failed to get clear images.

The fingerprints could not be matched with any existing databases or to any service records.

Attempts to obtain DNA also failed due to the degradation of the tissue over time.

But, with increased sophistication in technology, both problems were to be overcome.

A newly-developed rehydrating solution was applied to the hand at George Washington University, and enough definition was obtained to get good images.

In 2007, a match was found in Marine Corps files, and the hand was declared to be that of Francis Joseph van Zandt, who had, indeed, been on the plane on the fateful journey.

But the DNA route was still to be explored to establish full confirmation.

Mitochondrial DNA was finally extracted using a new method developed by the US Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) in Maryland.

This enabled the scientists to narrow the arm down to two possible owners.

To obtain absolute certainty, information, it was necessary for two successions of generations in the female line to be traced.

It was known that the mother of Francis van Zandt was Margaret Conway from Askaton, daughter of John Conway and Ellen Drumm.

Margaret Conway was born on September 14, 1871. And so, more in hope than expectation, AFDIL consultant, Colleen Fitzpatrick, based in California, began telephoning all

other sources.

His computer is loaded with dozens of old photographs from all of the families down the generations.

Rev Dr John M Peckery, a native of Ballysteen and renowned historian and genealogist, also volunteered to assist and drew up the complicated family tree.

As a result of all the work, Mr Conway now has an enormous amount of copies of records, photographs and diagrams which were amassed in the course of months of research.

"I had to be sure of getting every link right along the way," he said.

Conway's cousin, Liam Dundon, also became deeply involved in tracing the ancestry.

In parallel with this work was the final act – the taking of a DNA sample from Mosaic Conway.

A sterile kit was sent from either side of the world and swabs were taken.

Coincidentally, it was on the same day last year that the laboratory in America went delirious with joy as the short went up: "It's a match. It's a match."

And so, after 60 years, the mystery is solved, the ring has been given to Francis van Zandt's nearest traceable relative in America, the details of the whole story were released at a joint press conference in Alaska and Washington DC, and the combination of science in America and local research in County Limerick has proven that not even a half-century of being embedded in ice can prevent the truth from being revealed.

the Conways in the Irish telephone book in the hope of obtaining information about the family of John Conway and Ellen Drumm.

"I am ex-diretory, but she rang my sister-in-law one night and that's how she got my number," said Maurice (Mossie) Conway of Borrigone.

When the late night call came, Mossie "immediately realised that the Conway / Drumm connection led directly to my own family."

It would soon be established that the great great grandmothers, Elizabeth Drumm, were a sister of Francis van Zandt's grandmother Helen or Ellen.

"Many of those siblings (sons and daughters of John Conway and Ellen Drumm) came to the US, but so far we have been unable to find any descendants among them who link along the exclusively female line to the family," Ms Fitzpatrick told Mossie Conway.

"If we can't find any Conways, we are willing to go back a generation to find a descendant of the Drumm family along the exclusively female line of the family. That would be a descendant of Ellen Drumm's sister, for example," she said.

Elizabeth Drumm (1833 to 1935) had a daughter, Anne O'Shea (1856 to 1941) whose daughter, Bridget Sheehy (1885 to 1969) had a daughter, Catherine McNamee (1922 to 1986). And Catherine McNamee was Mossie Conway's mother.

All of this was painstakingly researched by Mossie in Kilmorran, Shanagolden, and other parish records, and other parish records, and cemetery headstones and