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## Mystery of lost war hero may be solved, 70 years on

By [Ralph Riegel](#)

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THE body of a World War Two fighter pilot shot down 70 years ago has finally been discovered in the Egyptian desert, his family believe.

The Pryor-Bennett family are praying that DNA tests confirm that the remains are those of Flight Sergeant Denis Copping.

The young pilot has been missing for 70 years after he failed to return to base in his Curtiss Kittyhawk fighter in 1942.

It was initially believed that the young man was shot down by the Luftwaffe near the Egypt-Libya border -- but experts later guessed that the RAF pilot got lost in a sandstorm over the featureless desert before running out of fuel and crashing.

Incredibly, a group of Polish oil workers discovered the near-intact Kittyhawk plane three months ago.

They confirmed that the pilot survived the crash because they found his parachute but no remains.

They concluded that he must have set out on foot across the baking desert to try to reach the safety of Allied lines.

Flt Sgt Copping's nephew William Pryor-Bennett (62), was determined that his uncle's remains should be found -- and his son John (30) was prepared to travel to Egypt to help with the search.

But the Pryor-Bennetts -- who run the successful Mother Hubbards Cafe in Kinsale -- were astounded to receive word that Italian military historians have already found what they believe could be the young pilot's remains.

The discovery was made just over a fortnight ago.

"They heard about the discovery of my uncle's plane and decided to search the area around it. They have been doing a lot of research on the Italian soldiers that fought alongside Rommel," William Pryor-Bennett told the Irish Independent.

The Italians searched the area around the crash fighter plane -- and came across human remains just five miles from the Curtiss.

"They didn't recover much -- just a leg and some vertebrae. We don't know when DNA tests are going to be carried out to see if it actually is the body of my uncle," he added.

The crash site is located more than 200 miles from where the Allied front line was in 1942 -- and, without water or supplies, it was believed the young airman would only have covered 20 to 40 miles on foot.

It is now feared that he only made it five miles before perishing from heat and exhaustion.

"Unfortunately, it looks like it was just too far for him to make it," said Mr Pryor-Bennett.

"Obviously I never knew him but I heard so much about him as I grew up. The family always wanted to know what happened because all we heard at the time was that he was 'missing in action'. But we know now," he said.

The Egyptian authorities have given permission for the plane to be salvaged and brought back to the UK.

The Royal Air Force hopes to restore the fighter and put it on display at the Hendon Aviation Museum in London.

Flt Sgt Copping was assigned with a colleague from RAF's 260 Squadron to fly two US-built fighter aircraft between bases on June 20, 1942 at the height of the North Africa campaign by Hitler's

Africa Korps.

"It is incredible that his plane has been found after all this time. We're just hoping now that the remains found are those of my uncle," added Mr Pryor-Bennett.

- *Ralph Riegel*

