

Lieutenant Charles Noble Kirkham

Communities tend to remember those who they know the best, and as a result, others often go unnoticed, especially 70 years later. However, the story of Charles Kirkham has survived, even though he was a small, and fleeting, part of his communities. Both his community in Sunnyside, Washington, and at Washington State University remember his legacy, even though he was but a temporary member of each. Yet, his story remains a lasting example of the comradery and brotherhood between soldiers.



Charles Noble Kirkham, as a High School Senior

Originally born in Canada, Kirkham and his family moved to the Yakima Valley in 1936, where he attended Sunnyside High School. After graduating in 1940, he went on to attend Washington State College in 1941, where he majored in Mechanical Engineering. Kirkham attended for only one year, leaving in 1942 to join the Navy, where he became an airman, stationed onboard the USS *Shangri-La*.¹

¹ John Pannin, "Sunnyside man paid the ultimate sacrifice," *Daily Sun News*, November 11, 2015. And Registrar Record, UA 121, Box 1, Folder 8, War Records 1918-1950, Washington State University Manuscripts Archives Special Collections, Pullman, Washington.



Charles Kirkham, as a Navy Lieutenant



The USS *Shangri-La*, 1946

In late June 1945, when returning from a successful raid against Kyushu, the southernmost Japanese home island, Kirkham's wingman went down in the sea, after having been damaged during the raid. Upon seeing this, Kirkham began radioing to the ship for help. He continued to circle his wingman's position, giving constant radio updates, while the seaplanes were sent out to assist. However, before they could arrive, Kirkham's plane ran out of fuel. The

last transmission he made read “I’m going down to join up.” When the seaplanes arrived, there was no sign of either man.²

This act of comradery and loyalty to a fellow pilot earned Kirkham a posthumous Navy Cross, Air Medal, and Purple Heart. *The Sunnyside Sun*, the local newspaper, as well as *The Daily Evergreen* at WSC carried the story of his death. For most men lost at sea, this likely would have been the end of their story, their remembrance left to monuments and their family. However, in 2015, the *Daily Sun News*, the current newspaper for Sunnyside, Washington, ran a full companion to their regular newspaper for Veteran’s Day. Within, was a full two-page story detailing Kirkham’s story, a tribute to a man whose memory lived on in their community, though he had only lived there for five years.

In the same way, through this project, Kirkham, and many others like him, will live on here at Washington State University. Since Charles Kirkham attended for only a year, he left little record at the College, with no mention of him in the *Chinook*, the school yearbook. Indeed, the most notable written record is the report of his death in the school paper. Yet, in this archive, Kirkham’s story, and many others, can continue to shape the community at Washington State University.

² Pannin, “Sunnyside man paid the ultimate sacrifice,” *Daily Sun News*, November 11, 2015. And “In Memoriam,” *Washington State Evergreen*, July 25th, 1945.