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U.S. Air Force retirees reunite here at POW*MIA Awareness Rally

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POCATELLO — Whether organizers of the 11th annual POW*MIA Rally and Motorcycle Rodeo realize it or not, they played a role in the reunion of two retired members of the U.S. Air Force who had not seen each other in more than 40 years.

The two men had plenty of time to catch up at the three-day event that was held at the Bannock County Fairgrounds this weekend.

"It gives me chills to be here," said Simon Penz, who drove from Coeur d'Alene to meet Capt. George Burk in person. "I wouldn't have missed this opportunity ... I would have done anything humanly possible to be here."

Among other things, Burk has been a motivational



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Jason Johnson, of Roy, Utah, Bud Busenbark and Donna Busenbark, of Perry, Utah, from left, plug their ears during the loudest pipes competition at the POW/MIA Awareness Rally and Motorcycle Rodeo at the North Bannock County Fairgrounds Saturday afternoon in Pocatello.

speaker for the last 27 years.

"I was invited to be here and speak at several of the ceremonies," Burk explained.

In May of 1970, Burk was the sole survivor of a mili-

tary plane crash.

Ironically, the two members of the Air Force never met prior to the day of the accident. Penz was supposed to be a passenger on the plane the day it crashed

POW*MIA RALLY

Today's events:

7 a.m., Power County Search and Rescue Farewell Breakfast.

9 a.m., Sunday services led by Reverend Jim Jones.

11 a.m., Kids Rodeo.

in the hills near Schellville, Calif. Given the option to stay or go, Penz chose to stay and instead ended up being a member of the cleanup crew.

Burk doesn't remember what happened following the tragic accident that was triggered by faulty aircraft engineering.

"Surviving the crash added more purpose to my life," Burk said. "I've always tried to be more positive. In a way, I feel like my attitude honors those people that touched my life when I needed it most. To this day,

I am still in touch with some of the doctors that helped bring me back to life."

Burk suffered severe burns and multiple internal injuries.

In fact, he spent 90 days in an intensive care unit, where he said he had two near-death experiences.

With help from others, like Penz, Burk has been able to piece together what happened after the plane crashed.

"I have also had sons and daughters of those who perished on the airplane look me up over the years," Burk

said. "They were seeking closure and felt compelled to have a conversation with the person who last had contact with their loved one."

It was on the recent 40th anniversary of the airplane crash that Penz felt compelled to dial Burk's telephone number.

"After we spoke, I passed along a few pictures that were taken the day of the accident," Penz said. "Burk told me it was like a flashback looking at them for the first time."

Penz said he idolizes Burk, calling him a hero.

"I hope others walk away with the same message I did after hearing (Burk's) story," Penz said. "No matter what happens to you in life, there is always someone who has it worse. There is always light at the end of the tunnel."