

Finding the forgotten

Shoreview man searches for 33 planes lost in World War II

by Katie Erickson

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A Shoreview man's search for one downed World War II plane has been expanded to a search for 33 planes and 110 men missing in action during the war.

Patrick Ranfranz, an aficionado of history and flying, has always been intrigued by the mystery surrounding the 1944 death of his uncle, Army Air Force

Tech. Sgt. John McCullough.

The family knew only that McCullough, an assistant radio operator, was missing/killed in action off the coast of a tiny island in the Pacific Ocean. His body was never recovered.

Ranfranz, of Shoreview, and his wife, Cherie, traveled to Yap Island last fall to

Expanded Search

Patrick Ranfranz has expanded the search for his uncle's downed B-24 to a search for all 33 U.S. planes lost on Yap Island during World War II.

The tiny island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean holds the secret to 10 downed Army Air Force planes, 11 Navy planes and 12 Marine planes. From those planes, 110 of 145 men on board were listed as missing or killed in action.

For more information visit www.missingaircrew.com.

look for clues. During their search they stumbled across other downed planes on the island while searching on land and underwater.

The couple will return to Yap Island Sept. 13 to 29, this time armed with much more information.

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Planes

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"The first trip was a reconnaissance trip (flying blind)," Ranfranz said. "We did not know what to expect. ... The big difference is that we now have research about all the planes lost near Yap and will be able to identify the wreckage of almost any plane we locate."

The couple continued researching the crash after they left the island. Ranfranz said they've found something new every week.

And Yapese residents, intrigued by their visitors' search last year, have done their own research as well, he said. The residents will guide the couple to more crash sites during the upcoming trip.

"I'm light years ahead of last year regarding my research, Yap contacts and ability to search for the planes," Ranfranz said.

He expects to find three to five planes, thanks to the additional research.

Seven relatives of two other men lost on the island also will accompany the couple to Yap Island.

"The families are thrilled to be able to visit Yap and never thought it was possible until they were put in contact with me. I feel this has already made the trip a smashing success," Ranfranz said.

He said they have a good chance of locating the B-24 on which one of the families lost their father/grandfather.

Even if they don't, just the opportunity to travel to the island is bound to help bring closure to the families, Ranfranz said.



— Submitted photo

Sharon Conner will join Pat Ranfranz and others next month on a trip to Yap Island. Conner's father and Ranfranz's uncle both were killed in action on flights over the island during World War II.

Bigger mission

Ranfranz also has a personal interest in finding a B-24. Only two are known to have crashed near the island, one carrying Ranfranz's uncle and the other carrying the father of one of the men joining the trip to Yap Island next month.

Ranfranz has a better chance of finding the second plane, so the group will focus on that search next month.

Ranfranz said his goal is "to locate all the planes and men lost near Yap. ... I have a special focus on my uncle; however, so many men are listed as MIA that I want to make sure we focus on the cases we can solve."

He's looking for any information he can find on all of the 33 U.S. planes lost near the island.

His reasoning is two-fold. First, he wants to help provide closure for other families who lost loved ones on the island.

Second, if he has success finding at least a few of the planes, he's more likely to receive funding from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) to continue the search for the rest of the planes.

Ranfranz said the organization, formed to solve such cases, is sorely underfunded and therefore focuses on the few thousand men missing in smaller wars rather than trying to tackle the 78,000

MIAs from World War II.

"JPAC is not staffed to put a dent in the World War II losses," Ranfranz said. "The government repeatedly makes the statement that we will never leave men behind, but we did with the missing from World War II. We wrote off the men and have never applied the resources to locate these men."

Yap Island, Ranfranz said, is just one example of those forgotten. He is the first to do the research and pull together information on the planes lost near Yap Island.

He already has spent thousands of dollars out of pocket in the search. But his efforts have not been in vain. He's ruled out several possible locations for his uncle's plane, and has caught the eye of JPAC officials with his extensive research.

Ranfranz said the organization is considering its own trip to Yap Island in 2007 or 2008 due to the research he already has uncovered. More high-tech equipment and other resources could be available for Ranfranz if JPAC sees he is making progress.

Ranfranz expects to spend several more years traveling between Minnesota and Yap Island.

"My mission will not be complete until I locate my all the planes, including my uncle's," he said.

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