

WEDNESDAY • JULY 5, 2006

# StarTribune **north**

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**Shoreview's Pat Ranfranz is on a mission of memory to Yap Island, the last known location of his uncle, John R. McCullough, a World War II airman.**



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Pat Ranfranz runs the Missing Air Crew Project, online at [MissingAirCrew.com](http://MissingAirCrew.com), which is dedicated to the lives and memories of the Coleman B-24 crew.

# Lost but not forgotten



John R. McCullough's plane was lost over Yap Island in 1944.

**« WE'RE BRINGING MEMORIES ALIVE THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN LOST. »**

Pat Ranfranz

By DAVID La VAQUE  
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**A** man is not dead until he is forgotten. That saying is at the heart of Pat Ranfranz's search for his uncle's downed bomber, which has become a quest to identify many of the World War II servicemen and planes lost on and around Yap Island more than 60 years ago.

From Sept. 13 to Sept. 29, the Shoreview resident will lead a nine-person search party on Yap Island, a spit of land in the western Pacific Ocean. They will be scuba diving, hacking through jungles and wading through swamps in an attempt to document the whereabouts of about 17 planes — including a pair of B-24 Liberator bombers, one of which is the resting place of Ranfranz's uncle John R. McCullough.

Ranfranz and his wife, Cherie, explored Yap Island in October 2005 armed with some basic information and diving gear.

They surveyed crash sites and interviewed several Yapese elders on what he called "a reconnaissance mission" that opened his eyes to a larger reality.

McCullough's plane is one of 33 known aircraft lost over the island, and he is one of the 110 men still listed as killed or missing in action on the island.

**Crew continues:** Bombers were vulnerable when they had to fly too far for fighter escorts to follow. **N8** ▶



Photo courtesy of Pat Ranfranz

The Coleman B-24 crew, including Pat Ranfranz's uncle, technical sergeant John R. McCullough, third from the bottom right.

## ON THE WEB

Pat Ranfranz has created an extensive website ([www.missing-aircrew.com](http://www.missing-aircrew.com)) for visitors interested in his project, findings and research. The site includes details on all the airmen and planes lost on or around Yap Island.

# Lost, not forgotten: A search for airmen

## ◀ CREW FROM NI

Ranfranz knows other families are in similar limbo knowing what exactly happened to their husbands, brothers, fathers or uncles. About 78,000 World War II servicemen are listed as killed or missing in action.

"We're not just searching for men, we're documenting lives cut short," Ranfranz said. "We're bringing memories alive that would have been lost forever."

His uncle's plane, a B-24 piloted by Gerald D. Coleman, was shot down on June 25, 1944, and crashed about 2 miles southeast of the island. The plane was part of the 13th Air Force, 372nd Bombardment Squadron, 307th Bombardment Group. McCullough, 20, of Watertown, S.D., was the assistant radio operator.

Ranfranz's search party will include an important new addition in Tim Schubert, a Yap Island resident from about 1984 to 1989. After discovering Ranfranz's website, he made contact in May. He told Ranfranz that in 1985, he found a plane in the back area of the harbor he believes is a B-24. Ranfranz said the first dive will be for that plane, which is likely the bomber piloted by Don A. Anthony.

Ron Anthony, Don's son, his wife and their three sons will

be on-hand for the search. The nine people who will be involved in the search are families of three airmen lost over Yap Island.

Ranfranz and his group plan to make more than 20 dives. At this time, however, they do not have the aid of underwater metal detectors or sonar equipment. Those items are widely available but expensive.

The cost of this trip, including airfare, boat and guide rentals, underwater cameras and other expenses, will be about \$9,000 for Pat and Cherie. They have received small, mainly private donations to help fund both trips.

Yap Island was not the site of a well-known battle. As U.S. forces moved west across the Pacific Ocean, they employed an "island-hopping" strategy. Some Japanese strongholds would be attacked while others were cut off and left to wither on the vine.

The island was bombed throughout 1944 and 1945 to prevent Japanese forces from rebuilding airfields within striking distance of the U.S. fleet. Because of their superior range, B-24s flew many of the missions. But their ability to fly great distances was a detriment. Fighter escorts could not stay with the bombers, leaving them vulnerable to enemy aircraft.

Reports indicate that Mc-



Photo courtesy of Pat Ranfranz

Pat and Cherie Ranfranz traveled to Yap Island last October to search for remains of the Coleman B-24 crew that was lost during World War II. They will return to the Pacific island this September to continue their search.

Cullough's B-24 was hit, made a loop, then fell toward the water in a flat spin. No parachutes were seen, and the 10 men on board were presumed dead.

"Sometimes when I'm sleeping, I picture seeing it on a dive," Ranfranz said.

In his dreams, he sees an aged but intact bomber resting on the ocean floor just beyond a reef. He found a painting that resembles his vision and considers the manta ray in the picture to be a good sign. An abundant supply of giant manta rays

makes Yap Island a top scuba diving destination.

He will not stop searching until he locates his uncle's plane, he said. Even when that day comes, he plans to continue his search of Yap Island.

"I am the first one to have comprehensive knowledge of the island; I've kind of adopted it," he said. "If I stop, I'm afraid that all those planes and men won't ever be identified."

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