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Patrick Ranfranz holds part of an American Hellcat in the jungle on Yap. Ranfranz has visited the South Pacific island twice looking for the plane in which his uncle, John McCullough, was lost.

(Photo by Photos courtesy Patrick Ranfranz)

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Nephew years for help in finding uncle

By Steve Young
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SHOREVIEW, Minn. - Patrick Ranfranz's search for his uncle's sunken B-24 bomber in the South Pacific has relied on Micronesian chieftains, incomplete military records and the fading memories of 80-year-old veterans and their relatives.

He'd like more assistance from his own government.

Years of research and his own travels to an island called Yap have given the 40-year-old suburban St. Paul man a fairly good idea about where the bomber lies that entombed his uncle, a Watertown farm boy named John McCullough, 63 years ago this June.

Now Ranfranz is hoping his extensive work will interest the Joint Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Command, or JPAC, in bringing its 21st century technology to the island to help him search.

"I was at a meeting in Minneapolis for families of World War II MIAs, and literally, the conversation was that Yap is now an area JPAC is interested in," Ranfranz says. "The indication is that ... it's because of the work we've done. One of them told me, 'We're going to Yap in the next couple years.' "

But if JPAC does come to Yap, will it be in time - before potential eyewitnesses die? The government's slow pace is as frustrating to families of missing World War II service members as have been the decades of trying to learn what happened to their loved ones.

Finding the lost

Within the Department of Defense, the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office handles policy and oversight when it comes to investigating, recovering and identifying Americans missing or lost in war. Almost half of its \$105 million annual budget is spent by JPAC, the agency that actually sends

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ABOUT THE SEARCH

Patrick Ranfranz of suburban St. Paul is a man on a mission. He's searching for a B-24 bomber shot down June 25, 1944, near a little island in the South Pacific. It was carrying his uncle, Tech Sgt. John McCullough of Watertown, and nine others when it sank just off the south tip of Yap.

Yap is in the western Caroline Islands, part of the Federated States of Micronesia, about 850 miles east of Mindanao in the Philippines.

Through his Web site, www.missingaircrew.com, and invaluable resources now available on the Internet, Ranfranz suspects the plane sank intact and that remains could yet be inside it.

Despite the misgivings of some of McCullough's other relatives, who think he should leave it alone, Ranfranz has traveled twice to Yap to dive and search for his uncle's plane. He intends to keep going back until he finds it. He hopes the U.S. government will help him search, too.

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The Department of Defense's published strategy today for recovering and accounting for missing personnel includes the authorization of 18 recovery teams - 10 dedicated to those missing in Southeast Asia, five dedicated to Korean War missing, and three to Americans missing from World War II.

For planning purposes, the level of effort expended by conflict is 65 percent for the Vietnam War, 20 percent for the Korean War and 15 percent for World War II, the Defense Department says.

But Larry Greer, a spokesman for the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office, says that the money spent looking for MIAs is not divided that way.

teams out to do the recovery work.

While the agencies are charged with accounting for Americans held captive or otherwise missing in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, much of their work also involves trying to account for service members missing from World War II, the Korean War, the Cold War and Vietnam.

JPAC estimates that 35,000 of the more than 78,000 Americans unaccounted for from World War II are potentially recoverable. The rest are either lost at sea or entombed in sunken vessels that can't be accessed. That compares with 1,800 still missing after Vietnam and 8,100 unaccounted for after the Korean War.

JPAC officials estimate that they identify the recovered remains of about 74 POW/ MIAs a year. But recovery efforts are slow for World War II missing, hindered by poor and inaccurate records, the inability to access some loss sites, even the weather.

"Asking a bureaucracy to be more efficient ... is an oxymoron," says Janice Snyder of Indianola, Wash., part of a loose-knit group called World War II Missing In Action Recovery Group. Her father, Air Force 2nd Lt. Dale Watterson, was shot down March 31, 1945, over Germany.

She describes JPAC's efforts at recovering World War II missing as trying "to carve Mount Rushmore using a dental pick. Some of us want to give them extra dynamite to blow away some of the rocks in the way."

Vietnam focus

Part of their frustration involves the emphasis JPAC has long placed on finding Vietnam MIAs. After the war, the families of Vietnam veterans evolved into a vocal and powerful group demanding the return of their missing loved ones, says Douglas Walker of New Canaan, Conn., part of the same group as Snyder.

His father, Brig. Gen. Kenneth Walker, became the highest-ranking World War II MIA lost in combat when he went missing during a bombing mission of Japanese shipping lanes at Rabaul, New Britain, in January 1943.

"They started out with a legitimate demand, to go into Southeast Asia and look for MIAs that were not recovered," Walker says of JPAC. "But now they have three detachments full time in Southeast Asia, and we'd like to see them spread their efforts around more. I think there could be no more than 1,200 Vietnam MIAs that are recoverable. And World War II has what, 35,000, 38,000?"

Snyder says family members of soldiers didn't question the government's efforts 60 years ago to find the missing. They just accepted what they were told. But Vietnam-era soldiers' families have demanded and received more accountability from their government.

Community Websites

BrandonInfo.com

[Brandon Valley Challenger](http://BrandonValleyChallenger.com)

[Dell Rapids Tribune](http://DellRapidsTribune.com)

[Baltic Beacon](http://BalticBeacon.com)

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"Our budget is not carved up in specific percentages by conflict," Greer says. "Because the operational situation is dynamic, specific percentages may vary from year to year."

Maj. Brian DeSantis, chief of community relations for JPAC, says his agency recognizes the need to expand its efforts in the area of World War II and Korea. In fact, it has received more money - including the hiring of more historians in 2001 - to expand and enhance efforts.

But family members remain skeptical.

Looking on their own

The flood of relatives looking for their missing World War II service members grew dramatically with the advent of the Internet. Military records became accessible on the Web. Northern Plains residents could easily reach out via e-mail to historians and researchers in Europe, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. And folks such as Snyder and Ranfranz became adept at making Freedom of Information requests.

Armed with such information, families began conducting their own searches. In the fall of 2005 - and again almost exactly a year later - Ranfranz flew to the island of Yap with his wife, Cherie, to search for his uncle's missing plane.

With files of research and the help of Yapese natives, including local chieftains, Ranfranz documented 33 American plane wrecks from World War II on or near an island that is 16 miles long and four miles wide. He documented the 149 men lost on those missions and the 110 still missing after the war.

Even the U.S. government didn't know that, he says.

"The military, I suppose, it's too vast. They never put their resources into focusing on each area to see what the losses really were after the war. The different branches weren't communicating on those losses, either. So no one had ever pulled all of this together until I did."

DeSantis of JPAC confirmed as much.

"We often start with very little," he says. "In the case of World War II, we have to create files on each loss. ... The records were not as accurate and are not readily available."

Ranfranz has provided JPAC with GPS maps, pictures and eyewitness accounts. His own study of missing air crew reports indicates that his uncle's plane - he calls it the Coleman B-24 because 2nd Lt. Gerald D. Coleman headed up the 10-member crew - was shot down by the Japanese on June 25, 1944, and did not disintegrate when it hit the water.

Searching the sea

His research has convinced him that the plane lies intact on a flat off a reef at the south end of the island, in 100 to 500 feet of water. He also suggests that there could be remains inside the downed plane.

"There are a lot of remains that are recovered out of the ocean," Ranfranz says. "If the plane goes down and does not disintegrate, and it's basically a tomb, that allows for the preservation of remains."

In dozens of 30- to 40-minute dives, he and his wife have found propellers, munitions and shell casings on the ocean bottom. What they haven't located yet is what he calls "the Holy Grail piece," such as an aircraft identification tag or a serial number on a machine gun - anything that would identify his uncle's plane.

That's why the military, with its side-scanning sonar, submersibles and other technology, would be so valuable.

"JPAC could go in with a military expedition and do in a short time what I've been doing for years," he says.

Help could come

Though Ranfranz thinks JPAC will come to Yap, the agency isn't confirming that. DeSantis says his agency has to apply its resources

prudently. An underwater recovery effort costs hundreds of thousands of dollars, including a platform or vessel for diving and the equipment needed to remove wreckage and recover remains. That compares with recovering remains from isolated burials with a cost little more than the price of airfare and lodging for a team, he says.

"We conduct operations in those cases where we are most optimistic of a good result."

While it appreciates and even encourages information from private individuals and researchers, officials can run into problems with those sources, DeSantis says. Some go to sites and disturb evidence that could lead to an investigation. Some have excavated sites with heavy equipment and ruined remains. And others have caused problems by offending host nations by violating their laws, which made it more difficult for JPAC to conduct operations in those countries, he says.

"We encourage anyone who has information about a specific case to share that information with us," DeSantis says. "However, the evidence, leads or information we do get will always be validated independently because the judgment or objectivity of private researchers or historians can be clouded by emotion."

Frustrating wait

For Snyder, Walker and Ranfranz, that independent validation often only fuels their frustration. Time is running short, especially for the older generations, they say.

"Those of us who are waiting the longest also see the shorter time available in our lifetime to ... see these issues resolved," Snyder says.

It is frustrating, Walker says, and priorities should change.

"As it is now, they only respond to World War II sightings if someone fills out a document and makes a persuasive case," Walker says. "Otherwise, they don't search. And that is their first glaring flaw."

For his part, Ranfranz says he will keep going back to Yap, even if his government doesn't join him in the search. It costs him a lot of money to do so - between \$10,000 and \$12,000 each time he and his wife travel to the South Pacific. But he insists that he won't give up until he has an answer.

He just hopes JPAC doesn't give up, either. Or wait too long.

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