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Patrick Ranfranz holds a model of a B-24 bomber similar to the one his uncle, Tech Sgt. John McCullough, was shot down by the Japanese near the island of Yap on June 25, 1944.

## The solitary search for Uncle John Nephew won't give up hunt for a soldier he never knew

By Steve Young  
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SHOREVIEW, Minn. - In the crystal blue waters off the South Pacific island of Yap, Patrick Ranfranz swims with the manta rays and speaks to the dead.

Hovering beneath the surface, Ranfranz scans the depths for a B-24 bomber that crashed into the sea and fell to the white, sandy ocean floor below, entombing 10 men, including his uncle - South Dakota farm boy John McCullough - 63 years ago this June.

Sometimes he feels so near to the man he knows only from pictures and others' memories that Ranfranz calls to him through his mask.

"Hi, John," he will say. "I know I'm close to you. ... and the others. I hope you're proud of the work I'm doing."

"Work" doesn't begin to describe what this 40-year-old suburban St. Paul man has spent years doing. As a child, he would spin the globe in his classroom until he found Yap - a strange-sounding place famous for ancient stone money and, more importantly to Ranfranz, for its connection to his mother's brother.

Through the years, that childhood wonder turned into a fascination with airplanes, history and the scant family takes of an

uncle he never knew. Eventually, it became a passion, then an obsession.

Now it possesses him so much that Ranfranz has created a Web site, [missingaircrew.com](http://missingaircrew.com), and filled it with pictures, military records, maps, history lessons and blogs. It's all tied directly and indirectly to the missing plane on which Tech. Sgt. John McCullough was an assistant radio gunner when it was shot down June 25, 1944, by the Japanese while Americans bombed an air strip on the island.

Frustrated by the slow pace of government efforts to recover more than 78,000 service members missing from World War II, Ranfranz has begun to spend his

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For more information on Patrick Ranfranz's search for his missing uncle, World War II radio gunner Tech. Sgt. John McCullough of Watertown, go online at [www.missingaircrew.com](http://www.missingaircrew.com)

## YAP STRATEGICALLY VITAL DURING WWII

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

This small island came under the control of Spain during its Age of Exploration and served as a source of copra - dried coconut meat from which coconut oil is extracted. It also is famous for its giant stone money - large circular stones that are carved symmetrically and holed in the center so as to be transported. They can be greater in diameter than a man's height.

Yap was a Japanese air and naval base during World War II, before falling to American forces. Though largely bypassed in the U.S. "island-hopping" strategy, it was regularly bombed by American ships and aircraft, and Yap-based bombers did some damage in return.

In particular, 33 B-24 Liberators conducted a surprise raid on the Yap airfield June 22, 1944. The Japanese were caught completely off guard; not a single one of the more than 40 planes on the ground was able to take off.

Nineteen enemy planes were destroyed, 15 damaged, and the runway was cratered and rendered unserviceable.

own money as well - up to \$12,000 in 2005, and a similar amount in 2006 - to fly to the South Pacific with his wife, Cherie, so they can search themselves.

They will keep going back, he promises, until they find that plane and whatever lies inside of it.

"My quest is to find John," Ranfranz says as he sits in the office of his Shoreview home, surrounded by folders and files, model airplanes and images on the wall of World War II aircraft.

"I think guys like him belong home, especially if the military's motto is, 'We don't leave anyone behind,' " he continues. "I want to do this for the sacrifice he and others made, and to chronicle who they are. I don't want them to be lost to history. I really believe that a man is not dead until he is forgotten."

### Relatives divided about mission to find uncle

It is a zeal that seems odd even to some of his own relatives. John McCullough was the fourth of 13 children born to a skinny Irish farmer named Hugh McCullough and his wife, Blanche. Two of the kids died in infancy. The rest of the clan ended up on a 1,400-acre spread south of Watertown in 1938 after the Depression wiped out the family's sobdusting dreams on the western Iowa prairie near Denison.

Many of the McCullough siblings are fine with their nephew's search.

"I admire Pat for his keeping at it," says Marilyn Schulte of Watertown who, at 75, would be eight years younger than her brother, John. "I don't object to it."

Nor does her brother, Bill McCullough, 71, of suburban Seattle. "I think it's a really good thing that Patrick's doing," he says, then quickly adds, "though my thoughts aren't necessarily shared by all the family."

Indeed, there are a few of the brothers nearer to John McCullough's age who wonder why their nephew just doesn't let it rest. One was Lyle McCullough, who died last October in Albert Lea, Minn.

"There was an older brother, Bud, who had passed on to Lyle information he heard from other people who flew planes that they literally exploded into a million pieces when they hit the water," Bill McCullough says. "So I guess Lyle felt, 'Hey, it's over. Leave it be.' "

Ranfranz's reading of the records suggest that the plane sank intact. But in Moline, Ill., where 80-year-old Earl McCullough is a retired engineer, and the Twin Cities, where 78-year-old Bob McCullough drives a taxi, there is indifference and curiosity.

"He feels strongly about it, so I don't care," Bob McCullough says of Ranfranz's search. "But it ain't going to bring him back, so what difference does it make?"

His brother, Earl, adds: "I see nothing wrong with it. I have nothing against it at all. But I don't really understand the enthusiasm for it. It's not going to change anything."

### Some don't want to confront 'the pain of the past'

Lisa Phillips of World War II Families for the Return of the Missing understands

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For six consecutive days after the raid, B-24s blasted away at Yap, preventing its use in ferrying planes from the Philippines to the Marianas to aid the Japanese defenders of Saipan.



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that attitude. The thought of finding a missing brother or uncle or husband 60 years later can be painful, she says, especially for those who had already reconciled their loved one's death decades earlier.

It could be that brothers who served in World War II and came home might feel survivor's guilt, too. Or if they witnessed the death and destruction and horrors of war themselves, revisiting those memories through a search for a missing relative could be too much to bear.

"For 1 or 2 percent of relatives of MIAs, I think it does bring up the pain of the past," says Phillips, of Windham, Maine, whose great-uncle died in a Burmese prisoner-of-war camp. His remains were lost when the airplane bringing them home crashed between Burma and Calcutta, India.

"But I would also tell you," Phillips adds, "that 98 percent of people today want to see their loved ones recovered."

And not just recovered, but remembered, Patrick Ranfranz says. His uncle only lived to age 20. His siblings' memories of their brother have faded. There isn't even a marker in a cemetery to chronicle his name or the span of his days.

"John would have had a family and kids and a future," Ranfranz says. "Instead, he disappeared off an island that he probably never even knew existed two days before he was shot down near it.

"It's a sad, sad situation. The more I physically come in touch with things he had, the more I understand that to be forgotten is the saddest thing. Except for me, I'm not sure much would be said of John."

Even with Ranfranz's research, the story of McCullough's life is thin. His younger brothers and sisters don't remember him well. What the brothers nearer in age to him recall are impressions of a farm kid who was quiet and mild-mannered but could handle himself physically if needed.

"He wasn't as bookish as I was," Earl McCullough recalls. "But as I remember, he was better set up than I was. He was really well muscled."

At 170 pounds and about 5-foot-10, John McCullough could have been an athlete if he wasn't so busy helping his father scrape a living from the land.

"Them years, you did a lot of work on the farm," Bob McCullough, the Twin Cities taxi driver, says. "It was more work than some of these people today ever done."

When World War II started calling his sons away, Hugh McCullough decided to give up the farm in Watertown and, as autumn broke in 1942, moved his family to Covina, Calif. There, the father and three sons, including John, worked in a Goodyear plant in Los Angeles, building bullet-sealing fuel tanks for airplanes, and testing and repairing life rafts.

### Radio school days in Sioux Falls before the war

It wasn't long after that, in spring 1943, that Uncle Sam called John McCullough into the service. One of his first stops on the way to the South Pacific was back in Sioux Falls, where he spent four months at the Army Air Corps radio school. There he befriended a young Californian from Lodi named David Stennick.

"He was bashful, but a very, very pleasant young man," Stennick, 82, says. "He had the personality that was very enjoyable to be around. Whatever the general consensus of the guys in a group was, that was fine with John."

Stennick remembers how he and McCullough caught a ride once to attend a dance at the Corn Palace in Mitchell. Afterward, with no transportation back to the base, they sat talking beneath a street lamp at 1 in the morning when a couple from Mitchell driving by

stopped, asked them what they were doing and offered them a place to spend the night.

Ranfranz's mother, Marie, has a few memories such as that. She was the youngest child, almost 14 years behind Jack, but recalls how he would twirl her in the air on their small farmstead in California.

She remembers, too, when the Western Union man came to the door in July 1944 with the news no one wanted to hear.

"This Western Union guy handed the message to my mother, and everybody started crying," Marie Ranfranz says from her home in Rochester, Minn. "My dad, and the other brothers that were there, they were all crying. I can still see myself going over, sitting on the piano bench and just watching everybody."

Her father never allowed her mother to put John's picture up in the house again, Marie Ranfranz recalls, even after he moved the family back to Watertown in the late 1940s.

"It had something to do with his anger," Marie Ranfranz says. "You figure out an Irishman's mind. He didn't want it up. He was angry. Angry that they had taken him over there so young, and he got killed. Angry at the Japanese."

Web site sparks nephew's investigation into '44 crash

Stories like that intrigued and inspired her son. Twenty years ago, as a student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Patrick Ranfranz intended to write his senior thesis on that uncle. When military records didn't come through fast enough, he switched gears. But his interest never waned, and he kept pursuing the story, even as he established a career that has taken him to the vice president of marketing for Pearson AGS Globe, a publisher of educational special needs curriculum products.

Three years ago, Ranfranz created his Web site. He posted his years of research on the Internet. And the response was overwhelming.

"It was just like a fire," he says. "It just took off."

He heard from family members of other crewmen on his uncle's B-24 - and actually succeeded in bringing members of at least one family back together again. He heard from other members of his uncle's bomb group, and has made presentations of his work to veterans groups.

Most importantly, he heard details about U.S. planes that crashed over Yap and received valuable information on places where he should look. So he and wife, Cherie - both pilots and certified divers - have begun doing their own searches with the help of natives who remember the days when bombing rocked their island and filled the sky with dogfights.

With their daughter, Genna, graduating this year from high school, Ranfranz insists that they have the time and desire to keep returning to Yap as often as their finances will allow them.

And in the water, surrounded by sharks and manta rays, sea turtles and barracudas, he says he will keep speaking with the dead until he finds what he is looking for.

"Being in the water where I knew these men were, it's a strange feeling. I feel so close that maybe I went right over the top of them," Ranfranz says. "I tell them, 'I feel like I know all of you and the others. Don't worry. I will find you.' "

Reach reporter Steve Young at 331-2306.

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