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World War II

Dead, But Not Forgotten

American, Palauan Push Search For Executed Airmen, Jesuits and Yapese

By Giff Johnson

Where exactly are the remains of 13 people — three American airmen, six Jesuit missionaries and four Micronesians — all executed by Japanese soldiers in the same spot on Babeldaob Island, Palau in the waning days of World War II? A team of investigators from the U.S. Army's Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii (CILHI) attempted, unsuccessfully, to locate the burial site in Palau in October last year, and is expected back for a second search.

This largely unknown story is beginning to see the light of day largely because of the efforts of University of Guam professor Donald Shuster and Fr. Felix Yaoch, S.J., the Jesuit Superior for Micronesia based in Koror. Shuster is working on the biography of the late Roman Tmetuchl, who was an important Palauan business and political leader, and who testified at a U.S. Navy tribunal on Guam following the war. Shuster learned much from the stories Tmetuchl provided before his death in 1999. But finding leads to the whereabouts of the remains of the victims proved a difficult task.



Ngatpang State, Palau: Unsuccessful dig for World War II remains

"I found the information (from Tmetuchl) so interesting, and my gut feeling was that there was a lot more to the story," Shuster said. "So I began the search for the war crime records." This took Shuster on several trips to Washington, D.C. to the U.S. National Archives, where he poured over dusty copies of 50-year-old reports and trial testimony of Japanese involved in the executions. He discovered sketch maps and testimony from the war crimes tribunal that the B-24 airmen, who were shot down over Babeldaob and parachuted from their plane, were executed on September 4, 1944, and the missionaries and Micronesian family were executed on September 18 — all at the same site in Ngatpang State in Palau. Shuster said that once he had collected this information, he began lobbying the CILHI and officials at the Pentagon to get them interested in the case. "The critical link (CILHI involvement) was my discovery that the B-24 airmen, missionaries and Hondonero family are all in the same burial spot," he said.



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Searching for people executed at war's end.

Shuster briefed Yaoch during a visit by the Jesuit to Guam in mid-1999. Yaoch returned to Palau and located three Palauan elders who have first hand knowledge about the event. Ramona Baiei, Katalina Katosang and Rubak Techitong either worked with or knew members of the "Kempeitai", the feared and sometimes brutal Japanese military police. They are the only Palauans alive today who had some knowledge of the events. The Catholic priests and brothers who were executed are still recalled by many elders. Fr. Marino and Br. Emilio arrived in Palau in 1921, and Fr. Elias five years later. "They strengthened the church, taught basic catechism and songs to several generations of Catholics and are fondly remembered by Palauans in their 60s and older," Shuster said. "Even though they were Spanish civilians, they were suspected of communicating with the enemy — the American military." These three Jesuits were taken from their base in Koror to join three other Jesuits from Yap already in captivity in Ngatpang village on Babeldaob. The Hondonero family — consisting of a mother from the Untalan family of Yap, Chamorros in business there prior to the WWII, a father from the Philippines, and two small children — were also under house arrest in Ngatpang.

Until Shuster pieced the evidence together, and Fr. Felix found Palauans with some knowledge of the executions, "no one had certain evidence of the deaths of all these persons," Shuster indicated. Even with his research into Navy tribunal and related records at the U.S. National Archives, Shuster has been unable to find the names of the three U.S. airmen.

Last October, the CILHI investigation team arrived in Palau and interviewed the three Palauan elders. Using this information, the Army team was able to discover the hill where the killings took place. Five large areas on the hill were searched by removing all the vegetation, looking for depressions, and using a probe to bring up a core of soil to determine if it had been disturbed. Although the search did not result in the discovery of any human remains, the Army is in the process of locating an eyewitness in Japan. Of the 18-to-21 Japanese soldiers involved, at least three are still alive. The CILHI team is expected to return to Palau in the next few months to continue search and recovery efforts.

"The Palau case has major personal implications," Shuster said. "Even today after 57 years, the Catholic church and families in the U.S. and on Guam yearn for the return of the remains of their loved ones."

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